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PIECING TOGETHER THE PONCA PAST RECONSTRUCTING DEGIHA MIGRATIONS TO THE GREAT PLAINS

BETH R. RITTER

The twenty-first century presents opportunities, as well as limitations, for the American Indian Nations of the Great Plains. Opportunities include enhanced economic development activities (e.g., casino gambling, telecommunications, and high-tech industries) and innovative tribal programming such as language immersion programs made possible through enhanced self-governance initiatives. Limitations include familiar scripts that perpetually threaten tribal sovereignty and

chronically underfunded annual appropriations for Native American health, housing, and social service programs.

The Ponca Tribe of Nebraska, terminated in 1965 and restored to federally recognized status in 1990,¹ embraces these challenges by exploring the limits of self-governance, economic development opportunities, and cultural revitalization initiatives. The Ponca recognize they have experienced profound cultural loss over the past three centuries. Yet the definition of what it “means” to be Ponca has never been lost.

Tribal termination was the culmination of generations of federal Indian policy that adversely affected the Ponca.² Historically, the Ponca were a small tribe who suffered considerably as a result of treaties of cession, forced removal to Indian Territory, the subsequent division of the tribe into “Northern” and “Southern” entities, allotment, and the eventual dispossession of all but 834 acres of their original estate.³ By the time the government enacted its termination policy in the 1950s, there was little left of the former estate of the Northern Ponca to fight for.

KEY WORDS: Blood Run, Degiha, ethnohistory, migrations, Oneota, oral history, Ponca

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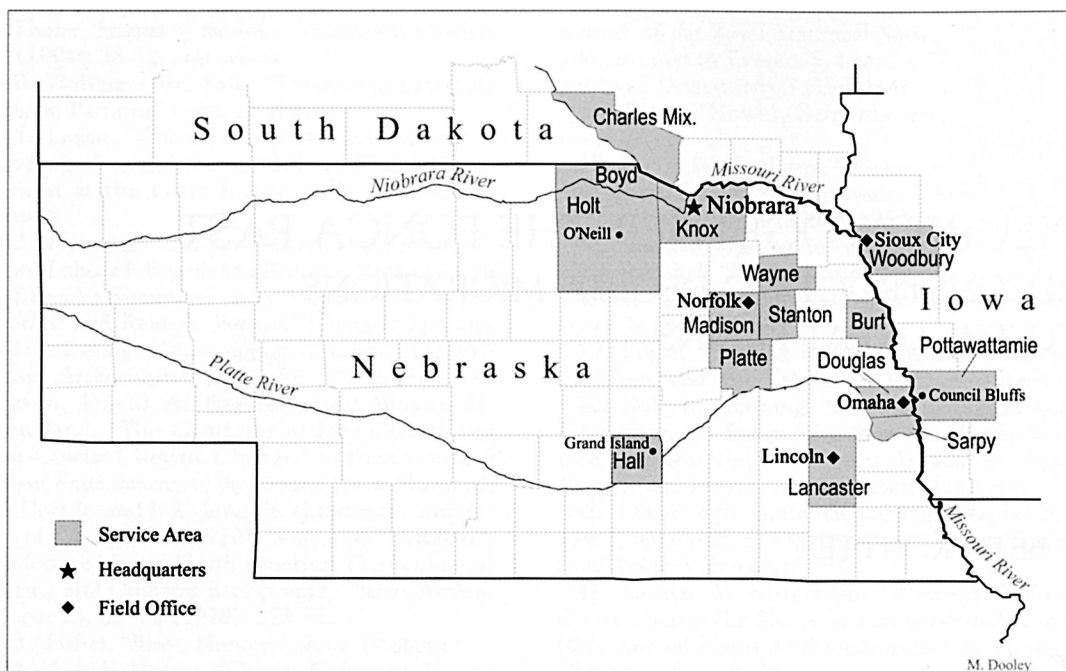


FIG. 1. Map of service delivery areas of the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska.

The Ponca Tribe of Nebraska was restored to federally recognized status on 31 October 1990. The language of their restoration legislation specifically prohibits the tribe from ever seeking a residential reservation.⁴ Rather, it is allowed to deliver services (e.g., health, housing, and social services) to their widely dispersed membership who reside in fifteen counties in Nebraska, Iowa, and South Dakota (Fig. 1). These counties include the cities of Omaha, Lincoln, Grand Island, and Norfolk in Nebraska, as well as Council Bluffs and Sioux City in Iowa. Tribal headquarters are located in Niobrara, Nebraska. Field offices are located in Omaha, Lincoln, Norfolk, and Sioux City. The tribe is allowed to acquire trust land and deliver a full range of services in all of the fifteen counties that comprise their service areas.

In 1998 the Tribal Council identified a need to better understand the early migration and

settlement history of the tribe in order to make more informed policy decisions governing all fifteen service delivery areas. This article synthesizes tribal oral histories (recovered from legal and ethnographic sources), as well as ethnohistorical and archeological evidence for Ponca migration to and settlement in the Great Plains.

