

Monuments of the West on Our Blue Highways

It's huge. Created in the late '20s, during the heyday of memorial making, Bryant Baker's *Pioneer Woman* stands formidably just off one of Ponca City's main streets, right where Oklahoma oilman millionaire, Earnest Whitworth Marland, wanted it. It's bronze and it's big and it's a lovely gift to the town, the region, and the entire nation really.

Baker won the commission, a 1929 contest among some of the nation's leading sculptors, after a nationwide tour of the submitted possibilities. Hundreds of thousands of people voted.

Pioneer Woman really is memorable. His sun-bonneted woman, an admiring son at her side, carries her shoulders as if she were royalty, an attitude that was likely hard to come by on the muddy floors of the region's sod houses.

In April of 1930, Baker's design was unveiled, just down the street from the place where the oil man Marland's mansion stands in all of its splendor. For a time, Marland—get this!--single-handedly controlled one-tenth of the world's supply of oil.

The Marlands had come to Oklahoma without much in their pockets or pocketbooks--lived something of the vision in his *Pioneer Woman's* face. That Ponca City residents looked on approvingly when the big sculpture was unveiled goes without question: one-third of the town worked for him.

She is elegant. And determined. And blessed with a vision of the future that, at the time she was erected in Marland's front yard, was only half the story.

After all, she's the polar opposite of those equally famous Oklahoma mid-Dust Bowl era, when Roosevelt's government-financed photographers, Dorothea Lange among them, recorded a wholly different face on pioneer women and their men, folks who didn't stride quite so confidently into

America's frontier or their country's future. Those images caught faces less sure any future at all.

It's telling that the elegant statue was financed by a multi-millionaire oilman, while those famous Depression-era images were caught by photographers salaried from a government payroll.

But vying them off against each other is silly. Both faces capture something dynamic in the human character. And, as all of us know, it's not impossible to one day walk out into life with a chest full of undaunted courage, and at another seem incapable of anything but in-the-flesh despair.

Just down the road, one of Oklahoma's hundreds of roadside markers, on a single slab of stone, tells the story of Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce, who spent enough time in the Oklahoma Territory to bury a hundred of his people, including his daughter, before finally being put on a train and sent unceremoniously back to the Pacific Northwest--to Washington, and not home to Idaho.

Like hundreds of thousands of other Native people, the Nez Perce had been summarily directed--at gunpoint--to relocate to Indian Territory, where, it was assumed, all of the nation's indigenous would live together smoking peace pipes, farming respectably, and going to church.

In Oklahoma, the Nez Perce fared no better than many others, and, like the Poncas and Northern Cheyenne, simply couldn't acclimate. Wearied by death and disease and dislocation, they were finally allowed to move back home.

That flat brass highway marker is not so powerful as Baker's *Pioneer Woman*. Around it there is no garden, no museum on its grounds. But then, it wasn't commissioned by one of the state's most wealthy citizens. That the highway

marker is there at all is worth celebrating. That someone insists people not forget is pure blessing.

History's stories are as easy to forget as they are important to remember. We forget for good reason--not to be trapped in the past perhaps. But when we forget, we do so at our peril and begin to believe, as nutty as this is, that we're right about things, even about everything.

America's blue highways are full of small wonders.