



The church in Omaha, Nebraska, where Standing Bear had been invited to tell his story,

was overflowing with people. Many had read the article in the local newspaper about the mistreatment of Standing Bear and his tribe, the Ponca, by United

THIS LAND WAS THEIR LAND

States government agents. Now, on this fall day of 1879, they had come to hear his story for themselves.

Standing Bear first related the story of his people. The Ponca, he told the congregation, were a peaceful tribe that lived in Nebraska near the bank of the Missouri River. They raised corn and other vegetables on their farms. They were eager to trade with white settlers and had never been at war with the United States government.

Then one day, in January 1877, government agents came. "The inspector said to us: 'The President says you must sell this land. He will buy it and pay you the money, and give you new land in Indian Territory,'" Standing Bear told the congregation. "We said to him: 'We do not know your authority. You

have no right to move us till we have had council with the President."³²

After much discussion with the chiefs, the agents made a proposal. They wanted all ten Ponca chiefs to go with them by train and see the reservation that the government had set aside for them in Indian Territory, an area known today as Oklahoma.

Once they saw it, the chiefs would be permitted to report back to the president and let him know if the land was a suitable place for their tribe to live.

The Government Agents' Deceit

But once the chiefs arrived in Indian Territory, the agents kept none of their promises. First, the agents refused to pay any money for the Ponca tribe's ancestral homeland. "You have forgotten what you said before we started," Standing Bear told the agent. "You said we should have pay for our land."³³

And that was only the beginning of the agents' deceit. All three pieces of land the agents showed the Ponca chiefs were far inferior to the rich, fertile farmland the tribe lived on in Nebraska. The soil was rocky and the few trees that grew there were short and scrubby. The land was totally unsuitable for farming.

"We do not like this land," Standing Bear told the agents. "We could not support ourselves. The water is bad. Now send us to Washington, to tell the President, as you promised."³⁴

But the agents refused, saying, "The President did not tell me to take you to Washington; neither did he

tell me to take you home."³⁵ Now all ten Ponca chiefs were stranded several hundred miles from their home with very little money and no supplies.

The agents even took away the interpreter, whom the chiefs had paid, and would not show them the way back to the railroad. "He left us right there," Standing Bear said:

It was winter. We started for home on foot. . . . We barely lived till morning, it was so cold. We had nothing but our blankets. We took the ears of corn that had dried in the fields; we ate it raw. The soles of our moccasins wore out. We were barefoot in the snow. We were nearly dead when we reached the Otoe Reserve.⁶

By then, the Ponca chiefs had been walking for fifty days. They stayed with the Otoes for several days to regain their strength. When they left to continue their journey home, the Otoes gave each chief a pony to ride.

But before the chiefs were able to make their way home, the government agents returned to the Ponca homeland with soldiers and ordered the tribe to move to Indian Territory. No one wanted to leave. The Poncas demanded that the chiefs be returned before any decision was made. But even after the chiefs found their way back home, they could do nothing to stop the agents and soldiers from forcing the Ponca people off their land.

The government soldiers took all the Ponca's farming tools and household furniture and put them into a big building. They threw all the Ponca's smaller

★ *Native Americans and the Reservation in American History* ★

possessions into a wagon. Then they forced the Ponca tribe to move at gunpoint. "We told them that we would rather die than leave our lands; but we could not help ourselves. They took us down. Many died on the road. Two of my children died. After we reached the new land, all my horses died. The water was very bad. All our cattle died; not one was left," Standing Bear said.

The congregation was shocked at what they heard. Many people were inspired to write letters to Congress and protest the unfair treatment the Ponca tribe had received at the hands of government agents.

Standing Bear continued to travel and speak about



Native American tribes lived in a variety of homes and had different methods of obtaining food. Here pumpkins grow in front of a single-family Zuni adobe structure.

★ *This Land Was Their Land* ★

what happened to him and his tribe. Because of Standing Bear's efforts, many white Americans began to realize how poorly Native Americans were being treated. Not all of the tribes that the government relocated to Indian Territory were treated as badly as the Ponca. But few Native American chiefs had willingly agreed to give up their ancestral homeland and relocate their tribe to land that America's white government had "reserved" for them. In many cases, they had been lied to, cheated, threatened, or otherwise forced to move against their will. That was the real story of the removal of Native Americans to reservations.

Beliefs about Land Ownership

Before European settlers arrived in North America, this entire continent was inhabited by many diverse tribes of Native Americans. Each tribe spoke a language that was unique to its people. Every tribe had its own culture, religion, ceremonies, and ways of providing food. Some Native American tribes lived primarily through their farming skills. Other tribes specialized in hunting, gathering, fishing, or trading. Their methods of building shelters and homes differed as well. Native Americans belonging to some tribes lived in tepees, while others lived in log homes or houses made of earthen bricks.

Religion was central to every Native American culture. It was the heart of their being. Every tribe had its own religion and its own ways of honoring the

★ *Native Americans and the Reservation in American History* ★

creator, or Great Spirit. Nearly all tribes believed that animals, plants, and even the earth held a certain spiritual significance. And they believed that the Great Spirit had placed their tribe where it had for a special purpose.

