

I Am a Man: Chief Standing Bear, A Native Son's Search for Justice

By Bruce MacDonald

Imagine having to deal with armed strangers who order you and your people to move from ancestral lands to a distant place you never heard of.

Imagine having to endure a forced-march of several hundred miles under harsh winter conditions complete with blizzards and temperatures that reached 40 below zero.

Imagine arriving at your destination, a malarial swamp, only to discover that the government had made no provisions for basic survival.

Imagine having to go into federal court seeking a declaration that you are a person "within the meaning of law" after you were thrown into an army jail. Your crime: An attempt to return home to fulfill the wish of a dying son who wanted to be buried with his ancestors.

Imagine all this against the backdrop of the stirring declaration that "all men are created equal" in the eyes of the law, and you begin to get an idea about the story of Standing Bear, a chief of the Ponca nation in what is today Nebraska, and his search for something no other native leader had achieved: justice under American law.

A book, due out later this month, details the sad but inspiring story of a peaceful people caught up in a cruel policy dictated by the United States government at a time in the 1870s when white settlers were streaming west.

The book deals with the unprecedented steps Chief Standing Bear and others took in response to the government actions, steps that have been described as a forerunner of the modern civil rights movement to gain equality for blacks.

Written by Joseph Starita, a journalism professor at the University of Nebraska and a two-time Pulitzer Prize finalist, the book lays out a poignant human drama that should be a must-read for anyone interested in how our government treated Native peoples in the post-Civil War years.

Mr. Starita's account is filled with important lessons, and some surprises, from the white settlers who didn't want the Ponca moved, to the large numbers in eastern cities who supported justice for Chief Standing Bear and his people.

In the hands of a less skilled writer, a book such as this could have been reduced to a rant, a one dimensional account of a trying time in our nation's history when European-bred culture forced its way on people viewed as "savage," and somewhat less than human.

Many Americans today are aware, some more vaguely than others, that a terrible injustice was done to the people who occupied this land when the Europeans arrived and claimed it as their own.

This book speaks to the subject in great detail, casting aside such vagueness and telling a story that is eye-opening and deeply moving.

We have all been told that vast herds of buffalo once roamed the Great Plains until they were killed by professional hunters, sportsmen from the east and others. Less well known is the government policy outlined in the book that took aim at the Indian's food base to starve them into submission and "to settle the vexed Indian question," in the words of General Philip Sheridan.

The story of Chief Standing Bear and other American Indian tribes are not often told from the perspective of the victims, since as has been said, the victors write the history, with predictable results.

That is not what the reader gets with this book, *I Am a Man, a Native Son's Search for Justice*, to be published by St. Martin's Press on Jan. 20th.

The author describes the incredible cruelty inflicted upon a peaceful people who sought nothing more than to live in harmony with their white neighbors.

He also describes individual acts of kindness by the settlers and those the Ponca met along the route of their journey south to Indian Country, now known as Oklahoma.

The scope of government cruelty and bungling is breathtaking, but the author never loses sight of the narrative thread and the story moves along smoothly.

The Ponca's plight and Chief Standing Bear's courage attracted an unlikely combination of a muck-raking journalist, lawyers who knew that the law should be about the administration of justice and effective legal and indignant citizens who responded to a public relations campaign crafted to capture the hearts of people and to turn the tide in favor of Chief Standing Bear and his people.

For many young students in contemporary America, history is something they had to endure before lunch or the afternoon dismissal bell. Perhaps that wouldn't have been the case if their history books were written with such a rich level of detail and a keen sense of basic human decency.

Lest we think that the drama played out in that 19th century court room settled the issue of whether people confined by the U.S. government should have access to our courts we need look no farther than the cases involving people confined at Guantanamo and declared "enemy combatants" by a 21st century federal government that seems to have taken its cue its 19th century predecessors.

History matters and books such as *I Am a Man* remind us of just how much.