

A Fresh Look At Nebraska

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By LuAnn Schindler

If you were forced to move from your Nebraska home, what would be your reaction?

Would you gather your belongings, prepare for relocation and hope for the best? Would you speak your mind or share your concerns with those willing to listen? Would it weigh heavily against your heart and cloud your judgment? Or, would your sorrow make you stronger?

Just over 135 years ago, a similar situation played out along the banks of the Niobrara and Missouri Rivers.

Storytelling traditions recount the split among Siouan tribes, with the Poncas and Omahas leaving the others before 1500. These two groups traced the channels of the Des Moines River to its headwaters, turned northeast and crossed the Missouri River, where they forced the Arikara out of the area.

Eventually, the Poncas and Omahas split up, and the Ponca established residency along Ponca Creek near the mouth of the Niobrara near present-day Verdel in Knox County.

For years, agreements promising monetary support between the Poncas and the government fell through. In 1875, Ponca agent A.J. Carrier approached President Grant about moving the Poncas to Indian Territory, in what is now Oklahoma.

Disagreements grew from language discrepancies. Standing Bear thought he agreed to move his people to the Omaha reservation. Ultimately, the Ponca leaders went to Oklahoma on a scouting journey but did not approve a new site. Standing Bear and his men left and trekked back to Nebraska through rugged conditions.

When they returned, Indian inspector E.C. Kemble greeted them and gave an ultimatum: move or be moved by force. Followed by military personnel, many left on the tiresome journey in May 1877. Extreme weather conditions hampered travel.

Nine Ponca lost their lives along the Trail of Tears. Prairie Flower, daughter of Standing Bear, died of consumption and was buried in Milford. In Neligh, White Buffalo Girl lost her life. The townspeople offered a Christian burial and placed an oak cross at her grave. When Black Elk requested his daughter's grave be respected, Neligh residents placed a marble monument at her grave.

The Ponca saga does not end with the Trail of Tears. It continues with the trial of Chief Standing Bear and his battle for humane treatment.

It's a fight that made the Poncas strong.

The Ponca Tribe of Nebraska reports over 2,500 members currently live in the Cornhusker state.

Saturday, Scott, Lacey and I attended the Ponca powwow near Niobrara. Watching the ceremonial dances, viewing the emblematic costumes, and listening to the drum and singers remind me of the sacrifices made by the Ponca. Positive energy flows through the ceremonial traditions honoring the spiritual tribe.

Sitting in the arena, I couldn't help but wonder how I would react if I were forced to leave my home. Would I silently accept the news or would I soar like the sacred eagle, finding my strength and courage?

The powwow presents a powerful celebration of culture and folklore, a symbolic link between their storied past and optimistic present.

These are lessons every culture should learn.