

## The Story of Standing Bear - Part 2

Forget every cavalry vs. Indian show you ever saw—get it out of your consciousness. The Ponca story is not like them.

There'd never, ever been a hostile problem with the Poncas. They'd signed a treaty sixty years before, so when the mounted cavalry from Ft. Randall came riding into the Ponca villages, no Ponca had ever seen the army before. Can you imagine?

The wailing that whole night was robust. No one wanted to leave. The next morning, in come these fighting men with guns and swords.

When a lawyer from nearby Niobrara came by and confronted the official, told him taking the Poncas away was a miscarriage of justice, he was told Washington's plans were written in stone. "The dignity of the government demands that it should go ahead." What he meant was it would look bad now for the government to back down.

So 500 Poncas, warned there'd be no food if they refused to go, spent a night crying so loud their white neighbors heard the wailing. Then, scared and hungry, they packed up their earthly belongings on wagons, and, readied themselves. Standing Bear stood firm: "This land is ours," he said. "It belongs to us. You have no right to take it."

About that, Standing Bear was wrong. Washington could do what it wanted, because in the United States of America of 1877, Native Americans weren't Americans at all. They weren't people. They weren't even human beings.

On May 19, after unending rain, the column of Poncas crossed the rain-swollen Niobrara and headed south, their military escort with them.

Abundant tears fell on this horrific trek. Already on the second day, beset by relentless rain and cold, a child died and was buried the next day in the village of Creighton, then marched 25 miles to Neligh, where, once again, a child, stricken with pneumonia died. A carpenter in town fashioned a casket and a cross was set down on the grave, where

the father of the little girl made the townspeople promise they would care for the grave. "I may never see it again," he told them. "Care for it for me."

All these years later the grave of a little girl named White Buffalo Girl, is still blanketed with fresh flowers, the only decorated burial spot in the entire Laurel Hill Cemetery. Two children were lost in five days.

The rains continued. The cold held them icily in its unforgiving hand. No doctors accompanied them. No medicine was to be found.

On June 6, after burying yet another child, Prairie Flower, a storm arose, "such as I never before experienced," the agent wrote in his journal. It was a tornado. "Some of the people were taken up by the wind and carried as much as three hundred yards without touching the ground," he wrote. Amid the crying and lament, he said, "I earnestly hope to be spared any similar experience in the future."

By the time they reached Indian Territory, the Ponca people had crossed two states, some aboard wagons, many of them walking. Nine people had died. They'd reached their destination, a place aching far from home, unlike anything they'd ever experienced, pushed on to land already owned by another tribe, who weren't even told about the Poncas. Heat and humidity was sweltering.

The grand plan of the United States of America was to place all the Native people in a region where they would be together, as if all tribes held carbon copy cultures. The list goes on and on: Otoe, Missouri, Wichita, Pawnee, Kaw, Osage, Cheyenne, Apache, and more, all pushed together in a region General William Sherman once claimed to be "a parcel of land set aside for Indians, surrounded by thieves."

They were in the way of progress, America's Manifest Destiny.