

## Ponca Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma

*(Oklahoma Social Studies Standards, OSDE)*

**Tribe: Ponca Tribe of Indians of Oklahoma**

**Tribal website(s):** [www.ponca.com](http://www.ponca.com)

### 1. Migration/movement/forced removal

**Oklahoma History C3 Standard 2.3** *“Integrate visual and textual evidence to explain the reasons for and trace the migrations of Native American peoples including the Five Tribes into present-day Oklahoma, the Indian Removal Act of 1830, and tribal resistance to the forced relocations.”*

**Oklahoma History C3 Standard 2.7** *“Compare and contrast multiple points of view to evaluate the impact of the Dawes Act which resulted in the loss of tribal communal lands and the redistribution of lands by various means including land runs as typified by the Unassigned Lands and the Cherokee Outlet, lotteries, and tribal allotments.”*

Original Homeland – present day Kentucky, Indiana, and Nebraska

Location in Oklahoma – North central Oklahoma primarily in Kay County

Traditionally the Ponca share common social and cultural characteristics with the Omaha, Osage, Kaw and Quapaw peoples. They once lived in the area of northern Kentucky and southern Indiana along the Ohio River, then migrated west into what is today known as Nebraska. The Ponca first encountered Europeans in 1789 when they lived in villages along Ponca Creek near the Niobrara River in northeastern Nebraska. Despite several treaties with the U.S., in 1868 due to an “administrative blunder” by federal agents, the entire Ponca Reservation was given to the Sioux. When the error was discovered, the U.S. government chose to remove the Poncas south to Indian Territory rather than admit the mistake. The tribe protested for nearly a decade, but under military escort, the Ponca’s forced removal to Indian Territory began in the spring of 1877. Their trek was beset by great hardship and upon their arrival in northeastern Oklahoma, they found no shelter and little food. After the first two years almost one-third of the tribe had perished and many others were ill and disabled. It was at this time one of the most famous Ponca leader’s sagas began. When his eldest son died in 1878, the Ponca Chief Standing Bear and 65 followers began a journey back to Nebraska to bury his son in traditional Ponca territory. Standing Bear was arrested in Nebraska for leaving the reservation without permission. The ensuing trial in federal

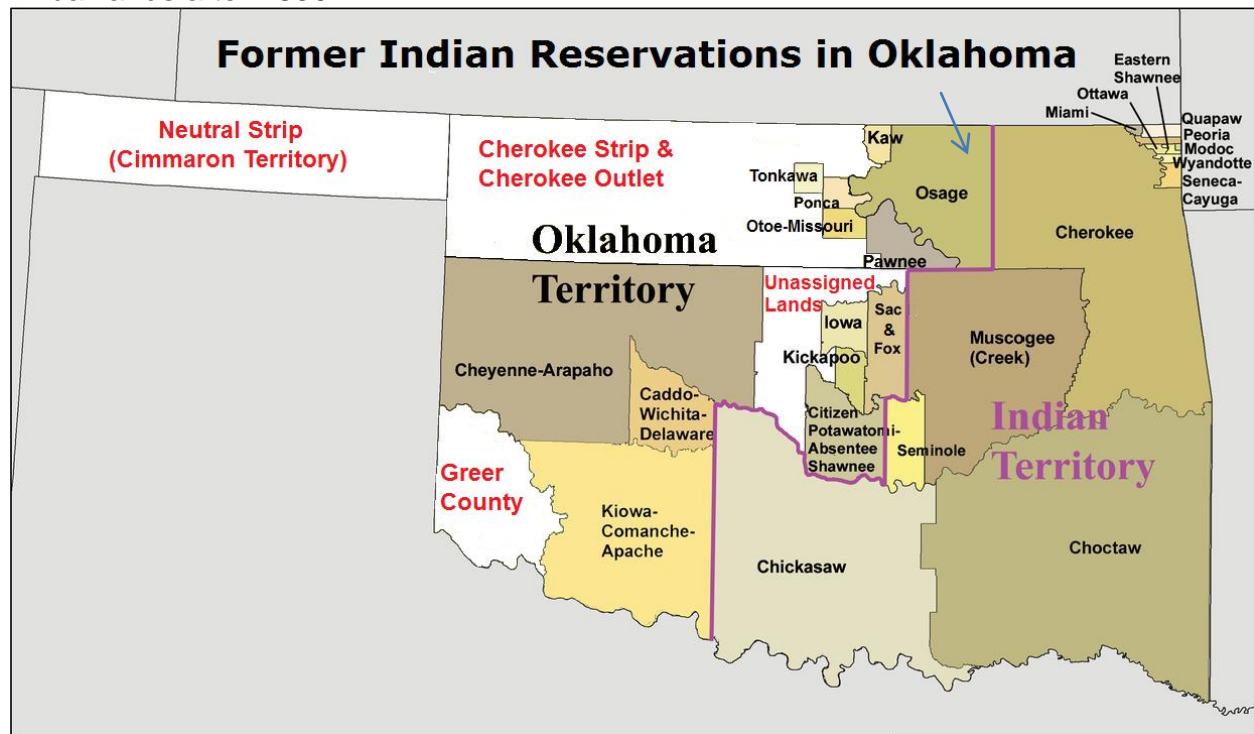
court resulted in the landmark decision which declared Indians to be considered “persons” with individual rights under the law.