DEGIHA MIGRATIONS

Many of the tribes historically and currently associated with the Great Plains originated from regions outside the Plains, particularly from the Eastern Woodlands. The Ponca and their close linguistic and cultural relatives, the Omaha, Kaw (also known as Kansa), Quapaw, and Osage, are one such example. Together, the five cognate tribes are referred to as "Degiha-speakers" of Siouan linguistic stock. The Degiha-speakers are also related lin-

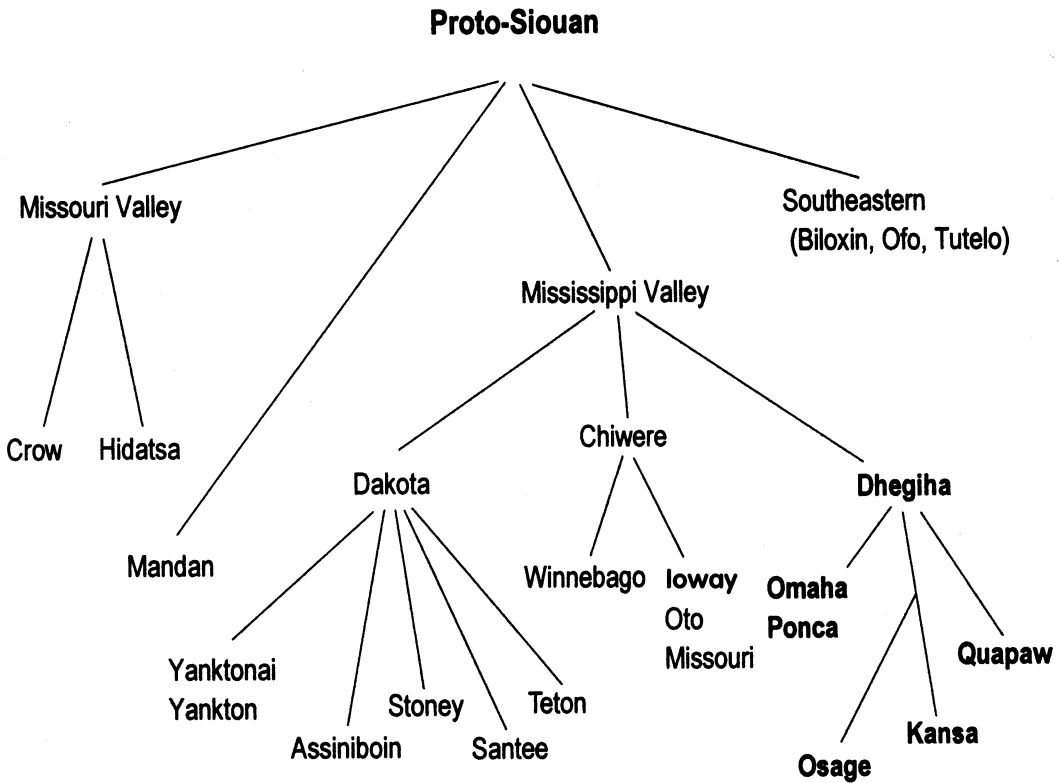


FIG. 2. *Siouan language family*. [Adapted from Hollow and Parks: Robert C. Hollow and Douglas R. Parks, "Studies in Plains Linguistics: A Review," *Anthropology on the Great Plains*, ed. Margot Liberty and W. Raymond Wood (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), Fig. 1, p. 76.]

guistically and culturally to the Chiwere division of Siouan-speakers, the Ioway, Otoe, Missouri, and Winnebago (Fig. 2).

The story of how the Degiha-speakers and Chiwere-speakers came to inhabit the Great Plains from their woodland homelands is known primarily through tribal oral histories supported by ethnohistoric accounts. From these texts, we can begin to flesh out an epic narrative of a large-scale migration of Indian nations to the Great Plains.

The precise location of the "premigration" homeland of the Degiha-speakers is not known. Tribal oral histories suggest the Ponca were one contingent of a large migration of Degiha-

speakers who originated from the vicinity of the Great Lakes or Ohio River valley.⁵ The cognate Degiha tribes contend they were once a single tribe—before the migration. According to Dorsey, the Degiha-speakers, when one nation, were known as the "Arkansa" or "Alkansa" by the Illinois tribes when they still dwelt within the Ohio River valley (Fig. 3).⁶ Fletcher and LaFlesche posit the original tribal name was *Ho'n'nga*, a hypothesis that is well supported by linguistic evidence.⁷

We can only speculate why the Ponca ancestors and their relatives may have chosen to migrate to the Great Plains, but we know that their migration was an event of great

