HISTORY OF THE PONCA INDIANS OF OKLAHOMA

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Bachelor of Arts

John Fletcher College

University Park, Iowa

1928

Submitted to the Department of History

Oklahoma Agricultural and Mechanical College

In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements

For the Degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

1941

APPROVED:

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PREFACE

Two years ago the author's wife mentioned something about the passing of the fiftieth anniversary of the Ponca Methodist Indian mission. About that time, questions began to intrude themselves into his placid thoughts as to the size of the mission, the extent of its work, and just why there should be such a flourishing work so far removed from any vestige of self-support. The questions were uncomfortable to live with, so they were taken to school to see if the doctors there had any idea for the solution. The questions were not very comforting, so the investigation was carried further.

What is written here is more an effort to point out and to discover trends than an effort to enumerate so many more-or-less disconnected facts. The legends, stories, anecdotes, jokes, and documents relative to the Ponca Indians form a mass of material that would make exciting drama for those so inclined. So apologies are presented to a number of people - especially Ponca friends - for the valuable material that was presented but that is not even touched upon. And to you who are unnamed go sincerest thanks.

But most of all expression of heartiest thanks should go to the author's good wife, Thelma. She has been a real

helpmeet and an encouragement.

To the teachers, librarians, and fellow students at Oklahoma A. and M., thanks should go for many a boost and hint. Most helpful of all advisers was T. H. Reynolds, who assisted in organizing this study in the early days of the class on Westward Expansion.

This work could never have been so profitable to the author had it not been for three months of study last summer. So to Mrs. L. E. Hoover, the missionary Indian Bureau Secretary, goes a large slice of credit for securing the extra two months.

To the Hon. John Collier go thanks for readily making available the records and documents in the Office of Indian Affairs, and for his time so graciously given in assisting the author to get the right start on his research in Washington.

These thanks also go to the employees at the Office of Indian Affairs and at the Pawnee agency who gave freely of their time.

And to the secretaries and workers at the National Archives - how can proper gratitude be shown you for your unfailing cheerfulness and patience in hunting out letters and documents and in unwinding the red tape?

The annual reports of the Indian Bureau of the Woman's Home Missionary Society furnished several valuable checks,

and were the earliest, and perhaps the most reliable, primary sources. Thanks go to Mrs. S. S. Beggs, past Bureau secretary, for the loan of these.

Anyway, "thanks to you all," whether you are mentioned or not by name.

D. J. K.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Chapter I. The Poncas Before Contact With the Whites

Many, many years ago - nobody knows when - a group of dark skinned people who called themselves Punka (head or fore-part) were instructed by Wa-Gun-Deh, the Great Spirit, to go toward the Setting Sun. They did this. After several moves under such orders they came to the Great Waters that had too much salt in them to drink. Here they stayed for many years. Finally Wa-Gun-Deh called them together at the edge of this Great Water and again told them to go West.

Nobody knows exactly how they crossed this Great Water. Some say they closed their eyes and when Wa-Gun-Deh told them to open them again they were on the other side. Others say a large turtle appeared and they rode across on it. Still others think that rocks appeared above the surface of the water, close enough together to step across. When they had made the crossing these rocks disappeared.[1]

This is how the old people told their children that the Punka Indians came to North America.

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[1]Memoirs of Lewis McDonald and of James Williams.

They found themselves in a very wooded country much different from anything that they had ever known, and they were afraid. But Wa-Gun-Deh showed them by several miraculous signs that he was well pleased with them and wanted them to live in this country.

As nearly as is known, this was somewhere along the Atlantic seaboard of the State of Georgia, or the Carolinas. Here they stayed for quite a while. But again Wa-Gun-Deh ordered them to move toward the Setting Sun, and again the great trip was taken Westward. They traveled down the Ohio Valley and up the Missouri Valley until finally they came to a region where Sioux City, Iowa, and Yankton, South Dakota now are located. There is some confusion as to which way the trip was continued from here. Some think the Indians moved on up the Missouri;[2] others say that they went North to the region of Devils Lake in North Dakota and stayed there for many years,[3] living mainly on the eggs of birds and fish of that region. Anyway, they continued to migrate Westward by degrees up the Missouri River until they finally came to a place where the hills were so high the dogs would not drag the loads. This was the fartherest west that the whole tribe migrated.

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[2]Memoirs of Lewis McDonald.

