

• VIEWER DISCUSSION GUIDE •

Standing Bear's Footsteps



Damon Roughface (Southern Ponca) portraying Chief Standing Bear in the courtroom scene in *Standing Bear's Footsteps*. Image courtesy of Christine Lesiak.

“When I was a kid, I had little toy Indians. They were all on horseback or they were all holding their tomahawks. Get one standing in court, standing for his rights—I didn’t have that one!”

— Playwright Christopher Cartmill.



In 1877, the Ponca people were exiled from their Nebraska homeland to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma. A third of the Tribe died there of hunger, exhaustion and disease. To honor his dying son's last wish to be buried in his homeland, Chief Standing Bear and his small clan set off on a grueling, six-hundred-mile journey home. Captured enroute, Standing Bear sued a famous U.S. army general for his freedom—choosing to fight injustice not with weapons, but with words.

The 1879 trial of Chief Standing Bear once filled newspapers and sparked a resounding national debate. Before he could be free, Standing Bear had to prove that an Indian had the right to challenge his own imprisonment—the right to habeas corpus. Only a person had that right. Was an Indian a person in the eyes of the law? Did an Indian have the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness guaranteed by the 14th Amendment? At the center of that debate stood a father who wanted only to keep a promise to his son.

At his trial in Omaha, Nebraska, Standing Bear spoke these words to the judge: “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.”

Many find Standing Bear's words as relevant today as they were in 1879. We still live in a world where human beings define one another by degrees of humanity, where some have rights and some do not, where some are free and others are not. Not once in his long odyssey did Standing Bear doubt his own equality. His message coming to us from our shared history is both simple and profound: Freedom comes from within.

This Viewer Discussion Guide is designed to encourage deeper exploration and conversations about the film and explore issues surrounding heritage, displacement and home.

PRODUCER'S NOTES



CHRISTINE LESIAK, PRODUCER/DIRECTOR:

“The inspiration for *Standing Bear's Footsteps* goes all the way back to my first years in Public Television when I worked on *The Trial of Standing Bear* which aired on PBS and is still shown in schools and museums today. This feature film was the first to tell Standing Bear's story, but I've always been troubled by what it left out—the Ponca language, the role of Indian rights activist Susette LaFlesche, the surprising story of what happened to Standing Bear after the trial. Twenty years later, I thought it was time to create a documentary film that filled in those gaps and that would be as true as possible to the personhood of Standing Bear and his impact on American history.

“I already knew something about the historical context that surrounded Standing Bear's trial. *In the White Man's Image*, which I produced for the *American Experience* series, told the little-known story of the Federal government's attempt to civilize Native children by sending them to boarding schools. The trial of Chief Standing Bear took place in 1879—the very same year that the boarding school experiment began—and it has some of the same themes: the end of a way-of-life for Native Americans, the national push for Indians to embrace the White man's way, the struggle of Native people to hold onto their languages and their way of life. It's all part of a missing chapter of American history now being told in books and films and at last being taught in schools.”

BY THE NUMBERS

In **1862**, the U.S. Government terminated the Northern Ponca Tribe which removed **442** Poncas from the Tribal roles. Recognition was not restored until 1990 following decades of activism.

In **1918**, **two** young, educated Ponca men, Frank Eagle and Louis McDonald, helped co-found the Native American Church.

The Poncas and Omahas spoke the same language and basically came from the same group which also included the **five** Tribes of the so-called Dhegiha group of the Siouan family, forming with the Omaha, Osage, Kansa and Quapaw.

After the relocation and Standing Bear's return to Nebraska, the Ponca Tribe split into the Northern Band which was comprised primarily of Standing Bear's people and the Southern Tribe.

The Fort Laramie Treaty of **1868** between the U.S. and the Sioux ceded Ponca land without authorization. The Government “solved” the problem by moving the Tribe of approximately **700** people to Oklahoma. A **third** of the people died from disease and difficult conditions along the way.

Much of the music and many of the dances used by the Lakota today came from the Omahas and Poncas. There is a lot of discussion as to who had the **first** Powwow, and many people believe it was the Poncas, although it's not a widely held belief among the Omaha.

The Standing Bear case was the **first** time in U.S. history that Indians were recognized as human beings. The judge's ruling in favor of Standing Bear gave, for the **first** time, the rights of a United States citizen to a Native American. It wasn't until the Indian Citizenship Act also known as the Snyder Act was passed in **1924** that **all** Native Americans became full U.S. citizens. It wasn't until the Nationality Act of **1940** that **everybody** born on U.S. soil were called “citizens.”