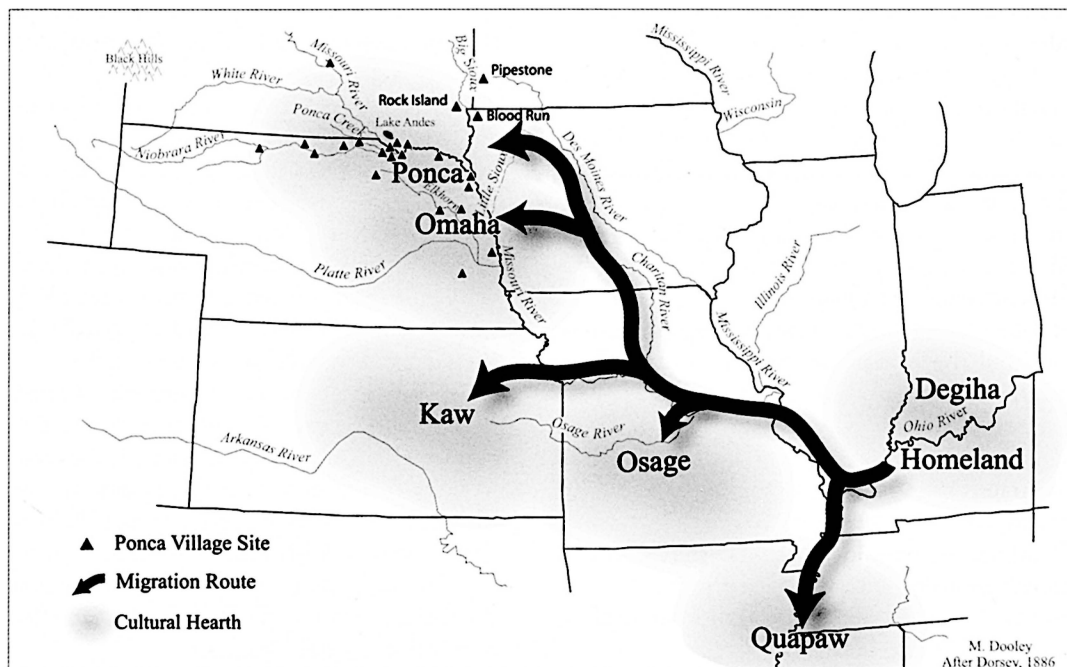


FIG. 3. Map of Degiha migration routes and Ponca village or occupation sites. [Adapted from James Owen Dorsey (note 6), Plate X, and James H. Howard (note 42), p. 111.]

magnitude that has left vivid, yet varied accounts among each of the cognate tribes. One plausible explanation is that the Degiha-speakers once comprised a highly organized chiefdom of village horticulturalists in the Ohio River valley.⁸ Depending on the timeline selected, many factors may have contributed to their apparent decision to abandon their ancestral homeland.

If one favors a relatively "early" exodus, the collapse of complex chiefdoms associated with the Middle Mississippian cultures (e.g., Cahokia or the American Bottoms) in the fourteenth century may be directly implicated.⁹ Moreover, global climate change may have initiated a push-pull effect. Beginning as early as A.D. 1200 and culminating in the "Little Ice Age" or Neo-Boreal,¹⁰ a general pattern of cooler, drier conditions may have seriously curtailed the number of frost-free days for maize

horticulture while simultaneously favoring the expansion of western bison range.¹¹ Other triggering factors may have been the spread of epidemic disease and/or intensified intertribal warfare associated with the early Contact period.¹² In this context, we can imagine a scenario whereby either part or all of the Degiha-speakers eventually sought refuge on the Great Plains.¹³

The tribal designations of "Quapaw" and "Omaha" may be of more recent origin than the tribal names of "Ponca," "Osage," and "Kaw." According to Degihan traditions, the term "Omaha" refers to those going against the wind or current and "Quapaw" refers to the opposite phenomenon. The terms harken back to the initial event that split the Degihas, dividing those who traveled upstream from those who traveled downstream when the original group reached the Mississippi

River early in the course of their migration odyssey.

From the Ponca perspective, the migration commenced with all five cognate tribes traveling down the Ohio River from their original homeland.¹⁴ Upon reaching the confluence of the Ohio and Mississippi Rivers, one group separated and traveled down the Mississippi River. This group came to be known as the “downstream” or Quapaw.¹⁵ The “upstream” people—the Omaha, Osage, Ponca, and Kaw—followed the Mississippi upstream until they reached the mouth of the Missouri and eventually drifted into the contemporary state of Missouri (Fig. 3).

James Owen Dorsey, a missionary and ethnographer who lived with the Ponca and Omaha for an extended period in the late nineteenth century, has provided the most comprehensive account of the migration route after separation.¹⁶ The group (sans Quapaw but otherwise intact) apparently remained at the site of present-day St. Louis, Missouri, for some time before ascending the Missouri River to the mouth of the Osage River east of the present-day Jefferson City, Missouri. It was at this point that another major separation took place. The Omaha and Ponca crossed the Missouri River and left the Osage and Kaw behind.

Dorsey offered two accounts of the migration from this juncture.¹⁷ One account (supplied by Joseph LaFlesche and Two Crows of the Omaha) recounts that the migration of the Omaha and Ponca followed the Missouri River north and west until reaching the vicinity of the Pipestone Quarry (in southwestern Minnesota). The other account, favored by Dorsey and other informants, placed the Omaha and Ponca on a route that ascended the Chariton River to its source near the Des Moines River. This account posits that the Ioway first joined the Omaha and Ponca on the Des Moines River, traveling together to the headwaters of this river near Pipestone Quarry (Fig. 3).¹⁸

Dorsey characterized the subsequent migration of the confederated tribes (Omaha/Ponca/

Ioway) in the following passage: “At all events the traditions agree in this: the people built earth lodges (permanent villages), they farmed and hunted the buffalo and other animals. When the game became scarce in their neighborhood, they abandoned their villages and went north-west.”¹⁹ Dorsey’s assertion that the tribes built earth lodges is at odds with the oral traditions of both the Ponca and Omaha, who believe they learned to build earth lodges from the Arikara (or “Sand Pawnee”) after they arrived in northwestern Iowa.²⁰

All accounts concur that the Omaha, Ponca, and Ioway proceeded northward and eventually reached the sacred Pipestone Quarry. It was here that the Ponca obtained the catlinite for their sacred pipe.²¹ Pipestone Quarry was a highly contested landscape, and the Omaha/Ponca/Ioway were forced to abandon their settlement at Pipestone due to fierce opposition by the Dakota.²²

Reportedly, after leaving Pipestone the tribes then drifted south and southwest toward the Big Sioux River, eventually establishing a village on the Big Sioux River north of present-day Sioux City, Iowa (see Fig. 3).²³ The Big Sioux River figures prominently in the subsequent history of the three confederated tribes. The riverine habitat of the Big Sioux locale reportedly had plentiful game and also would have supported the style of floodplain horticulture the confederated tribes were familiar with.²⁴ However, the confederated tribes faced continued opposition to their occupation of this locale by the Yankton Dakota and their allies.

