Brief History of Standing Bear Events

Standing Bear was the most prominent chief of the Ponca tribe in 1877. This tribe traditionally engaged in agriculture in the Niobrara River area and began to live in houses at the urging of early settlers in the Omaha area. The Poncas had built a church and attended services regularly. Most Omaha citizens looked on the tribe as a good neighbor.

The Department of the Interior in Washington, D. C., began in the 1870’s wanting to move the Ponca tribe. In 1877, the Department finally decided that the tribe should be moved to Oklahoma and intended to give the land occupied by the Poncas to the Sioux. The Sioux refused to come.

Standing Bear and the Poncas were forced to leave their homes and furnishings and to move with minimal possessions. The Poncas were very disappointed with all the arrangements made for them in Oklahoma. Therefore, in the fall of 1878, Standing Bear and many other Poncas resolved to return to Nebraska. They made this trip in harsh winter weather. They were considered criminals and had to travel with little help. Standing Bear’s son as well as other Poncas died in the course of the trip. Their travel routes to and from Oklahoma will constitute the proposed historic trail.

Upon the Poncas return, the national government immediately ordered them to return to Oklahoma. Standing Bear and the Poncas adamantly refused.

Citizens’ efforts to help the Poncas were led initially and to a large extent by Henry Tibbles, a journalist for the *Omaha World Herald* who had spent time with other Indian tribes and always supported their needs. On a Sunday morning the Poncas invited Tibbles to come a council meeting to learn about their plight. He rushed back to Omaha to speak at evening church services. His second stop was at First Congregational where he was allowed to speak after the opening hymn. Church members voted to oppose moving the Poncas.

Five local clergymen founded the Omaha Ponca Relief Committee with the goal of trying to stop the removal of the tribe. Pastor Alvin Sherrill of First Congregational was the treasurer of this group. The five ministers sent a telegram to the Secretary of the Interior, urging him to rescind this decision. The telegram had no effect. The committee raised money to help the Poncas obtain supplies to live on land provided by the Omaha tribe.

At that time Indians were not considered to be citizens and could not take a case to court. Standing Bear had no legal way to protest what was happening. Because many Omahans were sympathetic to his plight, two local lawyers agreed to represent Standing Bear in court. John Lee Webster believed that the language of the fourteenth amendment to the Constitution protected the rights of all individuals born on American soil. The second was Andrew Poppleton, a leading Omaha citizen, who agreed to argue this position in court.

Judge Elmer Dundy presided at the trial. After all the legal arguments were carefully made, Judge Dundy invited Standing Bear to speak whereupon he made the famous statement, “(My) hand is not the color of yours, but if I pierce it, I shall feel pain. If you pierce your hand, you will also feel pain. The blood that will flow from mine will be of the same color as yours. I am a man. The same God made us both.” Ultimately Judge Dundy ruled that Indians were fully human beings and thus deserved the right to bring their grievances to courts of law.

The federal government immediately appealed Dundy’s decision. Because continuing the fight for the Poncas would be very expensive, Henry Tibbles quit his job and planned a speech-making campaign in Chicago and the Northeast Coast to raise money. Standing Bear accompanied him along with Bright Eyes, a Ponca woman who spoke English well.

The Omaha Ponca Relief Committee supported efforts to helped raise money for this cause. Large sums of money came to the committee as a result of presentations given in places like Chicago and Boston. Thus Sherrill as treasurer filled an essential function. First Congregational voted its continued support on at least one further occasion.

Given the pressure exerted through the speeches and other publicity, the federal government finally withdrew its appeal. Although the Poncas continued to struggle, they ultimately got much of their land returned and became good local citizens.

The Standing Bear case is recognized as a landmark in efforts to help Native Americans. The decision was the first instance of Indian reform. Further reforms did not come rapidly, but Judge Dundy set a good precedent by his decision that Indians were human beings entitled to representation in court.

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Books which you might want to read and from which I drew my information are listed below. All are available from the Omaha Public Library.

Joe Starita, “I Am A Man: Chief Standing Bear’s Journey for Justice, New York, 2008.

Starita, a former journalist, is now a professor journalism at University of Nebraska at Lincoln. He is easy to read and arouses one’s indignation, but he only mentions First Congregational once.

Valerie Sherer Mathes and Richard Lowitt, The Standing Bear Controversy: Prelude to Indian Reform, University of Illinois Press, 2003.

Good scholarly resource written by professional historians. Mentions Pastor Sherrill most often. Use index to find these places.

Thomas H. Tibbles, The Ponca Chiefs: An Indians Attempt To Appeal From The Tomahawk To The Courts (1880), Boston, Lockwood, Brooks and Company, 1880. This book was copied by Kessinger Pubishing’s Rare Reprints in 2007, and it is this edition that is in the Omaha Public Library.

Tibbles includes the telegram which the five ministers sent to the Department of the Interior. It is fairly interesting. Please be aware that when he says “he” or “the editor,” he is talking about himself.