[3]Memoirs of James Williams.

And for many years the country between the Black Hills and the Rocky Mountains was the home of these people.

Nobody knows how long ago this was. The Poncas speak of themselves as the "Old People." They must have been there before the arrival of the Mandans and other tribes in North Dakota. The Mandans claim that they are newcomers who have only been near their present location for about thirty-three generations.[4]

There was apparently not much change in the existence of the tribe from one generation to the next until they began to be affected by the arrival of the white men in North America.

Nobody knows about the exact date but it must have been about two hundred and fifty or three hundred years ago that the Poncas, living somewhere in northern Wyoming, suddenly saw the most ferocious animal that they had ever seen or heard of. It ran on four legs and had a long head in front and another manlike head sprouting out of the middle of the back. Also, it had arms on this portion sprouting out on the back, and they carried long clubs with stone axes with which they killed the Poncas. One day one of these animals fell down and broke into two pieces. Then they discovered it was a man riding on

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[4]Memoirs of Harry Randol.

a horse. The Poncas immediately began to make peace with these strange people. They found they were a band of Cheyenne Indians who had secured some horses from the Spaniards. In the course of events the Cheyennes gave the Poncas a few horses and taught them how to ride, and the two tribes became friendly.

Finally one night the Poncas stole all the Cheyenne horses they could find and collected their families and rode down the "Broad Water" (Platte River). This return trip was made in a comparatively short time and in a few years the Poncas were again located on the "Running Water," or Niobrara, in northeastern Nebraska. This must have been about 1700 to 1800.[5] Their tribe was situated among the Omaha, Brule, and Santee Sioux tribes. Here is the place where they were when they made their first significant contacts with the white men.

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[5]There is a disagreement of one hundred years in the letters from white settlers. The most reliable Poncas put it at about 1800.

Chapter II. The Poncas in Nebraska

For several years there was little contact between the white settlers of North America and the Ponca tribe even here. Occasionally some fur trader or traveller would come by. Whatever the travellers said of other people, they always spoke highly of the manhood and intelligence of the Ponca tribe.[1] The first official contact with the United States Government was the signing of a treaty of friendship at White Paint Creek in 1817.[2]

Their manner of obtaining the necessities of life was almost entirely by hunting, as it had been with their fathers. They may have occasionally put in a little corn, some squash, or beans, but there is not enough evidence to warrant saying that they were farmers. It would be easy to assume that they traded the proceeds of the hunt with the more settled Arikari and Mandans.[3]

The Ponca chiefs wished to sell their land and

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[1] Maximilian, Prince of Wied, Travels in the Interior of North America, Vol. XXII of Early Western Travels, 1748-1846, ed. by R. G. Thwaites (Cleveland: Arthur H. Clark Company, 1906), p. 283; Lewis and Clark Journals, 1806.

[2] Treaty No. 88, St. Louis, June 25, 1817.

[3] Memoirs of Colonel A. B. Welch; Lewis and Clark Journals, 1806.

accordingly wrote to the President:

My just friend,

I wish to write, if you please--say to our Great Father that we never stole anything of any consequence from the whites--that we have always been good and kind to them, and have done them no wrong. We have children and wish to help them so that they can live, and live on our land but we are poor and can do nothing. We have suffered great damage on our lands by the whites; they have cut our timber and destroyed it a great many times but we said nothing. The other tribes of Indians had land, sold, and got pay for it and good homes and can live comfortably but our tribe got nothing. All we ask for is our rights.

My own friend, where do you think we should go if we are to be driven off from our land that we should not all be murdered? We might as well be all killed off by the whites in our own country as to go away to be killed off by others. The United States is a great and strong nation--they have got too many men for us. They say that we must not go to war and fight, that they will defend us. We do not wish to sell all our land, but wish our Great Father would see we have a place on it for a home and are not driven off and killed by our enemies.

We have been living in that country a great many years. How do you think we have lived? We have bought hoes from the traders and raised corn but we have had nothing from our Great Father--not a pipe full of tobacco from the Government but only some little things of not great value of the Agent. We are poor and traveling away from home as you see. We have heard 'through the brush' that the Omahas have sold some of our country--we are going to find out how it is--and if it is so, I will take the bravest of their warriors by the hand and we will both fall by the knife before I will drop the land. We might call you whites all our sons for we broke up all the lands this side of the Niobrara R. for you. We might say we are Americans--we have got a little piece of land but we do not want to be robbed of it.