Tribal histories report the Ponca, Omaha, and Ioway were driven out of their village or villages on the Big Sioux by the Yankton Dakota in a major battle, losing 1,000 warriors in the process.²⁵ If this figure is accurate, the confederated tribes would have been a very large population group indeed. After this crushing defeat, the village(s) were evidently abandoned.²⁶ The surviving Ponca, Omaha, and Ioway traveled into southeastern South Dakota, reportedly to Lake Andes (Fig. 3), where they cut the sacred pole of the Omaha and

where the Omaha formally committed to their tribal organization.²⁷ Omaha tribal history suggests that they returned to the east side of the Missouri River and eventually built a new village on the Big Sioux River. Omaha tribal histories also recall that the Omaha/Ponca nearly lost possession of the Sacred Pole during a subsequent fierce battle at the newly settled Big Sioux village.²⁸

During the Big Sioux village era, the Omaha and Ponca encountered the Arikara living in what is now northeastern Nebraska. The Omaha and Ponca began raiding the Arikara, as Fletcher and LaFlesche attest: "Omaha war parties from the east side of the river harassed the Arikara, who were living on the west side."²⁹ Traditions of both the Omaha and Ponca relate that the tribes were operating together when they drove the Arikara northward. While this may be accurate, the Yankton and Santee Dakota are generally credited with displacing the Arikara. Nonetheless, the Omaha and Ponca agree that the Arikara sought to make peace with them and that peace was negotiated at the "new village" on the Big Sioux.³⁰

After finally abandoning the Big Sioux village locale, the confederated tribes traveled west and northwest to the mouth of the White River, where the Omaha and Ioway remained for a time. The Ponca, however, set off on their own to the Black Hills.³¹ The three tribes eventually reunited and traveled back down the Missouri River. Driving the Arikara out of northeastern Nebraska cleared the way for the eventual settlement of the region by the Ponca, Omaha, and Ioway (Fig. 3).

The Ponca were the first to fission off from the larger group, signaling a new political and economic arrangement for the allies. When the confederated group reached the mouth of the Niobrara River, the Ponca permanently separated from the Omaha and Ioway. The Omaha eventually settled near the mouth of Bow Creek in northeastern Nebraska,³² and the Ioway continued eastward to establish a village near Ponca, Nebraska. It is possible that the Otoe (Chiwere-speakers closely re-

lated to the Ioway) were also with the confederated tribes during part or all of this odyssey. The Otoe settled at the mouth of the Elkhorn River in eastern Nebraska (Fig. 3).³³

The Ponca appear to have been generally more mobile than their Omaha relatives (Fig. 3). When the Ponca separated permanently from the Omaha, according to the Omaha, neither tribe had horses. The Ponca traveled westward from their Niobrara homeland and encountered the "Padouca" or Plains Apache.³⁴ They warred with the Padouca but eventually made peace and received horses from them.³⁵ Interestingly, the Omaha have no stories about how they received horses but are highly familiar with how the Ponca obtained theirs. Besides their familiarity with the Black Hills, the Ponca also have traditions regarding expeditions to Pike's Peak in Colorado and a medicine wheel in Wyoming.³⁶

It is risky to assign dates to the migration scenario outlined above; however, it is possible to advance a tentative chronology specific to the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. In 1884 Dorsey wrote, "The *Waxdege*, *Za-waxube*, or sacred pole, is very old, having been cut more than two hundred years ago."³⁷ Obviously, this information does little to pinpoint the actual date of separation. However, this account, stating that the Ponca and Ioway were with the Omaha when the sacred pole was cut, was verified by Howard's twentieth-century Ponca informants.³⁸ This would have placed the Ponca with the Omaha at Lake Andes (Fig. 3) sometime near 1684. This estimate is generally consistent with available ethnographic, ethnohistoric, and archeological data.

PONCA ORAL HISTORY

Ponca oral history is vague when accounting for their history before they inhabited the Pipestone/Big Sioux region with the Omaha and Ioway.³⁹ If the Omaha-Ponca association posited by various scholars and Omaha informants is correct, this dearth of knowledge is consistent with the "single tribe hypothesis" (author's phrasing) which suggests that the

Ponca were a clan of the Omaha. However, it is also plausible that this gap in traditional knowledge may be due to the premature deaths of Ponca culture-bearers—as a result of epidemic disease, warfare, or some other cause—before they could pass on Ponca tribal history. Clearly, the recollections of various Ponca elders interviewed in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries consistently demonstrate a strong tribal presence in northwestern Iowa, northeastern Nebraska, southeastern South Dakota, and southwestern Minnesota in the protohistoric and early historic eras. As discussed below, these recollections dovetail with what is presently known about Oneota culture history in northwestern Iowa in the protohistoric and early historic periods.