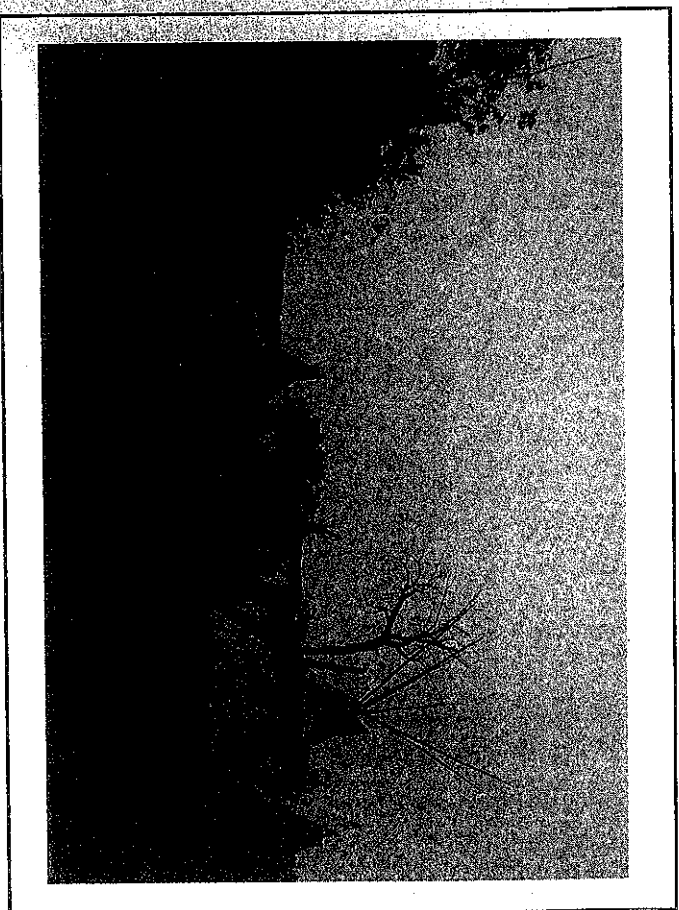
Arapoosih, a leader of the Crow tribe of Montana during the nineteenth century, expressed this sentiment:

The Crow country is a good country. The Great Spirit put it exactly in the right place; while you are in it you fare well; whenever you are out of it, whichever way you travel, you fare worse. . . . The Crow country is in exactly in the right place. Everything good is to be found there. There is no place like Crow country.⁸

Every tribe knew the land they lived on better than any other. As a result, they were acutely aware of the many wonderful resources the land offered and how they could best be used to benefit their tribe. They knew how to read the cycles of nature that told them when to plant and harvest their crops. They knew the animals that lived in their region and they knew how to hunt successfully for them. They knew where they could find tasty wild fruits and berries to supplement their diet. And they knew which plants could be used as effective medicines to fight disease. This closeness with nature and knowledge of the land's natural resources is one reason why Native Americans were so reluctant to leave their homes for reservations in unfamiliar territory.

Native Americans had a great reverence for the environment and did as little to damage it as possible.

★ *This Land Was Their Land* ★



Native Americans used the land's natural resources, through hunting, fishing, and gathering food. Buffalo meat is left to dry at this Arapaho camp near Fort Dodge, Kansas.

Most tribes were careful not to take more out of the environment than they needed to live comfortably. They realized that if they hunted too much game, there might not be enough for next season. For the same reason, they were careful not to cut too many trees, overfish their streams, or eat so much corn that there would not be enough seed left to plant next spring's crop.

These beliefs were nearly the opposite of those held by the European settlers. Most Europeans believed that individuals, as well as nations, should

★ *Native Americans and the Reservation in American History* ★

own and develop property. Europeans had lived under crowded conditions at home, and they thought it was wasteful not to get the most use and profit out of a piece of land.

Consequentially, European settlers saw the land that Native Americans had kept in its natural state as wild and undeveloped. They felt that if land was not being farmed by European settlers, built on, or otherwise developed, it was literally going to waste.

For that reason and many more, white settlers concluded that if these "savages" were not making full use of their land, they did not really own it or need it. They felt that it was their right to take it away from them. John Winthrop, a Puritan English lawyer who became governor of the Massachusetts Bay colony in 1630, declared that the bulk of the land in America was *vacuum domicilium*, legally wasteland because the Native Americans had not "subdued" it by farming the land or building on it.⁹

These opposing beliefs concerning land ownership and use were among the most important elements of the conflict that eventually led to whites forcing Native Americans off of their ancestral homeland and onto reservations controlled by the United States government.

The European settlers' attitude toward America's native populations prevailed for many years. Nearly three centuries after the first European colonies had been established in North America, much of the nation's white population remained convinced that the Native Americans' right to live where they wanted was

★ *This Land Was Their Land* ★

not nearly as important as the progress they saw in the spread of their own civilization across the continent.

The Handbook of American Indians, published by the Smithsonian Institution's Bureau of American Ethnology in 1910, illustrates this view. The handbook justified the United States government's policy of forcing Native Americans to live on reservations by saying:

A natural result of land cessions by the Indians to the U.S. Government was the establishment of reservations for the natives. This was necessary not only in order to provide them with homes and land for cultivation, but to avoid disputes in regard to boundaries and to bring them more easily under control of the Government by confining them to given limits. . . . It may be attributed primarily to the increase of the white population and the consequent necessity of confining the aboriginal [native] population to narrower limits.¹⁰

With whites in possession of most of their former territory, the struggle of America's native population was not only to hold onto what they had left of their land. It was also, in the face of the nation's dominant white European culture, to hold onto their tribal traditions, religions, and way of life.