> We have got but one man on whom we can depend--that is our Great Father, and wish to hear from him. If we could all our anxious troubles would be at an end, for we know he will do by his children what is right. If he wants our land, we will make a treaty and have our lines run--the whites can live on one side and we on the other, each on his own land in peace.[4]

About 1856 marks the beginning of the struggle for existence of the Ponca tribe as it was affected by the Westward migration of the white men. Their first blow was the United States Treaty with the Omahas,[5] wherein that tribe ceded to the United States for settlement land on which the Poncas lived. The farmers began to move in and stake out their claims. The Indians also wanted to plant a crop in the same place. And as they saw much beef handy that was easier to get than the buffalo that had been driven farther west, friction began to develop.[6]

The difficulty was twofold. The Poncas were being dispossessed of their land by the white men by this treaty which they claimed that the Omahas had no right to make. And seeing the Omahas prosper by the handout of the United States Government, they became jealous of the

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[4]Office of Indian Affairs (hereafter, O. I. A.), Omahas, W-250, December 1, 1856. Ellsworth Wakeley to the President on behalf of nine Ponca chiefs.

[5]Ibid., C-948, June 15, 1857.

[6]Ibid., C-986, June 9, 1857; ibid., J-623, July 2, 1857.

Omahas. So within the year the machinery of the government was moving to perfect a treaty with the Ponca tribe.

The Poncas' idea that their trouble would be over by ceding some of the land was not very well founded. No sooner had they made this treaty than they incurred the wrath of the Brule Sioux, who accused them of selling out to the government and proceeded to make war on them. In fact, their condition was not much better than it was before. Their farming was so poor that most crops failed.[7] They no longer dared to go out to the plains to hunt buffalo, for the Sioux killed them and robbed them of their horses and supplies.[8] This state of affairs continued until they were removed to Oklahoma.[9]

One is impressed with the records that the Poncas were a helpless people and on the way to extinction by starvation and warfare.

The first payment out of treaty funds was to Mitchell Cerre for food and supplies furnished the tribe when their hunting and crops had failed. The chiefs acknowledged

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[7] Ibid., D-511, August 26, 1864.

[8] Welch Report of 1870, Congressional Library, E-99, DIW-22, p. 12.

[9] The raids of the Sioux were also provoked by the activities of Chief Iron Whip, or "The Whip." He was a lone killer who preyed upon other tribes. Raids were made on camps where Chief Whip was said to be, but he was never taken. (Memoirs of Tony Knight).

the justice of the claims.[10]

Very soon after the ratification of the treaty, there arose a clamor for "relief." There was a scant crop in 1857 and an insufficient hunt. Their agent reports:

> There was a scarcity of food amounting almost to famine. . . .
>
> I took the responsibility of promising them relief and shall furnish them with such provisions and hoes as appears necessary for their support.[11]

War was also declared against them by the Brules for breaking their alliance with them in resisting the whites and making a treaty with the government.[12]

We have no record available, but apparently the issuing of hoes did not materialize in any crop, whether the relief got there or not. Anyway, the tribe was still there next year, and no ground was broken. The following year the Poncas were still "unable to support themselves" without government aid. The special agent began government farming.

A special appropriation for this was expected to be

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[10]Claim No. 1 on Treaty, April 14, 1860, I. Shaw Gregory, Special Agent.

[11]O. I. A., Ponca, R-599, May 14, 1858. From Agent Robinson.

[12]Ibid.

the end-all and cure-all for relief cases.

> I would respectfully represent to you that the Ponca Indians not having any land broken, or any agricultural implements, they will not be able to support themselves the coming winter. If one thousand dollars can be appropriated and expended in breaking one hundred acres of land on their reserve, and in purchasing some hoes, seed corn, etc. they will become self-supporting and will no longer be a charge on the government.[13]

Whatever the results of farming were that year, the agent asked in the same fall for five thousand dollars for supplies to winter them. The Brule, Oglala, and Cheyenne Indians had attacked the Poncas while they were hunting and curing meat. Their tepees and supplies were destroyed.[14]

In fact, according to the agent's letters, the whole idea of self-support did not work very well, for a while at least. Two years after that, he wrote: "That these Indians have got to be largely supported the coming winter, I have not the least doubt."[15]

The agent apparently strove mightily to get the men to work their land. By threats, rewards, and food, he tried to get action. He wrote,

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[13] Ibid., April 21, 1859. Gregory to Mix.

