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The Ponca:

"There is much right, some wrong, and some misunderstanding."

The Great Plains evoke emotions to a vast majority of people. Some dismiss them as simply rolling grasslands with little to no beauty. Others find them to be akin to an alien planet, devoid of trees with endless skies and dangers abound. While others see them as a beautiful homeland with a multifaceted ecosystem that supports and sustains life. Modern day Americans fall into the first category, dismissing the rolling plans as just a part of the "flyover states." The Indigenous inhabitants fall into the latter category. It could be argued that the European Americans that came into this area in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries viewed it as an alien landscape fraught with dangers.

At least, that alien landscape is implied in many of the historical writings from that time. Lewis and Clark, other explorers, and government agents wrote about the animals, Indigenous peoples, and the dangers involved with traversing through different territories—both Indigenous and European. Overtime, the writings and dealings focused on larger and more warlike tribes like the Pawnee, Osage, and Lakota affiliated nations. Smaller nations, like the Ponca, Oto, and Omaha with more agricultural setups were considered peaceful and, in some ways, treated as a footnote to the larger story of the Plains Indians and European American saga.

For the purposes of this paper the focus will be on the Ponca. The Ponca came from their original homeland in the Ohio River Valley to northeastern Nebraska with the Omahas. The

reason for this migration is unknown, but the Siouan Dhegihan speakers, also including the Osages, Quapaws, and Kanzas left the Woodlands to settle in locations along the Ohio, Mississippi, and Missouri Rivers. After the Ponca settled on the Plains many of the Woodland's customs morphed into the "archetypal Plains Village Traditions" including earth lodges, communal bison hunting, and planting corn.[1] While small in comparison to other tribal nations in the plains the Ponca were able to work out treaties and alliances. Including the U.S. Federal government until a mistake, on the government's treaty writing skills, ceded away lands to the Lakota in the Treaty of Fort Laramie in 1868. Leading to one of the most famous cases Indigenous peoples won against the federal government—that they were "a person under the meaning of the law." However, by this point due to removal and resistance to the removal the Ponca tribe split into two bands—the Northen Ponca Tribe of Nebraska and the Southern Ponca Tribe in Oklahoma.

The Ponca is an interesting case study in the views of historiographical writing. During writing this essay, using two search engines, JSTOR and the University of Nebraska—Kearney Calvin T. Ryan Library only a few of articles dealing explicitly with the Ponca could be found. Which might be the work of user error or a miscalculation on keywords. However, there was a multitude of reports and books from the U.S. Department of Interior and historians—both European American and from Indigenous scholars.

Unfortunately, most of the early articles were not predominantly historical in nature. Instead, they focused on ethnomusicology and anthropological leanings toward dances of the Ponca.[2] Or they were pleas from private newspapers and Christian organizations to not remove

[1] Encyclopedia of the Great Plains | PONCAS (unl.edu)
[2] Dorsey, George A. 1905 The Ponca Sun Dance. *Field Columbian Museum*, Anthropology Series 7:61-88. The Ponca Sun Dance. Field Columbian Museum, Anthropology Series, vol. 7 (pg. 61-88); Howard, James H. "Ponca

the Ponca from their Niobrara River homelands due to Chief Standing Bear's plight.[3] The most notable article, *Notes on Ponca Ethnohistory, 1785-1804* is well done, if dated.[4] Wood, … However, a predominate book about the Ponca was written in 1965, simply titled *The Ponca Trib*e by James Henri Howard—who wrote one of the aforementioned articles lead to intriguing review by Carol K. Rachlin in 1967.[5]

It should be noted that James H. Howard points out in his original dissertation how complicated it is to find primary sources about the Ponca, "The published materials concerning the Ponca are diffuse and of uneven quality. Many of the tribal institutions have been neglected entirely, and other features of the culture have been treated in only a general manner. Consequently, it has been difficult event to assess the cultural position and affiliations of the tribe."[6]

While that is daunting, when looking at the historical record and scholarship there are articles that allude or place some agency on the Ponca. However, they either center white Americans and their contributions to Ponca sovereignty or focus on Plains Indian Tribes as a whole. For example, in 1938 Marian W. Smith, wrote an article about the methods of war in Plains Indian Tribes, mentioning the Ponca in passing, "[Wissler writes about the use of war

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Dances, Ceremonies and Music." *Ethnomusicology* 3, no. 1 (January 1959): 1–14. https://www.jstor.org/stable/924128.

