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Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve

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Standing Bear of the Ponca



Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve

Illustrated by Thomas Floyd

University of Nebraska Press
Lincoln and London

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Introduction

“I am a man,” Standing Bear told a crowded Omaha courtroom. Then he declared that his blood was the same color as that of any person in the room.

He made those claims at the end of a famous trial. That court case showed that an American Indian had the same rights as any other person in the United States.

Standing Bear was not the main leader of the Ponca tribe. He was a chief of the Bear Clan. As such, he was responsible for taking care of one small band. His bold acts to care

for his family and followers made him famous in Nebraska and all across the country.

As a result, many white people began to support American Indian causes. Other Indians noted what Standing Bear had done too. They were encouraged to fight for their own rights. The Standing Bear trial was historic. For the first time, the law said that “an Indian is a person under the law”—a person who has rights just like any other American.

Standing Bear, the Boy

It was always a good day for the Ponca when a child was born. The tribe treasured its children. But when the chief's son was born, he was doubly welcomed. One day this boy would be the head of the Bear Clan. He would be a leader and take care of his people.

The mother took the baby's umbilical cord. She put it into an amulet bag. That was a leather pouch shaped like a horned toad. The toad was a symbol of long life and endurance. The parents did not know their son would face many troubles in his life, but they believed the amulet had powers to

protect him. For all of his life that bag was kept in a special place in the lodge.

The boy's mother sang soothing songs to quiet and lull him to sleep. He was with her all day in a cradleboard on her back. Sometimes she set it nearby or hung it from a tree. There the baby watched her at her work. He could also see the things going on in the village.

Children were not allowed outdoors at night. Their mothers warned them that there was a monster outside, so they'd better be good and go to bed.

The boy grew older. When he did something bad, he was gently scolded. He was never spanked. The Ponca believed that hitting a child would hurt the child's spirit.

The boy was trained to respect the old ones. He was never to walk in front of a seated person without permission. He was taught to say thank you. He learned to play quietly and to speak softly around adults. He knew that it was improper to stare at strangers.

When he could walk by himself, the boy was considered a person. He was no longer a baby. It was time for the ceremony of "Turning the Child." He stood on a stone in the center of the family's lodge. An elder turned him to each of the four directions. The elder cut a lock of the boy's hair and then gave him a new pair of moccasins. Then the boy was given his new grown-up name.

He was now Ma-ch-nah-zha, Standing Bear.

Standing Bear was the eldest son in the family. He was treated like a special child. But he also had duties in his home. He helped take care of his younger brother, Big Snake.

In those days Ponca children did not go to school to study in classrooms. Girls learned from their mothers and other women. Boys learned from their fathers and other men. They also spent a lot of time with grandparents. The elders had time to tell stories. One tale was about a yellow-haired beast that lived in a cave above the river. They also told stories of little men who protected a special hill on the plains.

Standing Bear's and Big Snake's grandparents did other things for them too. Their grandmother would have sewn their first ceremonial clothing. Their grandfather would have made their first bows and arrows.



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Boys played at war. They used red hay stems as arrows. They snapped the heads of flowers at each other. They learned how grown men should act by watching the respected men of the tribe.

The boys cared for the horse herd near the village. A strong youngster helped break in a horse by riding it in three feet of water. The horse could not buck in the slippery mud. If the boy fell off, he was not hurt in the shallow water.

When a boy was old enough, he became interested in girls. Then he began braiding his hair. When he wanted to marry, he asked his parents to help him. If they liked the girl he had chosen, he could take a horse or buffalo robe to her family. If her parents liked the young man, they kept the gift. Then the couple could marry.

In their early teens, boys went on Vision

Quests. They did that to receive spiritual power. A boy would go by himself to a high hill. He would fast—or go without eating—and pray for four days and nights. A bird or animal would visit him. The animal would give him power to help him in his life.

When the boy came down from the hill, he made a small leather sack. This was called a medicine bag. The boy would put an item in the bag—maybe a feather or a claw. It was to remind him of the creature that had given him power. Later as a man, he could gain more power by doing the Sun Dance.