[14] Ibid., August 10, 1859.

[15] Ibid., August 26, 1864.

> I shall obtain all the aid I possibly can from the Indians, and particularly from the young men, and as an encouragement, remunerate them for their labors. . . . If I can keep the squaws out of the fields this year, and make the men believe that unless they plant this spring, they will be very likely to starve next winter, and by rewarding them with one meal a day, and by paying a few, induce them to work, I think it will be comparatively an easy matter to make them do most of their own farming another year.[16]

Taking it all together, according to some of the white neighbors, some good was done by the efforts for their betterment. A Mr. Westerman, merchant of Niobrara, writes favorably concerning their character:

> The Indians have lived more than one hundred fifty years where the present reservation is, and for the past eighteen years . . . are more advanced in civilization . . . than any other tribe of Indians I know.

Up to this time the Poncas' religion was a simple animism shared by all the Plains Indians. They believed that every object of nature had a spirit, ruled over by the one Almighty Spirit, Wa-Gun-Deh. The Great Ceremony of the year was the "Sun Dance."[17] But after the treaty, the Episcopalian church started a mission among the Poncas with fair success.[18] It had a greater influence for good

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[16] Ibid., Ponca, D-559, April 26, 1862. Hoffman to the Governor of Dakota Territory.

[17] Memoirs of Lewis McDonald.

[18] Welch Report of 1870, Congressional Library, E-99, DIW-62.

than the records would show.[19]

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[19] Memoirs of Ellen Cerre.

Chapter III. Life and Customs of the Poncas on Their Oklahoma Reservation

For the most part, the relations between the Poncas and the white people have been on a friendly basis. The Poncas agree that the treaties and business deals have been largely to their advantage, except for one episode; that was their enforced removal from their Niobrara home. The Poncas believe that the government sold them out to pacify the Sioux after the Custer Massacre.[1]

But this has not been an unmixed curse. We find that after the investigation conducted by Congress relative to this removal and Congress had provided the means whereby they might go again to their old home, not one of those who had not already run away voted to return.[2] They liked this country, and hoped that this spot would be the home of the Ponca tribe forever.[3]

The chief of the tribe of the Mississais said to his

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[1]Memoirs of Tony Knight; memoirs of Albert Black Cole.

[2]Congressional Record, Sen. Misc. Doc. 49, 36 Cong., 3 sess., p. 16; memoirs of Horse Chief Eagle.

[3]This fact is often referred to in tribal business meetings and gatherings where affairs of importance are discussed.

people with regard to the whites about whom the Poncas, like Indians of other tribes, soon divided in their attitude:

> Do you see the whites living upon seeds, while we eat flesh? That flesh requires more than thirty moons to grow up, and is then often scarce. That each of the wonderful seeds they sow in the earth returns them an hundred-fold. The flesh on which we subsist has four legs to escape from us, while we have but two to pursue and capture it. The grain remains where the white man sows it, and grows. With them, winter is a period of rest, while with us it is the time of laborious hunting. For these reasons they have so many children, and live longer than we do. I say, therefore, unto every one that will hear me, that before the cedars of our village shall have died down with age, and the maple trees of the valley shall have ceased to give us sugar, the race of the little corn (wheat) sowers will have exterminated the race of the flesh eaters, provided their huntsmen do not resolve to become sowers.[4]

> We once had the buffalo to skin, and now we have the White Man.[5]

The Indians who followed the advice of the old Mississais chief have fairly well merged with the American population. They and their children soon ceased to be wards of the government, and they took their place as free citizens. They have almost entirely dropped out of tribal life.[6] This is true of Poncas, as it is of other tribes.

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[4]Tradition from "The Wheat Plant," Cincinnati, 1860.

[5]Ascribed to a Cheyenne.

[6]The Rev. V. A. Johnson, pastor of the Methodist Church at Tonkawa, Oklahoma, did not believe this statement was true in his community in 1938. He made a study of his congregation, and found a large percentage were of Indian descent.

It is the ones who have the "buffalo skin" philosophy that quite largely populate the reservations.