[3] The Outlook. *Christian Union* (1870-1893); Feb 2, 1881;23, 5; ProQuest pg. 101

[4] Wood, Raymond W. "Notes on Ponca Ethnohistory, 1785-1804." *Ethnohistory*, 6, no.1 (Winter, 1959)

[5] Howard, James H., and Peter Le Claire. *The Ponca Tribe*. Washington: U.S. Govt. Print. Off., 1965. This work was based off James H. Howard's dissertation in 1957 with the same title.

[6] HOWARD, JAMES HENRI. "THE PONCA TRIBE." Order No. 5800931, University of Michigan, 1957. http://proxy.lib.wy.us/login?url=https://www.proquest.com/dissertations-theses/ponca-tribe/docview/301923683/se-2.

bundles] It is not clear, but the Iowa may have done likewise, and the Ponca, Osage, Omaha, Oto and Kansa had war bundles."[7] Relegating the Ponca to mere footnotes after that brief mention.

Moving forward to 1967 when Rachlin wrote her review about Howard and Claire's work—mainly focusing on Dr. Howard's contributions while diminishing Peter Le Claire, the tribal historian, and other members of the tribe. The key takeaway by Rachlin is "*The Ponca Tribe*, like Dr. Howard's other works, hard to evaluate in terms of scientific accuracy; there is much right, some wrong, and some misunderstanding. Dr. Howard's work can never be disregarded, but it must be used with caution."[8]

There is one other interesting thing of note in Rachlin's review—Rachlin makes note that the Ponca Indians of Oklahoma did not agree with the premise of the book, citing that details were wrong and that the central concept unfounded. However, Rachlin then states, "The opinions of the Indian people cannot be overlooked, nor should they be over-emphasized…" before stating the belief that the reason the Ponca didn't agree with the book due to Howard's discussion of Pan-Indianism feels like a dismissal of Indigenous histories and concerns.[9]

In contrast after 1965, articles written about the Ponca diminish. In the same year Rachlin wrote the review of Dr. Howard's book 1967, other articles were being written about other tribal nations, the Plains Indian Wars and the white military commanders. It is here where snippets of Ponca history are trickled in. Like, the 1938 article by Smith, it might only be a sentence in passing or in an article about General Cook an entire paragraph.

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[7] Smith, Marian W. "The War Complex of the Plains Indian." *American Philosophical Society* 78, no. 3 (January 31, 1938): 446–446. https://doi.org/https://www.jstor.org/stable/984763.
[8] Rachlin, Carol K. "Reviewed works: The Ponca Tribe by James H. Howard." *American Antiquity* 32, no. 1 (Jan,1967): 128. https://www.jstor.org/stable/278804
[9] Rachlin, 128.

Centering the white General George Cook and other advocates for Indigenous rights seems to be a theme in some of the articles found relating to the Ponca. James T. King's article on General Cook does talk about his best-known "battle" for Indian rights was the ironically named *Standing Bear vs. Crook*.[10] In this article, it dismisses Chief Standing Bears efforts, along with other Indigenous activists and places Crook as the primary reason that the Poncas won their case. Not to dimmish Crook's legacy as an advocate, due to his sympathies, standing in the military, and understanding of Indigenous cultures he did provide a service to the Ponca; however, had it been any other tribe and public opinion on Standing Bear's side it might not have worked.

In a similar vein, several articles during the research popped up on Helen Hunt Jackson and her work on the Ponca Controversy. This is where there is a shift in scholarship, while searching for the Ponca Tribe seemed to stymie the search engine, searching for Chief Standing Bear had additional results. While there are more books that feature the history of the Ponca Tribe, the majority of articles seem to deal with Standing Bear's case, fought and won between 1879-1880—a singular event. Additionally, they seem to center the white participants more frequently than even Chief Standing Bear.

