

DAKOTA ACCESS PIPELINE UNIT: LESSON 2: DOCUMENT 1**"WE RATHER WOULD HAVE DIED," CHIEF STANDING BEAR, 1879.¹**

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In the 1870s, the Ponca tribe was removed from their ancestral land in the Dakota Territory. The Poncas were forced to march from Dakota to Oklahoma, and many people suffered and died. Chief Standing Bear was the leader of the Poncas. He led the survivors to Nebraska, where the Omaha tribe helped them recover. The Poncas were then arrested and forced to split into two groups. One group was forced to live in Nebraska, and the other in Oklahoma. In the following text, Standing Bear describes the hardships caused by the U.S. Government:

The Ponca has lived in the same place for thousands of years.

Then White men from the U.S. government arrived and started making trouble.

We lived on our land as long as we can remember. No one knows how long ago we came there. The land was owned by our tribe as far back as memory of men goes. We were living quietly on our farms. All of a sudden one white man came. We had no idea what for. This was the inspector. He came to our tribe with Rev. Mr. Hinman. These two, with the agent, James Lawrence, they made our trouble. They said the President told us to pack up—that we must move to the Indian Territory.

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 the Indian Territory." 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." We said to him: "When two persons wish to make a bargain, they can talk together and find out what each wants, and then make their agreement." We said to him: "We do not wish to go. When a man owns anything, he does not let it go till he has received payment for it." We said to him: "We will see the President first." He said to us: "I will take you to see the new land. If you like it, then you can see the President, and tell him so. If not, then you can see him and tell him so." And he took all ten of our chiefs down.

The man from the government said that the Ponca tribe must sell their land to the U.S.

Chief Standing Bear said he won't sell the land until he talks to the president.

¹ Moody, Roger, ed. *The indigenous voice: visions and realities*. Intl Books, 1993.

I went, and Bright Eyes' uncle went. He took us to look at three different pieces of land. He said we must take one of the three pieces, so the President said. After he took us down there, he said: "No pay for the land you left." We said to him: "You have forgotten what you said before we started. You said we should have pay for our land. Now you say not. You told us then you were speaking truth." All these three men took us down there. The man got very angry. He tried to compel us to take one of the three pieces of land. He told us to be brave. He said to us: "If you do not accept these, I will leave you here alone. You are one thousand miles from home. You have no money. You have no interpreter, and you cannot speak the language." And he went out and slammed the door.

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The man from the government took several Ponca chiefs to see new land in Oklahoma.

Then he said the Ponca would not be paid for their ancestral lands. If they did not accept the deal, they would be stranded in unknown lands with no money.

The man talked to us from long before sundown till it was nine o'clock at night. We said to him: "We do not like this land. We could not support ourselves. The water is bad. Now send us to Washington, to tell the President, as you promised." He said to us: "The President did not tell me to take you to Washington; have the Indian money you took to bring us down here. That money belongs to us. We would like to have some of it. People do not give away food for nothing. We must have money to buy food on the road." He said to us: "I will not give you a cent."

Chief Standing Bear told the government man that they did not like the land, and they wished to speak with the president.

The government man said no.

After the betrayal, the government man left the Ponca chiefs alone in unknown lands.

It was wintertime, and the chiefs had no money, food, or maps.

We said to him: "We are in a strange country. We cannot find our way home. Give us a pass, that people may show us our way." He said: "I will not give you any." We said to him: "The interpreter is ours. We pay him. Let him go with us." He said: "You shall not have the interpreter. He is mine, and not yours." We said to him: "Take us at least to the railroad; show us the way to that." And he would not. He left us right there. It was winter. We started for home on foot. At night we slept in haystacks. 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 went barefoot in the snow. We were nearly dead when we reached the Otoe Reserve. It had been fifty days. We stayed there ten days to strengthen up, and the Otoes gave each of us a pony. The agent of the Otoes told us he had received a telegram from the inspector, saying that the Indian chiefs had run away; not to give us food or shelter, or help in any way. The agent said: "I would like to understand. Tell me all that has happened. Tell me the truth. . . ."

The Ponca chiefs found shelter at the Otoe reservation.

They told the Indian Agent (a White government man who lives on the reservation) about the mistreatment and abuse that they suffered.

Then we told our story to the agent and to the Otoe chiefs—how we had been left down there to find our way. The agent said: "I can hardly believe it possible that anyone could have treated you so. The inspector was a poor man to have done this. If I had taken chiefs in this way, I would have brought them home; I could not have left them there."

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When the Ponca chiefs finally returned home, they found the government man there.

He had returned to threaten that the Ponca leave their land immediately, or they would be shot.

In seven days we reached the Omaha Reservation. Then we sent a telegram to the President; asked him if he had authorized this thing. We waited three days for the answer. No answer came. In four days we reached our own home. We found the inspector there. While we were gone, he had come to our people and told them to move. Our people said: "Where are our chiefs? What have you done with them? Why have you not brought them back? We will not move till our chiefs come back." Then the inspector told them: "Tomorrow you must be ready to move. If you are not ready you will be shot." Then the soldiers came to the doors with their bayonets, and ten families were frightened. The soldiers brought wagons, they put their things in and were carried away. The rest of the tribe would not move.

Then, when he found that we would not go, he wrote for more soldiers to come. Then the soldiers came, and we locked our doors, and the women and children hid in the woods. Then the soldiers drove all the people [to] the other side of the river, all but my brother Big Snake and I. We did not go, and the soldiers took us and carried us away to a fort and put us in jail.

There were eight officers who held council with us after we got there. The commanding officer said: "I have received four messages telling me to send my soldiers after you. Now, what have you done?" Then we told him the whole story. Then the officer said: "You have done no wrong. The land is yours; they had no right to take it from you. Your title is good. I am here to protect the weak, and I have no right to take you; but I am a soldier, and I have to obey orders."

He said: "I will telegraph to the President, and ask him what I shall do. We do not think these three men had any authority to treat you as they have done. When we own a piece of land, it belongs to us till we sell it and pocket the money." Then he brought a telegram, and said he had received answer from the President. The President said he knew nothing about it. They kept us in jail ten days. Then they carried us back to our home. The soldiers collected all the women and children

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together, then they called all the chiefs together in council; and then they took wagons and went round and broke open the houses.

When we came back from the council, we found the women and children surrounded by a guard of soldiers. They took our reapers, mowers, hay rakes, spades, ploughs, bedsteads, stoves, cupboards, everything we had on our farms, and put them in one large building. Then they put into the wagons such things as they could carry.

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The U.S. soldiers forced the Ponca to leave their ancestral lands.

During the march to Nebraska, many people died, including children.

The land at the new reservation was bad for farming, and the water was making people sick.

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. I stayed till one hundred and fifty-eight of my people had died. Then I ran away with thirty of my people, men and women and children. Some of the children were orphans.

We were three months on the road. We were weak and sick and starved. When we reached the Omaha Reserve where the Omahas gave us a piece of land, and we were in a hurry to plough it and put in wheat. While we were working, the soldiers came and arrested us. Half of us were sick. We would rather have died than have been carried back; but we could not help ourselves.

-Chief Standing Bear, Ponca Tribe

Chief Standing Bear ran away with the surviving Ponca people.

They received help from the Omaha tribe, but once again, the government came and arrested them.

They would rather have died than gone back to the reservation.