

# Standing Bear's Speech

from *The Indian Journal*

The first time an Indian was permitted to appear in court in this country and have his rights tried was in the year 1879. Previous to this every Indian in the United States was subject to the orders of the Secretary of the Interior. If he happened to be a man of a tyrannical nature, the Indians fared hard. One Secretary of the Interior had caused all the Poncas Indians to be driven, at the point of bayonet, from northern Nebraska down to Indian Territory, depriving them of lands to which they held government deeds. They were left in the new country for months without rations, and more than one third of them died. Among these was the son of Standing Bear. The old chief refused to have the boy buried in the strange country, and, gathering about thirty members of his tribe together, he started for their ancient hunting-grounds, intending to bury his boy where generations of the Poncas chiefs lay.

The Secretary of the Interior heard of the runaways, and through the War Department telegraphed to General Crook, of Omaha, to arrest the Indians, and return them to Indian Territory. So General Crook arrested Standing Bear and his followers, and took them all, with the old wagon that contained the body of the dead boy, down to Omaha.

Standing Bear told his story to the general, who was already familiar with many wrongs that had been committed against the Indians, and who was indignant at their treatment. He detained the Indians at Omaha until he consulted with a Mr. Tibbles, an editor of a newspaper. They agreed to espouse the cause of the Indians, securing to Standing Bear a trial in the United States court. It was the most notable trial ever brought in the West, and, in fact, the scope was as wide as any ever tried in this country; for upon its decision one hundred thousand persons were made citizens.

Mr. Tibbles, who attended every session of the court, describes what took place, in the following words:

The court room was crowded with fashionably dressed women; and the clergy, which had been greatly stirred by the incident, were there in force. Lawyers, every one in Nebraska, and many from the big Eastern cities; business men; General Crook and his staff in their dress uniforms (this was one of the few times in his life that Crook wore full dress in public); and the Indians themselves, in their gaudy colors. The court room was a galaxy of brilliancy.

On one side stood the army officers, the brilliantly dressed women, and the white people; on the other was standing Bear, in his official robes as chief of the Poncas, and with him were his leading men. Far back in the audience, shrinking from observation, was an Indian girl, who afterward became famous as a lecturer in

England and America. She was later known on both continents by a translation of her Indian name, *In-sta-the-am-ba*, Bright Eyes.

Attorney Poppleton's argument was carefully prepared, and consumed sixteen hours in the delivering, occupying the attention of the court for two days. On the third day Mr. Webster spoke for six hours. And during all the proceedings, the court room was packed with the beauty and culture of the city.

Toward the close of the trial, the situation became tense. As the wrongs inflicted on the Indians were described by the attorneys, indignation was often at white heat, and the judge made no attempt to suppress the applause which broke out from time to time. For the department, Mr. Lambertson made a short address, but was listened to in complete silence.

It was late in the afternoon when the trial drew to a close. The excitement had been increasing, but it reached a height not before attained when Judge Dundy announced that Chief Standing Bear would be allowed to make a speech in his own behalf. Not one in the audience besides the army officers and Mr. Tibbies had ever heard an oration by an Indian. All of them had read of the eloquence of Red Jacket and Logan, and they sat there wondering if the mild-looking old man, with the lines of suffering and sorrow on his brow and cheek, dressed in the full robes of an Indian chief, could make a speech at all. It happened that there was a good interpreter present—one who was used to "chief talk."

Standing Bear arose. Half facing the audience, he held out his right hand, and stood motionless so long that the stillness of death which had settled down on the audience, became almost unbearable. At last, looking up at the judge, he said:

"That hand is not the color of yours, but if I prick it, the blood will flow, and I shall feel pain. The blood is of the same color as yours. God made me, and I am a man. I never committed any crime. If I had, I would not stand here to make a defense. I would suffer the punishment and make no complaint."

Still standing half facing the audience, he looked past the judge, out of the window, as if gazing upon something far in the distance, and continued:

"I seem to be standing on a high bank of a great river, with my wife and little girl at my side. I cannot cross the river, and impassable cliffs arise behind me. I hear the noise of great waters; I look, and see a flood coming. The waters rise to our feet, and then to our knees. My little girl stretches her hands toward me and says, 'Save me.' I stand where no member of my race ever stood before. There is no tradition to guide me. The chiefs who preceded me knew nothing of the circumstances that surround me. I hear only my little girl say, 'Save me.' In despair I look toward the cliffs behind me, and I seem to see a dim trail that may lead to a way of life. But no Indian ever passed over that trail. It looks to be impassable. I make the attempt.

“I take my child by the hand, and my wife follows after me. Our hands and our feet are torn by the sharp rocks, and our trail is marked by our blood. At last I see a rift in the rocks. A little way beyond there are green prairies. The swift-running water, the Niobrara, pours down between the green hills. There are the graves of my fathers. There again we will pitch our teepee and build our fires. I see the light of the world and of liberty just ahead.”

The old chief became silent again, and, after an appreciable pause, he turned toward the judge with such a look of pathos and suffering on his face that none who saw it will forget it, and said:

“But in the center of the path there stands a man. Behind him I see soldiers in number like the leaves of the trees. If that man gives me the permission, I may pass on to life and liberty. If he refuses, I must go back and sink beneath the flood.”

Then, in a lower tone, “You are that man.”

There was silence in the court as the old chief sat down. Tears ran down over the judge’s face. General Crook leaned forward and covered his face with his hands. Some of the ladies sobbed.

All at once that audience, by one common impulse, rose to its feet, and such a shout went up as was never heard in a Nebraska court room. No one heard Judge Dundy say, “Court is dismissed.” There was a rush for Standing Bear. The first to reach him was General Crook. I was second. The ladies flocked around him, and for an hour Standing Bear had a reception.

A few days afterward Judge Dundy handed down his famous decision, in which he announced that an Indian was a “person,” and was entitled to the protection of the law. Standing Bear and his followers were set free; and, with his old wagon and the body of the dead child, he went back to the hunting-grounds of his fathers, and buried the body with tribal honors.

From the website: **Stories Worth Rereading**

[http://library.timelesstruths.org/texts/Stories\\_Worth\\_Rereading/](http://library.timelesstruths.org/texts/Stories_Worth_Rereading/)