Like any group of people, the Poncas have several ways of earning a few dollars occasionally. Some of these ways are looked upon by a few as their chief occupation. But for most, they are "fill-ins."[7]

Handcraft heads the list for the number employed and the amount of returns. The Poncas are recognized by those who deal in such things as among the most skilled in the world in certain forms of feather, bead, and leather work.[8] They are also somewhat famous for their tom-toms.[9]

Ray Lyon, manager of Old Town, Pawnee, employs the most in craft work. His specialty is feather head dresses and tom-toms. He has enough work to provide steady employment to about twenty Indians. Many of them are Poncas, although some are Pawnees and members of other tribes.[10]

Norman Moore, manager of the old 101 Ranch store, is perhaps the next largest dealer in Indian handcraft. He handles large quantities of tom-toms and different kinds

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[7]Most of what follows immediately is from personal observation and study.

[8]Memoirs of S. H. Newlin.

[9]Memoirs of Ray Lyon.

[10]Ibid.

of novelties. At present, most of his Indian tom-toms are made by white labor.

There is an uncertain trade with the Osages in feather work especially. The Osages also have some other bead work done occasionally. The feather work is largely fans for the peyote meetings. Most of the Poncas complain that Osage work is hard to collect for.

Zack Miller's family has been in and out of the Indian novelty business the last few years. At present, they are doing a fair wholesale business.

The missions have at various times sponsored bead and leather work to encourage self-support and self-respect. But it is not pushed much now, except as a pastime. The pay is too small for expert work, and sewing small beads onto suede leather is hard on the eyes.[11] Besides, it was found that if the women could bring in fifty cents or so a day beading, it relieved the men of the responsibility of breadwinning.

Perhaps the poorest paid group on the reservation are the dancers. Not only are the returns small, but a dancer is usually too dignified to dig. The amount of garden stuff raised one year by this group could be

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[11]Some of the Ponca ladies have had exhibits of their beaded handbags at the Kay County Fair Handcraft exhibit the last three years. They have taken a majority of the prizes in their class.

carried in one gunny sack without difficulty.

The big spree for the dancers is the annual pow-wow. This has more of a social nature than commercial. But what the white sight-seers see is commercial. What is put on is what they expect to see when they pay their gate receipts.

Each family usually receives some meat, and in special cases, groceries. Gate receipts, donations from white merchants, concessions, and whatever money comes in is handled by a committee appointed by the Tribal Council for that purpose. The total amount must be a tidy sum, but no audit is ever rendered or statement released.

Occasionally the professional dancers are called for some special celebration for white men. Nobody knows what the promoter usually gets, but the dancer generally gets his expenses, his meals, and perhaps fifty cents a day to a dollar and a half a week. As there may only be eight or ten calls at the most a year, dancing is a precarious business.

A source of income peculiar to the reservation is "side money." The time to work for side money is the time when a lease is in progress. When there are several heirs, the most determined may hold out for a considerable amount because he knows that the lessor is in an awkward

position. Sometimes the money paid out on a lease amounts to quite a rental item. And sometimes, if the white man knows his Indian, he gets him drunk, and the expense is not so heavy.

But the side money does not always stop with the signing of the lease. A thing that delights an Indian's heart is to get something. Maybe he needs it, and maybe he just wants to try his ingenuity. Certain individuals have been known to walk ten or fifteen miles with the hope of getting a chicken, a bag of potatoes, or something else. If he did not get side money, and the lessor did not do anything to pacify the lessee before the year is out, he is usually in for difficulty when a new lease falls due.

Sometimes, this search for side money descends to plain panhandling. A question may be raised if getting side money and panhandling is really earning money. Well, many of them work harder at these than if they were on wages.[12]

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[12]Sometimes the panhandling develops humorous twists. One man, when he was refused a gift of fifteen cents "to buy crackers for the baby," went out angry, saying, "I thought that you would cooperate with me better than that." Another, after his tale of calamity had not softened the white friend, drew a long breath and said, "They told me it would not do any good, but I thought I would try anyway." After a short friendly visit, he left in high good humor.

Since the removal, the Office of Indian Affairs has had large dealings with the Ponca tribe.

The first consideration is in relation to the land. While the Poncas were stationed at Baxter Springs, a delegation of chiefs came and looked over the land in the immediate vicinity of the present location of the reservation. They held a council with the government agent on a bluff on the south side of the Salt Fork about a mile west of the road running due south of Ponca City. They decided that they wanted the land they now possess.[13]

This was purchased for them by the government, and they moved here in 1878.[14] The land was first held by the tribe. Two allotments were made.