Allotment and the Land Rush of 1889 dramatically undermined tribal lifestyle, yet in spite of the allotments, the Ponca continued to gather together as a tribe for the winter months and take part in traditional tribal life. Late in the 19<sup>th</sup> century non-Indian homesteaders began moving into areas surrounding the Ponca Reservation. In 1889 Ponca City was incorporated north of the Reservation and then a large percentage of the Ponca land was leased to the Miller Brothers and became the basis for the famous 101 Ranch. As original allottees died, the Miller Brothers purchased their allotments as they became available for sale. In 1911 oilman E.W. Marland struck oil on land leased from a Ponca tribal member named Willie Cries. It proved to be a major strike ushering in an era of unprecedented oil production in central Oklahoma. By the early 1920s local oil refineries began to dump oil waste into the Arkansas River and Ponca City used the river for disposal of raw sewage. Quickly the river water became unfit to drink, life in the river died off and the animals which had lived adjacent to the river all but disappeared, making already trying circumstances for the Ponca even more difficult. In 2010, the Ponca Tribe would win a major law case against the oil refineries and recover damages made to their lands.

## 2. Maps

**Oklahoma History C3 Standard 2.3** *“Integrate visual and textual evidence to explain the reasons for and trace the migrations of Native American peoples including the Five Tribes into present-day Oklahoma, the Indian Removal Act of 1830, and tribal resistance to the forced relocations.”*

## Tribal lands after 1830



### 3. Population Past/Present

- Total tribal enrollment: 3,600
- Tribal enrollment in Oklahoma -
- Membership criteria: Enrollment is limited to those who can prove a minimum of 1/8 Ponca Indian blood from their original base roll.

### 4. Government; Chiefs vs Chairman; Elected or Paternal

**US Government C3 Standard 3.4** "Summarize and explain the relationships and the responsibilities between national and state governments including tribal and local governments.

**Oklahoma History C3 Standard** "The student will analyze the formation and development of constitutional government in Oklahoma. 1) Compare and contrast the development of governments among the Native American tribes, the movement for the state of Sequoyah . . . 2) Describe and summarize attempts to create a state constitution joining Indian and Oklahoma Territories including the impact of the Progressive and Labor Movements resulting in statehood on November 16, 1907."

- Tribal Government leadership

The Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma is governed by an elected business committee and tribal chairperson and vice-chairperson. They are elected to four year terms.

## 5. Language Group

**Oklahoma History C3 Standard 4.1** *“Compare and contrast the successes and failures of the United States policy of assimilation of the Native Americans in Oklahoma including the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 and the effects of the Indian Boarding Schools (1880s-1940s) upon Native Americans’ identity, culture, traditions, and tribal government and sovereignty.”*

Ponca language

Dhegiha Siouan language family. Ponca is most closely related to the Omaha language. The language has two primary dialects which dissect amongst female and male lines. Today there are approximately twenty fluent speakers of the tribal language. Language materials for learners are available at the tribal complex.

## 6. Cultural Identifiers – i.e. Mound Builders; Plains

**Oklahoma History C3 Standard 4.1** *“Compare and contrast the successes and failures of the United States policy of assimilation of the Native Americans in Oklahoma including the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 and the effects of the Indian Boarding Schools (1880s-2013) upon Native Americans’ identity, culture, traditions, and tribal government and sovereignty.”*

Ponca Tribal members attended Indian boarding schools throughout the United States to include Carlisle, Hampton, Haskell, Bacone, Chilocco, Riverside, and others. They also participated in the Armed Forces during many of the wars and conflicts the United States has been engaged in. Tragic stories upon their return to the United States from wars such as the Korean Conflict have been heavily documented. Despite their service, many were subjected to high levels of racism and poverty upon their return home.