A survey conducted by the Department of the Interior, indicated that in **1938**, **seven** states refused to grant Native Americans voting rights.

The original Ponca people lived in earthen lodges and were primarily horticulturists, although they also made seasonal hunting trips.

The Ponca Tribe, never a very large Tribe, was nearly decimated by smallpox and deaths during the removal. Today, the Ponca of Nebraska is slightly over **2,500** members.

DELVE DEEPER

1. After viewing *Standing Bear's Footsteps*, what parts of the film did you find most disturbing? Most inspiring?

2. When Standing Bear tried to return to his homelands to honor his son's last request—to be buried on their homelands—he was arrested and detained for leaving the Reservation. The U.S. Constitution insures that any person may file a writ of habeas corpus to challenge a forced detainment. In order to do this, Standing Bear had to challenge the court to either declare him a person—or not. How do you feel about Standing Bear having to prove that he was a human being?

3. The Poncas were just one Tribe forced to leave traditional homelands to live on a place reserved for them by the U.S. Government. What do you think motivated the U. S. Government to conduct such inhumane practices against Native Americans?

4. What do you think the long-term impact has been of Standing Bear challenging the government in a court of law? Do you think that today's Native Americans are treated fairly by the U. S. Government?

5. The U.S. Government employed many tactics to attempt to “assimilate” Native Americans into the mainstream population. What were some of the other tactics and how effective do you think they were in the long run? What do you think the negative consequences of forced assimilation have been?

6. Since the Spanish and English first visited American shores, this nation has become a melting pot of many nations and races. What are your thoughts on how diverse cultures should be integrated into American society in terms of language, cultural traditions, religious practices, educational practices, etc.?



Casey Camp-Horinek (Southern Ponca) at the Ponca Tribal Cemetery in Ponca City, OK. Image Courtesy of Christine Lesiak.



Arnie Harlan (Omaha) was the horse wrangler behind-the-scenes on location. Image Courtesy of Christine Lesiak.

IDEAS FOR ACTION

1. Examine the U.S. policy and motivation behind Indian removals and assess what you think the long term effects, both negative and positive, have been.
2. In your classroom or group, set up a mock courtroom scene where a person must defend himself to prove that he is a “person” according to the law. You may want to do this with a number of disenfranchised groups such as women, gays, etc.
3. When the Europeans first came to America, they considered the Tribal people to be uncivilized or “savages.” Either personally, or as a class or group, define and compare/contrast what actions conducted by human beings that you would consider to be “savage” or “civilized.” Then review your lists and ask whether there are any circumstances under which a “savage” act may be considered “civilized” or a “civilized” act may be considered “savage.”
4. What does it mean for a Tribe to lose its federal recognition? Either in books, films or on the Internet do some research to discover which Tribes have lost their federal recognition or which Tribes have regained it through persistence and effort.
5. In Standing Bear’s fight, he had good friends and allies that helped him. These allies were both Native and White. Can you find other examples in Native/White history where the two different races worked together to reach a goal? What actions do you think would further the reconciliation between Native and non-Native peoples? What action could you personally take?



Above, Judi gaiashkibos (Ponca) visits with her daughter Katie Morgan (Ponca), an attorney, in Washington, D.C. Image Courtesy of Christine Lesiak.



Tristan and Zonte Upton (Ponca/San Carlos Apache/White Mountain Apache) film a scene for *Standing Bear's Footsteps*. Image Courtesy of Christine Lesiak.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

PONCA HISTORY AND CULTURE

The best Internet resource for Standing Bear and Nebraska history:

www.nebraskastudies.org

The Ponca Tribe of Nebraska official website:

www.poncatrIBE-ne.org/about.php



Nebraska State Historical Society

Books

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

Miller, Robert J. Native America, Discovered and Conquered: Thomas Jefferson, Lewis & Clark, and Manifest Destiny. Praeger, 2006.

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Tibbles, Thomas Henry. Buckskin and Blanket Days: Memoirs of a Friend of the Indians Written in 1905. Lincoln, NE: University of Nebraska Press, 1969. Originally published as Buckskin and Blanket Days: Memoirs of a Friend of the Indians Written in 1905 (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday, 1957).

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Wright, Charles E., "Standing Bear: A Long Walk for Liberty; A Firm Step for Justice." The Nebraska Lawyer August 2005: 4-9.

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Standing Bear's Footsteps is a co-production of NET and Native American Public Telecommunications, Inc. (NAPT).

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