In 1878, the Poncas were again removed to the Cherokee Outlet, for which the Cherokees were paid

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[13] Memoirs of Tony Knight and Lewis McDonald. This choosing of the present location is one of the favorite stories of exploit of the grandfathers. It is told on every occation appropriate. The interpreter was an Otoe (Barnaby by name). He wanted this fertile valley for his tribe, and did his best to convince the Ponca Chiefs that they should choose hilly land farther south (around Red Rock). But they insisted on their choice. Finally, the interpreter and the agent grew so angry with them that they took all the horses and left the chiefs to walk back to Baxter Springs.

[14] O. I. A. Service Monograph of United States Government, No. 48, Institute for Government Research, p. 120.

> $48,349.46 under the act of March 3, 1881, (22 Stat. L. 422). Allotments were made under the general allotment act of 1887, and in order to divide all the land, additional allotments were made under the act of April 21, 1904, (33 Stat. L. 217) by which also the reservation lines were abolished and the tract became parts of three counties of Oklahoma.[15]

There was much dissatisfaction on the reservation because of these allotments. A general feeling prevailed that the tribe had been sold out by certain of the chiefs and half-breeds. Certain ranchmen wanted to purchase a foothold within the reservation; this was impossible until after the allotments were made, and some were up for sale. So considerations were offered to those in favor of the allotment idea if they could prevail upon Congress and the tribe to accept it. They were at least accused of getting the best of the bottom lands in the "drawings."[16]

But whatever the feeling was then, there is now no appreciable sentiment toward tribal ownership of land, or any other resource. The Thomas Rodgers Reorganization Act for Oklahoma Indians has never gotten enough support to risk a vote on the subject. The idea is so dead by now that it is not even discussed seriously.[17]

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[15] Ibid.

[16] Because some of the persons involved are still living, and most of them have children living, names should not be used here.

[17] When the matter was up for discussion before the

The primary job of the government, since the forming of treaties and adopting of the reservation system, appears to be "to get the Indian to be self-supporting, so that he will no longer be a charge upon the government."[18] In fact, if it were not for this one item, there would be little excuse for having an Office of Indian Affairs in the Department of the Interior. And where this has been accomplished, at least among the Poncas, these self-supporting individuals no longer live on the reservation, and are not counted as part of the tribal life. The only connection they have officially is that they are on the tribal roll and are enumerated as Ponca Indians. Some also receive income checks through the office at Pawnee from inheritance or other sources.

The amazing thing is the resourcefulness of so large a percentage of the tribe in refraining from self-support. The current philosophy seems to be, "the government won't let an Indian starve,"[19] so there is no particular urge to

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tribe in 1937, the general idea seemed to be that it was an attempt by the Office of Indian Affairs to push them back twenty to forty years. It was presented with the idea of "giving everything back to the Indian that he had lost." An old Comanche is accepted as speaking generally for the opposition when he asked, "Will we get the buffalo back?"

[18]One hears an expression similar to this many times.

[19]This idea is voiced in various forms when the idea of work and self-support is presented to the young people. The most popular occupation is to "fool around."

get out and hustle. In fact, the very multitude and efficiency of the government agencies appears to bear out this philosophy.

In 1912, there was an inquiry started in the Washington office to see what could be done to get the Poncas to work on their allotments. The land was used in the following manner:

> The allotments were made 20 years ago, yet the annual report for 1911 shows 78 Indians farming 2,260 acres, while 60,787 acres are leased to whites. I believe we ought to get busy on some program that will start something different there soon.[20]

The matter was turned over to F. H. Abbott, who wrote the agent, F. F. Farrell, on April 8, regarding the matter; the next August 9 Mr. Farrell replied.

He said in a lengthy letter that some of the farmers were operating ten to twenty acres with seven or eight horse outfits and that poorly, that good farmers were discouraged by visiting, dancing, and attending to other people's business, and that Indians who had horses, cattle, hogs, and chickens were discouraged from being industrious by seeing other people going visiting and dancing and yet receiving the same consideration from the office. He also said:

The office may help in using its authority to

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[20]O. I. A. File No. 902, February 6, 1912. Shipe to Aschmeier.