One particular article of these stood out, *Helen Hunt Jackson and the Ponca Controversy*. The reason this particular article stood out dealt with the fact that while it centered Helen Hunt Jackson on the build up to Standing Bear's habeas corpus case—it mentioned other Indigenous players including an Omaha woman named Bright Eyes.[11] Bright Eyes, educated in the east but

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[10] King, James T. "George Crook Indian Fighter and Humanitarian." *Arizona and the West*. 9, no. 4 (Winter, 1967). 343.

[11] Mathes, Valerie Sherer. "Helen Hunt Jackson and the Ponca Controversy." *Montana The Magazine of Western History*, 39, no.1 (Winter, 1989). 46

still knew the language of both the Ponca and the Omaha—due to their close ties, served as Chief Standing Bear's interpreter during a series of speaking tours around the eastern United States to garner support, both political and financial, in order for his case to be heard.

In contrast to the article about Crook, this article did have a significant section speaking on the Ponca's history, the relocation to reservations, and the lead up to the case. While it does center Jackson, it does make a point to acknowledge the work done by the Indigenous peoples instead of solely focusing on Jackson. Which is refreshing since giving a concise history of the Ponca was missing from many of the other articles.

However, Jackson's approach to why she came to help the Ponca is questionable. It could have simply been a good-natured attempt, but in Mathes tone it could be implied that Jackson took up this mantle as a placeholder for her deceased children—viewing the Ponca as children in need of assistance in a form of white saviorism.[12] Additionally, Jackson moving on to the Missions in California seems dismissive of the Ponca event though Jackson still alludes to them in other writings. Using her quotes, Mathes does show that it might have been a combination of reasons for Jackson's support. Jackson also was an interesting person in this movement, however, from Mathes article a more in-depth look at Bright Eyes contributions might be a good article or subject of study on Ponca and Omaha relations on kinship bonds. One of Chief Standing Bear's solutions, as well as a misunderstanding on locations for Indian Removal, that Crook and others thought was pertinent was joining with the Omahas on their Reservation, however it never took root—which in the long run might have been a blessing.[13]

[12] Mathes, 53.
[13] Mathes, 50.

In the 1990s, there are more articles about Indigenous cultures as a whole but again, none that really feature the Ponca as a solitary subject. Except for one on the Northern Ponca Tribe seeking to be restored to federal status as a tribe in 1992.[14] This article does a marvelous service to both the Ponca Tribe's history and to the study of tribal identity and sovereignty status in the federal government. The section on federal policy was very enlightening and features an excellent timeline.[15]

It would be interesting to see more articles from this time but again, they do not focus on the Ponca. However, more autobiographical works are appearing in mainstream literature and scholarship. One article or short book depending on how you view it does mention the Ponca, but it features the Santee more heavily—which is another borderlands tribe that would be swept up during the Plains Indian War and like the Ponca, similarly dismissed by outsiders.[16]

Moving into the 2000's, there are works on the Ponca, but they tend to follow research on Chief Standing Bear and members of his family, like Big Snake.[17] In Grigg's article, we are shown the leadup to the Ponca Removal—including Chief Standing Bear's brother, Big Snake, being killed for his refusal to cooperate with an unjust order.[18] Griggs continues a similar theme with focusing on the 1879-1880 case but unlike previous articles, White Eagle, Big Snake and Chief Standing Bear are at the forefront and white advocates are in secondary roles. It delves

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[14] Grobsmith, Elizabeth, Ritter, Beth; The Ponca Tribe of Nebraska: The Process of Restoration of a Federally Terminated Tribe. *Human Organization* 1 March 1992; 51 (1): 1–16. doi: https://doi-org.unk.idm.oclc.org/10.17730/humo.51.1.n2p3778173q25u06

[15] Grobsmith & Ritter, 5-8.

[16] Sneve, Virginia Driving Hawk. "Completing the Circle." *University of Nebraska*, 1995.