In testimony provided for the Omaha Land Claims case in 1911-12, seventy-year-old Ponca elder Louis LeRoy described the eastern boundary of land claimed by the Ponca before their Treaty of 1858 as “that area that stretched from the catlinite quarries to the mouth of the Platte River or a point east of the Missouri opposite Omaha.”⁴⁰ On the question of whether the Ponca and Omaha were once a single tribe, seventy-year-old Jack Penisky [Jacob Peniska] replied, “They never mixed up, they were separate tribes, the Omaha and the Ponca. But when they were at Pipestone the villages were close together.”⁴¹

The Ponca have several stories of old villages in the vicinity of Pipestone and northwestern Iowa (Fig. 3). One such village, *Maxude Wa aeda*, translated as “Where the Iowa Farmed,” is near the mouth of Iowa Creek in Dixon County, Nebraska.⁴² Based on the testimony of Standing Elk, this village was “the oldest place the Ponca lived, a long time ago; that was their main home at one time.”⁴³ The Ponca were likely a much larger tribe when they originally inhabited this village near the Missouri River. Ponca elder Louis LeRoy reported that his grandfather told him his ancestors were a “three-ring tribe” when they lived together at this site, indicating that their numbers were too many to form a single camp circle.⁴⁴ Interestingly, one of the Dakota names

for the Ponca was *Oyateyamni*, or “three tribes.”⁴⁵ An alternative explanation of this name is that the village dated from the period when the Omaha, Ioway, and Ponca—or some other configuration of three cognate tribes—lived closely together.

Two other well-known Ponca villages are found along the Missouri River in what is now Dakota County, Nebraska (Fig. 3). The Ponca *Omadi* village site was located near Dakota City, Nebraska, very near Sioux City, Iowa. *Uhe atan*, or Bridge village, was located near Homer, Nebraska, confirming the Ponca assertion that they were well established in this region.⁴⁶ The remainder of the known Ponca village sites are located primarily within the traditional cultural hearth associated with the Ponca along Ponca Creek and the Niobrara and Missouri Rivers (Fig. 3).⁴⁷

ETHNOHISTORIC ACCOUNTS

North American ethnohistory utilizes archival maps, photographs, documents, and documented observations of Europeans and European-Americans to reveal the cultural history of a particular ethnic group, or “tribe.” Ethnohistory is very useful as an additional line of evidence to validate and/or refine tribal oral histories and the archeological record. The greatest degree of confidence in interpreting tribal history is gained when oral history, ethnohistory, and archeology overlap.

The earliest ethnohistoric data available on the Degihas involves the infamous expedition of Spanish conquistador Hernando DeSoto, who reportedly met the Quapaw on the lower Mississippi in 1541 (Fig. 3). Because the expedition specifically names the Quapaw it is widely assumed that the Quapaw were already “alone,” placing the initial separation of the cognate tribes well before 1541.⁴⁸

In the seventeenth century, France successfully challenged Spain’s hegemony over the interior regions of North America and came to dominate the trans-Mississippi trade with Native Americans. European geopolitical circumstances in the eighteenth century caused

France to yield control of the region back to Spain. As a result, many archeological sites from this era contain considerable quantities of European (including French) trade goods, allowing these sites to be more reliably dated.

After reviewing the available ethnohistoric literature, Thiessen concluded that by the early eighteenth century the French were highly familiar with the region west of the Mississippi "to the point where relatively specific information about native peoples and watercourses was becoming available on maps and in travelers' accounts."⁴⁹ Specifically, Thiessen noted that the Omaha/Ponca and Ioway were located by the French on maps and other eighteenth-century documents near (or west of) the headwaters of the Iowa-Cedar, Upper Iowa, and/or the Des Moines Rivers.⁵⁰

One of the first such French expeditions to document this region involved Louis Jolliet and Father Jacques Marquette, who are credited with "discovering" the Missouri River for France during their 1673 expedition.⁵¹ Of more immediate interest, Jolliet and Marquette reported an Omaha (/Ponca?) and Ioway village on the Des Moines River in the same year.⁵² The Marquette map of 1673 is the earliest documentary mention of the Omaha.⁵³ Unfortunately, Jolliet and Marquette did not visit the village personally; instead they relied on information gained from the Peoria and Quapaw.⁵⁴

In 1695 Pierre-Charles Le Sueur placed the Omaha near the Missouri River and noted that the Ioways had joined them.⁵⁵ Presumably, the Ponca were also with them. Le Sueur never personally visited the villages of the Omaha or Ioway; rather, he sent several expeditions of his men from his post on the Blue Earth River (south-central Minnesota), commonly referred to as Fort Vert, in 1700-1701. On the basis of Le Sueur's documentation, Wedel has concluded that the Omaha were residing in a large village on the Big Sioux River in 1700-1701 but had likely been joined by the Ioway by 1699.⁵⁶

Pierre Le Moyne, Sieur d'Iberville, the French governor of Louisiana, was a traveling

companion of Le Sueur's on his return trip to France. Le Sueur reported to Iberville that the Omaha had a population of 1,200 families in that village and that the Ioway and Otoe had an additional 300 families living at the site.⁵⁷

In a letter to Iberville in 1700, Father Marest of the Kaskaskia mission also placed the Ioway (and Otoe) on the upper Missouri River but admits he never met them personally.⁵⁸ In a memoir written in 1700 (published in 1702), Iberville said that the Otoe and Ioway were with the Omaha between the Missouri and Mississippi Rivers, and estimated their location as about a hundred leagues from the Illinois.⁵⁹

References to the Omaha/Ponca occupation of the Big Sioux locale are further supported by noted French cartographer Guillaume de l'Isle, whose two maps of 1702, and an additional map produced in 1703, placed the Omaha near the mouth of the Big Sioux River in northwestern Iowa.⁶⁰ De l'Isle's maps and accompanying notes situate the Omaha village thirty to forty leagues west of Fort Vert.⁶¹ Additional notes specify that the Omaha village was located on a river "that enters the Missouri on the right in ascending at nine or ten leagues from the river that comes from the former villages of the Aiaoue [Ioway]"; this river has been interpreted as the Big Sioux.⁶²