Oklahoma Historical Society source to consider for Boarding Schools:

<http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/a/am012.html>

## 7. Fine arts

**Oklahoma History C3 Standard 4.1** *“Compare and contrast the successes and failures of the United States policy of assimilation of the Native Americans in Oklahoma*

*including the passage of the Indian Citizenship Act of 1924 and the effects of the Indian Boarding Schools (1880s-1940s) upon Native Americans' identity, culture, traditions, and tribal government and sovereignty."*

## **8. Significant events (ie. Massacres, Battles, Supreme Court cases...)**

**Oklahoma History C3 Standard 2.4C** *"Summarize the impact of the Civil War and Reconstruction Treaties on Native American peoples, territories, and tribal sovereignty including the a) Required enrollment of the Freedmen, b) Second Indian Removal and the role of the Buffalo Soldiers, c) Significance of the Massacre at the Washita, d) Reasons for the reservation system, and e) Establishment of the western military posts of Fort Sill, Fort Supply, and Fort Reno."*

In the 1700's, the Ponca Indians separated from the Omaha tribe and established villages along the Niobrara River and Ponca Creek in present Nebraska and South Dakota. There they subsisted on horticulture and bison hunts. Until the arrival of the Teton Sioux circa 1750, the Ponca's territory stretched from the Missouri River to the Black Hills. Smallpox and other diseases in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries reduced their numbers. Sioux warfare forced their withdrawal to an area near the mouth of the Niobrara River.

The Ponca never warred with the United States, with whom they signed their first peace treaty in 1817. A trade agreement followed in 1825. In 1858 and 1865 the Ponca also signed land cession treaties in return for military protection and economic assistance. During the 1860s and 1870s, droughts, failed bison hunts, and an incessant Sioux threat brought the Ponca to the brink of starvation. Instead of honoring its treaty obligations, the United States ceded Ponca land to the Sioux in 1868. Rather than renegotiate the Sioux treaty, the federal government removed the Ponca to Indian Territory in 1877.

The Ponca removal was grossly mishandled. The United States not only failed to obtain the consent of the Ponca chiefs but also neglected to provide a reservation with adequate facilities. According to some estimates, nearly 158, almost a third of the tribe, perished during the first years in Oklahoma. After the death of his son in 1878, Ponca subchief Standing Bear returned to Nebraska with a group of followers. His arrest and trial led to a landmark decision in federal Indian jurisprudence. The court ruled in *Standing Bear v. Crook* (1879) that Indians were recognized as persons under the Fourteenth Amendment and therefore could sue for their rights. The decision split the tribe into northern and southern bands, as Standing Bear's followers were allowed to remain in Nebraska.

The southern Ponca under principal chief White Eagle settled on a 101,000-acre reservation near the confluence of the Salt Fork and Arkansas rivers in the Cherokee Outlet (present Kay and Noble counties in Oklahoma). They established winter camps

along the Arkansas River, where they continued to practice their tribal customs. They leased most of their land to Euro-American farmers and ranchers, including the Miller brothers of the 101 Ranch.

Ponca culture came under pressure in the 1880s and 1890s. Agents and missionaries sought to abolish traditional dances, marriage practices, and religious customs. Despite tribal opposition, the government also imposed its allotment policy on them in 1892, resulting in the eventual alienation of much of their land. The Ponca again came under pressure after the discovery of oil on and near their reservation by oilman Ernest Whitworth Marland in 1911. The development of the Ponca and Tonkawa oil fields caused environmental problems, forcing the Ponca to abandon their winter camps along the Arkansas River and move onto individual allotments.

Despite these pressures, the Ponca continued to shape their culture. Many joined the Miller Brothers' 101 Ranch Wild West Show, which allowed them to reenact aspects of their traditional lifestyle. The introduction of the peyote religion permitted them to establish their own version of Christianity. Two educated young Poncas, Frank Eagle and Louis McDonald, were cofounders of the Native American Church in 1918.