[17] Grigg, William Norman. "Standing bear: American: after his people were unjustly evicted from their homeland in Nebraska, Chief Standing Bear--aided by one of the Army's most renowned Indian fighters--mounted a legal challenge to prove what should have been obvious: Indians were people under the law." *The New American*, May 2, 2005, 33+. *Gale Academic OneFile* (accessed May 13, 2024). https://link-gale-com.unk.idm.oclc.org/apps/doc/A132162839/AONE?u=unl_kearney&sid=bookmark-AONE&xid=f6960c3a.

[18] Grigg, Discontent, Defiance, and Murder section.

more into the personal life of Chief Standing Bear—the numerous losses of life on the Ponca Trail of Tears—including most of his family and his "I Am a Man," speech.

However, there was still more articles where the Ponca are mentioned in passing including one that discussed Chief Joseph of the Nez Perce. This article was interesting though, because both Chief Joseph and Chief Standing Bear are lauded as forerunners to American Indian rights activism in 1870s and promoted a civil rights campaign at the dawning of the Indian reform movements throughout the country.[19]

Finally, it's important to look at Indigenous writers and historians. The most prominent Ponca activist and writer was Clyde Warrior. Warrior's efforts to bring Red Power to the forefront of civil rights issues in the 1960s. While not a discourse on the seventeenth and eighteenth century it is important to show the involvement of Indigenous scholarship in this context. Rosenthal's review of a biography about Clyde Warrior by Paul R. McKenzie-Jones in 2017 is a well-received discourse in how far we've come in the United States on Indigenous issues.[20]

However, there is still work to do and good trouble to find. Over ten years before, in 2009, Susan Miller discusses the need for Native Historians and how their contributions are needed in order to get the full story of the United States, including a mention of Clyde Warrior. "In historiography, the advent of Indigenous discourse has been gradual, and the discourse remains unrecognized within the discipline, viewed instead as nonconforming examples of Euromerican discourse. Nevertheless, it informs a significant and growing literature, part of the

[19] Jain, Samvit. "Leader and Spokesman for a People in Exile: Chief Joseph and the Nez Perce." *The History Teacher*, 43, no.1 (Nov., 2009). 123.
[20] Rosenthal, Nicolas G., Clyde Warrior: Tradition, Community, and Red Power, *Journal of American History*, Volume 104, Issue 1, June 2017, Pages 275–276, https://doi.org/10.1093/jahist/jax141

"writing back" movement of authors from colonized peoples, so named for Salman Rushdie's pun "The Empire Writes Back."[21] In some ways it's still a gradual process but more and more Indigenous peoples are creating spaces and turning the historical narrative on its head to be more inclusive of Indigenous histories and decentering European American narratives.

Sadly, there is still so little scholarship on the Ponca as a whole. Partly that is due to the desecration and dismissing of Indigenous cultural histories and a lost of Ponca lore. There is also the fact that many Indigenous peoples do not want to tell their historical narratives to outside parties due to the prevalence of both accidental and willful misunderstandings. Rachlin's 1967 review had an intriguing line— [on the Ponca's interpretation of the book] "…much right, some wrong, and some misunderstanding."

In the historiographical context of the Ponca this line covers the existing scholarship— especially since it is centered on white European history of the Ponca.[22] It would be interesting to see in the future a Ponca-centered approach by either a dedicated non-Indigenous historian or by a Ponca historian. Miller points out that "… American history by decentering nation-states to focus instead on tribal entities and their interests…make up a literature sperate from that of "American Indian history."[23] It would be fascinating to see the historical narrative decentered.

Over, the course of research it was interesting to see the dearth of primary articles written about the Ponca. It was also fascinating and frustrating to see how they would be grouped with other Great Plains tribes, like the Omaha or even with the Lakota, or sadly added as footnote to other histories. It was also interesting to see the glacially moving transition of focus on white

[21] Miller, Susan A. "Native Historians Write Back: The Indigenous Paradigm in American Indian Historiography." Wicazo Sa Review, Vol. 24, no. 1 (Spring 2009). 26.
[22] Rachlin, 128.
[23] Miller, 40.

Europeans and their “saving” of Chief Standing Bear to the inclusion of Indigenous self-advocacy and the inclusion of women like Bright Eyes to the discussion of cultural brokers. In time, the “write back” movement might allow for additional scholarship for the Ponca.

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