The Blessing on Laurel Hill

658 words

The only means of getting man and woman, beast and wagon across the rain-swollen Niobrara was by rope, hand over hand. Dozens of oxen and as many as 500 horses had to get to the other side, as did 523 Ponca men, women, and children.

And the rain wouldn't stop. All those wagons were disassembled and shouldered through and over the raging Niobrara. It took a day to recover, yet another rainy day.

In May of 1877, after endless haggling and heartless bureaucratic inertia, someone in faraway Washington determined that the Poncas of Nebraska would be forced to leave their villages, their homes and schools and churches, their sawmill and their flour mill and everything they owned, and walk to Oklahoma.

Imagine 500 people in soggy early May trudging up and down endless muddy hills along the Missouri. Imagine never-ending rains that made some days impossible to travel.

Try to imagine you and your family walking the entire state of Nebraska, north to south, then all of Kansas, only to reach a place your elders already determined so "stony and broken" they couldn't could never live there and would never love. Imagine endless rainy days and nights, forever cold and clammy. No rest for the weary. No shelter in the time of storm.

And you didn't want to go. You just plain hated the idea of leaving the place your people had lived for generations. That last night in the village, no oneslept. There was too much crying.

Is it any wonder people took sick? Is it any wonder some of the most vulnerable would die? Should we be surprised that the Ponca's Trail of Tears has countless unmarked graves?

Truth be told, the Ponca never made life troublesome for anyone. They hadn't attacked wagon trains or stolen horses, were never belligerent. From the Poncas, Washington had little to fear. But the government determined the Ponca had to leave for Indian Territory because they were Indian.

On May 23, not far from the Elkhorn River and near a tiny frontier town named
Neligh, the little daughter of Black Elk and Moon Hawk, succumbed to pneumonia. White Buffalo Girl was all of 18 months.

Her parents had watched her die and were frantic, beyond grief. A Neligh carpenter nailed together a wooden cross. Her family was Christian.

Up above town in a cemetery called Laurel Hill, Black Elk, distraught, talked to white folks who, with the Ponca, had gathered around that wooden cross.

"I want the whites to respect the grave of my child just as they do the graves of their own dead," Black Elk said. "The Indians do not like to leave the graves of their ancestors, but we had to move and hope it will be for the best."

Imagine that setting, up on a hill above a thick strap of trees that follows the snaking river below through an endless ocean of grass.

"I leave the grave in your care," Black Elk told those white settlers. "I may never see it again. Care for it for me."

And so they did. And so they do yet today, 140 years later.

You'll find Laurel Hill cemetery way atop Neligh; and you'll find there, just a short hike from the road, a stone that memorializes a Ponca child named White Buffalo Girl.

Won't be hard to locate. Her grave site is the only one that stays decorated all year long. Just get out of the car and look for a wooden cross, and flowers, lots and lots of flowers.

Tell you what--go there. Go to Neligh some morning. I don't care how far you have to drive, just go there, to Laurel Hill. Go up there and visit the grave of little White Buffalo Girl. It will bless your heart. Call it a pilgrimage, if you will. Better yet, make it one.

Call it a blessing. Because it is. A shelter in the time of storm.