



“The Ideal of Freedom” mural by Stephen Cornelius Roberts, 1996

I AM A MAN



Chief Standing Bear
(1834-1908)

“My hand is not the same color as yours. If I pierce it, I shall feel pain. If you pierce your hand, you too will feel pain. The blood that flows will be the same color. I am a man. The same God made us both.”



Stephen Cornelius Roberts
(b. 1952)

The trial...

Many Americans and Nebraskans have gone to war to advance the rights of people. This mural, “The Ideal of Freedom” represents the Trial of Standing Bear (May, 1879). Standing Bear sued the U.S. government for his freedom. If he could prove he was a person in the eyes of the law, he could return to his Nebraska homeland.

Susette LaFlesche Tibbles, “Bright Eyes” (female with hat and coat, upper left) was Standing Bear’s interpreter during his trial in 1879. General Crook (bearded gentleman, red banner, lower right corner) became a supporter of Native American rights. Although Crook was the defendant in the 1879 historic court case, he helped organize the trial for Chief Standing Bear behind the scenes (see the PBS documentary, Standing Bear’s Footsteps.) General Crook said, “I will say without hesitation, that our Indians

have adhered more closely to the spirit of treaty stipulations than the white men or the white man’s government has ever done. [It is] an odd feature of our judicial system that the only people in this country that have no rights under the law are the original owners of the soil.”

On May 12, 1879, in U.S. District Court, Omaha, Nebraska, Judge Dundy declared Indians to be: “persons under federal law.”(Chief Standing Bear vs. Crook). It was the first time a federal court found an Indian’s race did not justify the government’s denying a person the same rights under the law as whites. To learn more about the Trial of Standing Bear visit nebraskastudies.org and click on the dates 1875-1899.

Photos courtesy of The Nebraska State Historical Society (Standing Bear) and the Stephen Roberts family (artist).

Public Service



Standing Bear with his family

Standing Bear was born about 1834 in the Ponca homeland, near the confluence of the Niobrara and Missouri rivers in Nebraska. He is well known for the courage, persistence and intelligence he showed in honoring a promise to his son. Bear Shield, just before he died at age 16 from malaria in Indian Territory, Oklahoma, asked to be buried in his homeland-Niobrara, Nebraska. To honor his promise, Standing Bear walked 600 miles back to Nebraska in the brutal prairie winter.

(Helen Hunt Jackson Papers, Part 1, Ms 0020, Box 9, Folder 10, Colorado College Special Collections)

The trail...

In 1877, the Ponca were ordered by federal government to move to Indian Territory in Oklahoma. U.S. soldiers force-marched 523 Ponca along the 600-mile Ponca Trail of Tears to the new disease-ridden reservation. Many died, including Standing Bear's daughter and son.

The development of Chief Standing Bear Trail is an important step in educating the public about Standing Bear and the Ponca tribe's forced relocation to Oklahoma. This story transcends race, ethnicity, culture, and serves as a starting point to bring about a greater understanding of tribal sovereignty, tribal rights, human rights, and equality for all peoples.

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Nebraska Commission on Indian Affairs

Standing Bear is probably the best-known Ponca. He was not head or paramount chief of the tribe. White Eagle was head chief of the entire Ponca Nation. Standing Bear inherited the role of clan chief from his father Old Drum. The Bear clan, one of nine bands of Ponca, oversaw the social life of the tribe, ceremonies and rituals. Standing Bear was known for strength of character and eloquent speaking abilities. "He wore a necklace made of the claws of a grizzly bear.

Historically among the Ponca, only notable warriors gained the honor and right to wear a grizzly bear claw necklace. Killing two or more Grizzly Bears, or by killing an enemy warrior who wore a grizzly bear claw necklace, gave one the right to wear the necklace."

Who was Standing Bear?



White Eagle with Standing Bear. Abe Conkllin, 1986

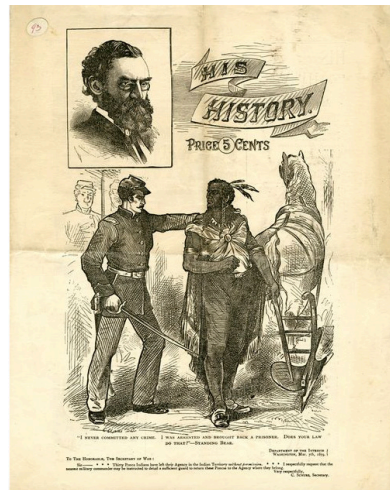


Illustration of Standing Bear from "His History," undated. Thomas Tibbles papers (NMAI, Smithsonian Institution)

Thomas Tibbles, journalist, was crucial in bringing the habeas corpus case of Standing Bear and the Ponca people before the U.S. District Court.

Tibbles worked for the Omaha Daily Herald, and was responsible for publicizing the unlawful removal of the Ponca from their home lands to Indian Territory and subsequent arrest of Standing Bear and other Ponca when they returned to Nebraska.

Rachel Menyuk, archives technician
NMAI Archive Center



What is the Correct Terminology: American Indian, Indian, Native American, or Native?

All of these terms are acceptable. The consensus, however, is that whenever possible, Native people prefer to be called by their specific tribal name. In the United States, Native American has been widely used but is falling out of favor with some groups, and the terms American Indian or indigenous American are preferred by many Native people.

National Museum of the American Indian, 2017