In 1919 Ponca World War I veterans formed an American Legion chapter called Buffalo Post 38. This organization revived such traditional war-related practices as the Ponca war dance (*heluska*). Dancing remained the central expression of traditional Ponca culture. Throughout Oklahoma the Ponca were known for their knowledge of songs and dances. They made important contributions to the development of powwow culture on the southern Plains. In 1926 Gus McDonald was crowned the first world champion fancy dancer, earning the Ponca the honor of organizing the world championships each year. The annual Ponca powwow, the oldest powwow in the United States, is held every August.

In 1950 the Ponca organized a tribal government in accordance with the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act of 1936. The tribal headquarters are located at White Eagle, five miles south of Ponca City. In 1961 Clyde Warrior, a Ponca activist, cofounded the National Indian Youth Council. Warrior's call for tribal self-determination paved the way for a new generation of Indian activists in the 1960s and early 1970s.

Turmoil characterized Ponca tribal politics during the 1970s and 1980s. Accusations of fraud and mismanagement led to a high turnover ratio of officials in the tribal business committee, the tribe's governing body. When the federal government reduced tribal funding in the 1980s, the committee began a bingo operation to increase revenues. Presently, Indian gaming is one of the most contentious issues between the State of Oklahoma and the Ponca community.

Relations between the Ponca of Oklahoma and the Ponca of Nebraska improved after the U.S. government restored recognition to the latter in 1990. Since then, both have cooperated on numerous issues, including the repatriation of human remains and artifacts under the Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA).



One of the greatest challenges facing Oklahoma's Ponca community is the retention of their language.

Oklahoma Historical Society: <http://www.okhistory.org/research/indianrecs>

## 9. Current Information on tribe

Since 1876, the Ponca Tribe has hosted the nation's longest running powwow.

The Ponca Tribe are the originators of the most colorful and vibrant dance in Indian Country (men's fancy). Each Sunday in April, the Ponca play their traditional shinny games at White Eagle, Oklahoma. The Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma currently provides a full range of services to their tribal members to include: health, education, housing, cultural, and social programming.

## 10. Other information (i.e. Elder testimonials; Guest speakers; Literature; Famous Tribal members...)

The Ponca Tribe of Oklahoma is one of two Ponca tribes in the United States. The other tribe, which has its own government and tribal lands, is located in Nebraska.

Ponca Literature Examples:

**Dando-Collins, Stephen:** *Standing Bear Is A Person: The True Story of A Native American's Quest For Justice*

**Brown, Donald N. and Irwin, Lee:** "Ponca," in *Handbook of North American Indians*, Vol. 13, Plains, ed. Raymond J. DeMallie (Washington, D.C.: Smithsonian Institution, 2001).

**Brown, Thomas:** "In Pursuit of Justice: The Ponca Indians in Indian Territory, 1877-1905," in *Oklahoma's Forgotten Indians*, ed. Robert E. Smith (Oklahoma City: Oklahoma Historical Society, 1981).

**Cash, Joseph and Wolff, Gerald W. :** *The Ponca People* (Phoenix: Indian Tribal Series, 1975).

**Howard, James H.:** *The Ponca Tribe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1995).

**Jablow, Joseph:** *Ponca Indians: Ethnology of the Ponca* (New York: Garland, 1974).

**Sherer Mathes, Valerie and Lowitt, Richard:** *The Standing Bear Controversy: Prelude to Indian Reform* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 2003).

**Wishart, David J.:** *An Unspeakable Sadness: The Dispossession of the Nebraska Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).

Famous tribal members

Casey Camp-Horinek (activist) has traveled throughout North America assisting indigenous people in their struggles against colonialism.



Ponca Artist Brent Greenwood

Brent Greenwood (artist): Brent's art can be found in numerous museums, galleries, tribal cultural centers, and private collections throughout the United States.

[Clyde Warrior](#) (activist) cofounded the National Indian Youth Council. He promoted [self-determination](#) and inspired many young Native activists during the 1960s and 1970s.<sup>191</sup>





Standing Bear and family

**Sources:**

Oklahoma Historical Society source to consider for Indian Removal information:  
<http://digital.library.okstate.edu/encyclopedia/entries/i/in015.html>

The Library of Congress: <http://www.loc.gov/rr/program/bib/ourdocs/Indian.html>

Oklahoma Indian Country Guide, Oklahoma Tourism and Recreation Department  
[NIE 2011 OK Indian Country Guide\[1\].pdf](#)

Ponca Tribal website: [www.ponca.com](http://www.ponca.com)

Oklahoma Historical Society

Oklahoma Indian Country Guide: *One State, Many Nations*; Travelok.com

The Library of Congress