In a subsequent 1718 map, de l'Isle again placed the "Maha" living near the "Aiaouez" [Ioways] north of the Missouri River—probably the Big Sioux River. Of particular interest is de l'Isle's 1718 depiction of a separate tribe east of the Missouri, identified as "Les Mahas, Nation errante" ("Wandering Omaha"). Howard and Wood believe this last group was very likely the Ponca, which if true is the first recorded mention of the Ponca as a separate tribe by outside observers.⁶³

Therefore, according to the ethnohistoric accounts, the Omaha/Ponca (and Ioway) had a village (or villages) on the Big Sioux River north of modern-day Sioux City, Iowa, for a considerable length of time in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries. More-

over, evidence of the Omaha/Ponca split is apparent on de l'Isle's 1718 map, with two "Maha" groups depicted. This chronology is consistent with the separation hypothesis championed by O'Shea and Ludwickson, who believe that the Ponca and Omaha split sometime between 1714 and 1718 (before the Omaha established Bad Village on Bow Creek in northeastern Nebraska in 1720).⁶⁴ O'Shea and Ludwickson believe that the tribes were still together in 1714 because a knowledgeable trader failed to mention the Ponca by name in that year. Furthermore, they posit that the Omaha population dropped by 800 between 1700 and 1758, which they believe is roughly the number of Ponca who may have departed. The first definitively Ponca villages date from ca. 1750 in their historical homeland near the confluence of the Niobrara and Missouri Rivers.⁶⁵

Any apparent confusion on the part of the Europeans regarding the tribal status of the Ponca was resolved in the ensuing years. By 1785 the French were highly familiar with the Ponca and associated them with their historic aboriginal homeland near the Niobrara River in northeastern Nebraska. In that same year the Ponca were disparaged in an unsigned letter to the governor general of Louisiana, Antonio Renzel, as "nomadic, naturally ferocious, and cruel."⁶⁶ According to Howard, a French map produced in 1786 identified the Ponca by name above the "Mahas" and placed their village on the Missouri River, near Ponca Creek and the Niobrara River.⁶⁷

The earliest European visitor to the Ponca to leave a firsthand written description was Jean Baptiste Monier. Monier (also known as Juan Munie by the Spanish) traded and lived with the Ponca in 1789 and petitioned for exclusive trading rights with the tribe in 1793.⁶⁸ In 1794 French trader Jacques Clamorgan located the Ponca "[o]n the bank of the Missouri about thirty leagues above the village of the Maha nation."⁶⁹ In the same communication, Clamorgan bitterly complained about Monier's trade monopoly with the Ponca.⁷⁰ In 1794-95 Jean Baptiste Trudeau

opened a trading post that came to be known as the "Ponca House" on Ponca Creek near the Missouri.⁷¹

ARCHEOLOGICAL EVIDENCE

Archeological evidence of Omaha/Ponca/Ioway campsites and/or village sites before they settled in the Big Sioux locale is difficult to detect. As Omaha informants noted, during their migration they used skin tents held in place by a circle of stones that was left in place when the tents were taken down. Some Omaha informants reported having seen the "tent circles" east of the Missouri, but subsequent attempts to locate them in the early twentieth century were inconclusive.⁷²

The greatest likelihood of finding early Omaha/Ponca archeological sites in the Great Plains is obtained by matching up the known sites with the most robust tribal traditions and ethnohistoric data. This approach leads us to directly examine the archeological evidence for Omaha/Ponca villages in the drainage of the Big Sioux River in northwestern Iowa. Mildred Mott Wedel, in her 1938 master's thesis and subsequent publications, was the first to explicitly attribute occupation of the Blood Run site in extreme northwestern Iowa to the Ioway Indians.⁷³ Ethnohistoric and tribal traditions certainly justify expanding that occupation to the Omaha/Ponca in the early historic period.⁷⁴

BLOOD RUN AND ROCK ISLAND ARCHEOLOGICAL SITES

The Blood Run (13L02) and Rock Island (39LN2) archeological sites in northwestern Iowa and southeastern South Dakota achieved National Historic Landmark status in 1970. The designation recognized roughly 845 acres as an especially significant resource.⁷⁵ The entire site spans more than 1,200 acres. The Blood Run/Rock Island sites are located ten miles southeast of Sioux Falls, South Dakota, and approximately seven miles west of Larchwood, Iowa (Fig. 3). They are approxi-

mately forty miles southwest of the Pipestone Quarry (southwestern Minnesota) that figures so prominently in the oral histories of the Ponca and Omaha. Blood Run actually straddles the Big Sioux River and takes its name from Blood Run Creek. The largest portion is located in western Lyon County, Iowa, and the portion on the other side of the river (in South Dakota) is known as Rock Island.

The Blood Run and Rock Island village sites are believed to have been occupied sometime between A.D. 1500 and 1700.⁷⁶ On the basis of tribal traditions and ethnohistoric documentation, it is likely that the Blood Run/Rock Island site contained the principal village of the Omaha/Ponca from the 1690s to perhaps 1714.⁷⁷ Blood Run/Rock Island is the largest documented Oneota site and one of the most important Oneota archeological village sites in the Western Prairie Peninsula.

Blood Run/Rock Island is an impressive, large-scale archeological site. The first documented observations of the site in the nineteenth century counted "275 large conical mounds, one possible effigy mound, an earthen embankment enclosing about 15 acres and a large number of circular and ovoid boulder outlines."⁷⁸ The effigy mound may have been in the shape of a bison, and there are also reports of a serpent-shaped effigy mound stretching more than one-quarter mile in length.⁷⁹ Most of the mounds are burial mounds; many contained European trade goods.⁸⁰ Unfortunately, the majority of the original features of the site have been either obliterated or severely modified by several generations of plow agriculture.

