

Nebraska has placed a statue of one of the great heroes of Native American civil rights in the U.S. Capitol's National Statuary Hall. The story of Standing Bear, chief of the Ponca tribe, is simultaneously tragic and inspirational, and it would be well worth repeating here, even if it didn't loop through Oklahoma. Which it does.

I first read the story of Standing Bear in former Gov. Frank Keating's book, "The Trial of Standing Bear." The book is written for children, but it has enough moral force for people of all ages. In 1877, the Poncas were forced from their Nebraska homeland along the Niobrara River for land in what is now Kay County, Oklahoma. The journey and the subsequently botched resettlement were rough on the tribe and cost the lives of many Poncas, including Standing Bear's 16-year-old son. Determined to bury his son in the Ponca homeland, Standing Bear led a small group of Poncas back to Nebraska in 1879. They were arrested. The outcome of Standing Bear's trial depended on the question of whether an American Indian was legally a person in the eyes of the court. It now seems amazing, but from the Constitution forward, American Indians had been treated as something less than full humans in law. At the trial's climax, Standing Bear directly addressed Judge Elmer Dundy with the eloquence of Shakespeare and the moral authority of a biblical prophet. "My hand is not the color of yours," he said. "But if I pierce it, I shall feel pain. If you pierce your hand, you also feel pain. The blood that will flow from mine will be the same color as yours. I am a man. God made us both." As Keating tells the story, Standing Bear looked out a courthouse window at a Nebraska day and described a box canyon flooded by a roaring river. He spoke of being trapped with his family, able to see the graves of his ancestors, but unable to reach them. A path appears that would allow them to their goal but it is blocked by an immensely powerful man backed by a vast army that will not let them move forward. "Slowly,

he turned, and with a look of sorrow and surrender, he faced the judge and said in a firm voice, "You are that man." The Wikipedia article on Standing Bear details the story from there. Judge Dundy ruled that an Indian is a person for purposes of habeas corpus and that the federal government had failed to show a basis of arresting the Poncas. "The right of expatriation is a natural, inherent and inalienable right and extends to the Indian as well as to the more fortunate white race," he concluded. Standing Bear and his group were freed, and, after their case gained the attention of the Rutherford Hayes administration, they were allowed to stay in their homeland. Standing Bear later made a lecture tour of the East Coast speaking on Indian rights, rode the Ferris Wheel at the Chicago World's Fair and worked for Buffalo Bill's Wild West Show. When he died, he was buried in the Niobrara Valley.

Sarah Beth Guevara of the University of Oklahoma's Gaylord News reported on the ceremony marking the placement of Standing Bear's statue at the Capitol on Wednesday. Among the dignitaries there was U.S. Rep. Jeff Fortenberry of Nebraska. "It is almost unthinkable to us today, that it wasn't until 1879 after Standing Bear's trial that Native Americans were declared to be persons for consideration of the law," Fortenberry said. "Chief Standing Bear didn't seek to be a civil rights leader," said Fortenberry. "He simply wanted to bury his dead on their ancestral homeland." Each state is allowed two pieces in statuary hall. Will Rogers and Sequoyah "two Cherokees" represent Oklahoma. Until Wednesday, two white men "Julius Sterling Morton and William Jennings Bryan" have stood for Nebraska. Morton was a newspaper editor and secretary of agriculture under Grover Cleveland. Bryan was the unsuccessful Democratic nominee for president three times between 1896 and 1908, setting a record in major party futility in national elections. He served in Congress, was President Woodrow Wilson's first secretary of state and played a dramatic role in the Scopes Monkey Trial. Ships and schools and even a county in southeastern Oklahoma have been named after

Bryan, and his statue represented Nebraska in the Capitol â€ until Wednesday. Bryan rose to national prominence with his bombastic â€œCross of Goldâ€• speech at the 1896 Democratic National Convention. It is remembered as one of the great moments of American oratory.

It almost carried him to the White House. Standing Bearâ€™s words, no less brilliant, carried him back to Nebraska. **FEATURED VIDEO** [Subscribe to Daily Headlines](#) [Sign up!](#) *

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