

The Story of Standing Bear - Part 3

“Warm Country,” the Poncas called it--Indian Territory, what would become Oklahoma—didn’t sit well for the Poncas, didn’t feel at all like home, and offered no rest for the weary, just another hard-core stretch of hunger and sickness. Weary and hungry when they arrived, they stayed weary and hungry for months.

The government promised wagons, but didn’t distribute them, afraid the Poncas would sneak back home. The government provided plows, but no oxen; the Poncas’ horses were skin and bones. The people were living—just barely--in canvas tents, distanced from each other by an agent who thought keeping them apart would keep them from plotting some dark-of-night escape. Salty water all around pushed them to vomit. A year after their arrival, they’d all lost faith in the government and abandoned hope.

“I stayed till 158 of my people had died,” Standing Bear explained later. “Then I ran away with thirty of my people—men and women and children. Some of the children were orphans.”

Mid-afternoon, January 2, 1879, thirty Poncas and three wagons, left amid mid-afternoon, sub-zero temperatures that continued to fall every hour.

Standing Bear had lost his first-born, Bear Shield, a young man, his third child to die since they’d been marched away from their homes and their land. Before he died, Bear Shield begged his father to bring his bones to the land of his grandfathers, on the Niobrara. “I promised him I would,” he told people. “I could not refuse the dying request of my boy.” A trunk in one of those wagons that January afternoon held the remains of his son.

The agent in Warm Country stayed holed up in the January cold while those thirty Poncas began the long trek home. Six days passed before he knew they were gone. Six days.

The landscape from eastern Oklahoma through Kansas and Nebraska alters only slightly. Here and there, cottonwoods rise from the valleys of occasional rivers across the Poncas' path, offering the only sustaining shelter from icy winds. What money they'd taken with them and the commodities they'd packed, were quickly exhausted, forcing them to beg to stay alive. You may be surprised to learn that white homesteaders, most as poor as Standing Bear's people, only rarely didn't or wouldn't feed them and find them shelter.

On March 4, 62 days after they'd left Indian Territory, Susette LeFlesch, "Bright Eyes," and her Omaha friends were told that the Poncas had arrived out west of the Omahas, where they were camped, regaining strength.

The Omaha and the Poncas were cousins. Between them there was blood and a storehouse of good will. Planting season was about to begin, so the Omaha offered their relatives open land to grow crops, just as they had once done beside the Niobrara.

But thousands of miles away, Washington would not tolerate the humiliation the Poncas had slapped on their great authority by defying its demands. Administering the law, bringing them back, once more, to Indian Country, fell to Brigadier General George Crook, the premiere Indian fighter. Crook's power had distinguished him in the Civil War, as well as Indian wars all over the west. At that moment, General Crook's residence was at Fort Omaha, where you can still visit his house today.

General Crook had always been his own man, sometimes off for days all by himself while his troops were on whatever mission he'd appointed. But he'd established a military record like none other, and Washington never doubted his allegiance or his valor.

As commanded, Gen. Crook and his troops traveled up from Fort Omaha to the Ponca encampment, west of the Omaha Reservation, and demanded Standing Bear's people

return, with him and his troops, to the fort until ready to move, once again, back to Warm Country.

Standing Bear and his people were physically worn and emotionally beaten by their long, mid-winter pilgrimage. The future looked bleak as the late winter countryside.

No one—not Crook, not Standing Bear, not the Omahas, not the settlers still moving into eastern Nebraska—no one would have or could have even begun to guess what would happen next.