Interestingly, Blood Run/Rock Island is known to have contained archeological features in the highlands area that may correspond to the "tipi rings" described by Omaha informants. The boulders were too large for individuals to lift and were usually arranged side by side to form ovals and circles (the circles average 30 feet in diameter).⁸¹ A tipi of this size would have accommodated a fairly large nuclear or extended family of six adults and several children. Thomas, who studied the site

in the 1890s, interpreted many of the boulder outlines (estimated at 150 to 800 total) as tipi rings with entryways oriented to the southeast.⁸²

The occupants of Blood Run/Rock Island were engaged in maize, beans, and squash horticulture and were hunting and collecting a wide variety of fauna, fish, and shellfish. Several catlinite pipes manufactured from stone quarried from Pipestone have also been recovered. Archeologists have also recovered chipped and polished stone artifacts and pottery.⁸³

THE ONEOTA TRADITION

Blood Run and Rock Island are included in a larger regional archeological taxonomy generally referred to as the Oneota tradition.⁸⁴ Oneota is often described as a "bridging culture" that spans the Prairie Peninsula, incorporating aspects of Eastern Woodlands with those of the Plains during the late Holocene.⁸⁵ Oneota culture dates from approximately A.D. 900 through contact with historically known tribes by European and European-American cultures.⁸⁶ Hundreds of sites have been classified as Oneota and are located in the tallgrass prairies along rivers and lakes in the modern states of Iowa, Nebraska (extreme northeast), South Dakota (extreme southeast), Kansas (extreme northeast), Missouri, Illinois, Wisconsin, and Minnesota.

Oneota sites have a generalized cultural pattern with few distinctive traits. In general, we can characterize Oneota as a hybridization of local Woodland cultures and the more elaborate Mississippian. Oneota sites exhibit an apparently higher reliance on hunting and gathering than the Mississippian, probably in response to local environmental factors.⁸⁷

Henning identifies the Oneota tradition primarily with the Chiwere-Winnebago and Degiha, or Siouan-speaking, peoples.⁸⁸ Harvey concurs with Henning and believes that four of the five Degiha-speaking tribes (all but the Quapaw) may be represented in the Oneota tradition.⁸⁹ What we may be seeing is an inte-

grated cultural complex that incorporated several distinct Chiwere and Degiha Siouan speakers throughout the region, involving patterns of movement from west to east as well as east to west.⁹⁰ Viewed in this manner, it is plausible that Degiha and Chiwere "pioneers" may have inhabited the region before the large-scale final migration described in tribal oral histories commenced.

Henning cautions against employing the direct historical approach in analyzing Degiha prehistory.⁹¹ He notes, quite correctly, that while the five cognate tribes have tenaciously retained their language, social, and religious traditions, they jettisoned their former material culture in favor of the regional adaptations of the Plains' tribes they encountered in their eventual homelands.⁹² Henning is referring specifically to the lack of similarity of archeological sites associated with the historically known Degiha tribes. The lack of similarity in the material culture of the five closely related Degihan tribes, or even of the Oneota sites in general, has confounded many archeologists' attempts to construct a distinctive "Degihan archeological type." The Ponca appear to be the most elusive of all, leading Henning to confess that the "Ponca constitute an archeological enigma."⁹³

Vehik notes that Degihan oral histories are often at odds with the archeological reconstructions that dismiss Degihan westward migrations in favor of local cultural evolution.⁹⁴ However, she credits the oral histories with having an internal consistency that is lacking in the archeological interpretations: "It seems odd to dismiss a set of oral histories that exhibit substantial similarity among Dhegihan societies in favor of an archaeological argument that cannot be substantiated in Dhegihan or Caddoan culture as historically documented."⁹⁵

Reconstructing prehistoric, protohistoric, and early historic tribal histories is far from an exact science. However, the ethnohistoric and archeological data strongly support the core content of Degiha tribal migration stories that

firmly place the Ponca in northwestern Iowa by the beginning of the eighteenth century. Thiessen concludes, "[D]espite the lack of agreement in all respects, Omaha and Ponca traditions in particular, considered as a whole, amply attest to the presence of the Omaha, Ponca, Ioways, and Otos in the region of northwestern Iowa, southeastern South Dakota and southwestern Minnesota."⁹⁶

While the ethnohistoric record fails to specifically identify the Ponca Tribe by name until 1718, many plausible explanations for this apparent deficit have been explored in this research. Like Howard, Jablow argues that the lack of specific mention of the Ponca separate from the Omaha until the eighteenth century may simply be the result of the failure of non-Indian observers to note the distinction between the linguistically and culturally similar tribes.⁹⁷

Today, the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska is seeking to recover the pieces of their past in an effort to move forward on behalf of their children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren to come. The research compiled for this article was a necessary step toward understanding their past so that better-informed policies may be formulated regarding land acquisition, economic development, cultural patrimony, and cultural programming. Despite termination and restoration legislation that preclude the Ponca from reestablishing a reservation, the Ponca Tribe of Nebraska has legally and politically returned to their homeland (see Figs. 1 and 3).

NOTES

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15. Fletcher and LaFlesche, *Omaha Tribe* (note 7 above), p. 38.

16. Dorsey, "Migrations of Siouan Tribes" (note 6 above).

17. *Ibid.*

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*, pp. 218-19.

20. Howard, *Ponca Tribe* (note 2 above); Fletcher and LaFlesche, *Omaha Tribe* (note 7 above).

21. Howard, *ibid.*

22. *Ibid.*

23. *Ibid.*, p. 15.

24. *Ibid.*

25. Dorsey, "Migrations of Siouan Tribes" (note 6 above), p. 219.

26. Fletcher and LaFlesche, *Omaha Tribe* (note 7 above), p. 73.

27. *Ibid.*

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29. *Ibid.*, p. 75.

30. *Ibid.*, p. 74.

31. Howard, *Ponca Tribe* (note 2 above).

32. John M. O'Shea and John Ludwickson, *Archaeology and Ethnohistory of the Omaha Indians: The Big Village Site* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1992).

33. Thomas D. Thiessen, "Who Lived at Blood Run? A Review of the Historical and Traditional Evidence" (unpublished manuscript, State Historical Society of Iowa, by the National Park Service, Midwest Archeological Center, Lincoln, Nebr., 1998), p. 7.

34. James D. Gunnerson, personal communication with author, 18 May 1999; Howard, *Ponca Tribe* (note 2 above).

35. Fletcher and LaFlesche, *Omaha Tribe* (note 7 above), p. 79.

36. Howard, *Ponca Tribe* (note 2 above).

37. James Owen Dorsey, *Omaha Sociology*, 33rd Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology (Washington, D.C.: US Government Printing Office, 1884), p. 234.

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44. Testimony of Louis LeRoy, OLC 1911-12 (note 40 above), p. 180.

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49. Thiessen, "Who Lived at Blood Run?" (note 33 above), p. 11.

50. Ibid., p. 12.

51. Alfred P. Nasatir, ed., *Before Lewis and Clark* (St. Louis Historical Documents Foundation, 1952; reprint, Lincoln, Nebr.: Bison Books, 1990), p. 3.

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53. Reuben Gold Thwaites, ed., *The Jesuit Relations and Allied Documents: Travels and Explorations of the Jesuit Missionaries in New France, 1610-1791*, vol. 59 (Cleveland: Burrows Brothers Company, 1900), fig. 3.

54. Mildred Mott Wedel, "Peering at the Ioway Indians through the Mist of Time: 1650-Circa 1700," *Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society* 33(1986): 1-74, p. 13.

55. Fletcher and LaFlesche, *Omaha Tribe* (note 7 above), p. 80.

56. Mildred Mott Wedel, "The Ioway, Oto, and Omaha Indians in 1700," *Journal of the Iowa Archeological Society* 28 (1981): 1-13.

57. Ibid., p. 9.

58. Nasatir, *Before Lewis and Clark* (note 51 above), p. 6.

59. Dorsey, "Migrations of Siouan Tribes" (note 6 above), p. 214. The distance of a league was not always uniform; during this period it generally meant 2.7 to 3.0 miles.

60. "Carte de la Riviere de Mississippi" (1702); "Carte du Canada et du Mississippi" (1702); "Carte du Mexique et de la Floride" (1703). Photocopies, Geography and Map Division, Library of Congress. Reproduced in Wedel, "Iowa, Oto, and Omaha Indians" (note 56 above).

61. Wedel, "Ioway, Oto, and Omaha Indians" (note 56 above), p. 7.

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64. O'Shea and Ludwickson, *Archaeology and Ethnohistory of the Omaha Indians* (note 32 above).

65. Holen, "Ponca Settlement" (note 47 above).

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67. "Carte du Mississippi et ses embranchemens"; an unsigned French map, in Howard (note 5 above), p. 24.

68. Howard, *Ponca Tribe* (note 2 above), p. 25.

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70. Howard, *Ponca Tribe* (note 2 above); Jablow, *Ponca Indians* (note 5 above).

71. Howard, *Ponca Tribe* (note 2 above), p. 25.

72. Fletcher and LaFlesche, *Omaha Tribe* (note 7 above), p. 72.

73. Wedel, "Ioway, Oto, and Omaha Indians" (note 56 above) and "Peering at the Ioway Indians" (note 53 above); Thiessen, "Who Lived at Blood Run?" (note 33 above), p. 2.

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75. Tom Thiessen, personal communication with author, 26 September 2002.

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77. Henning, "Oneota Tradition" (note 74 above), p. 384; O'Shea and Ludwickson, *Archaeology and Ethnohistory of the Omaha Indians* (note 32 above), p. 17.

78. Cyrus Thomas in 1891, quoted in Henning, "Oneota Tradition" (note 74 above), p. 383.

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80. Burials included glass beads, brass and small iron objects, horse bones and a dog skeleton wrapped in hide (Henning, "Oneota Tradition" [note 74 above], p. 384).

81. Midwest Support Office, "Special Resource Study" (note 79 above).

82. Quoted in Henning, "Oneota Tradition" (note 74 above), p. 383.

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87. Harvey, *Oneota Culture in Northwestern Iowa* (note 83 above), p. 232.

88. Henning, "Oneota Tradition" (note 74 above), p. 362.

89. Harvey, *Oneota Culture in Northwestern Iowa* (note 83 above), p. 226.

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91. Henning, "Adaptive Patterning of the Dhegiha Sioux" (note 84 above).

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93. Henning, "Development and Interrelationships of Oneota Culture" (note 11 above), p. 243.

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96. Thiessen, "Who Lived at Blood Run?" (note 33 above).

97. Howard, *Ponca Tribe* (note 2 above); Jablo, *Ponca Indians* (note 5 above), p. 47.