> break up visiting from tribe to tribe and the pernicious 'give away.' The individual should be recognized and encouraged and the tribal community discouraged.[21]

Conditions have recently progressed to the place where there were fifteen farms operated by Indians.[22]

An attempt has been made to find out how these farms are operated. There are not enough tools among the fifteen Indian farmers to equip a quarter-section in stock or tools properly. Most of what is done is privately leased to white farmers, or some white man is hired on the side to do the work. Some of this is legitimate and a step forward, but some appears to be so shady that it will not bear close scrutiny.

The officers are not to blame personally for the condition of things. They are doing the best they can under the circumstances. The Indians are not interested in working anything but the white men. "When the Indians want things better, they will do it themselves."[23]

In 1912 the gas and oil business began to bring in business through the office.[24] There are still some wells

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[21] Ibid., File No. 916, April 8, 1912. Abbott to Farrell and Farrel to Abbott.

[22] Ibid., Pawnee File 1148, 1938 Report.

[23] Oscar Gardner, Choctaw, from a speech made at Bacone College, June 12, 1940.

[24] O. I. A., Ponca File 902, 1938 Report.

producing for the Poncas, but nothing like they used to. The oil boom is gone, and the large fortunes derived therefrom are gone as effectively as though there had never been an Indian agency.[25]

> All the good the 101 Ranch ever did the Indians you could put in your eye and see just as well.[26]

With the coming of the white ranchers to the Ponca reservation came the beginning of the breakdown of the self-supporting manhood of the tribe. The Indians found out for the first time that they could get money from their land without working it themselves. They were taught that it was beneath the dignity of an Indian to work like a white man and that he should let the white men do the work on his land while he sat around and was fed.[27] That sounded like pleasant doctrine and was gladly accepted by most of the chiefs.

Another threat also arose to those who had livestock. All the white ranchers kept their livestock branded. The Indians did not brand anything. Not only was it an easy prey to bona fide rustlers, but the Indians also saw their stock herded into stock cars by the ranchers and did not

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[25]Willie Cry is reported to have had one million dollars to handle in twenty years. He now walks to town.

[26]Memoirs of J. H. Schlapbach.

[27]Much of the information presented here has been secured from Indians, government employees, and others with the understanding that their names would not be mentioned.

dare to say anything.

Coupled with this, the 101 Ranch kept a community store where any Indian could get whatever he wanted on credit. Most of them were in debt to the Miller brothers.

After this, the land was allotted. Indians began to become "competent" if they had any money. Store bills began to be collected. Many a fat allotment and desirable water hole was apparently traded out for a store bill.

It is true that the federal court at Guthrie found the Miller brothers "not guilty." But what else could one expect? What chance does an illiterate Indian have to prosecute his case intelligently against a rich white man in white men's court? Even some of the white neighbors feared to prosecute the Miller brothers to secure their own rights.

> I was a member of the Grant County Horse Thief Protective Association, and we traced many a horse to the 101 Ranch, but we did not dare to say anything.[28]

"Then came oil!" Who wants to ride herd with a flock of spouting oil wells on the place? Nobody would raise wheat while he was in his right mind when he could buy a new red Buick with one month's bonus and go north where it was cool.

There was no particular difference at first, and not

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[28]Memoirs of J. A. Jackson.

so even yet, that every Ponca did not have an oil well. Traditional Indian hospitality dictates that as long as one Indian has anything he will share with all who come.[29]

About 1908 a new blow struck the working Poncas. At this time many of them were advancing in the arts of industry.

> Many of them have fair houses and cultivate small tracts of land, raise garden vegetables, keep a few chickens, hogs, etc., and live at home most of the time. They have made more advancement in the past twelve years, I believe, than the white race has ever made in the same period of time.[30]

This would indicate that about that time many on the reservation were quite progressive. The memoirs of the white farmers and of the Indians bear this out.

But this is the year that the use of peyote, or mescal, was first recorded.[31] Much that is available has been written about this drug, so remarks here will be limited to what has been found out from observation and statements of Poncas, neighboring farmers, and government and church workers.[32]

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[29]Emmet Thompson, Kaw, as long as he lived always gave a grocery order to almost any Indian who asked for it. These bills sometimes totaled sixty dollars a month.

[30]J. A. Sims, Annual Report of the Woman's Home Missionary Society (Cincinnati: Methodist Episcopal Church, 1908).

[31]Ibid.

[32]The National Fellowship of Indian Workers will republish material on this subject in the near future.

You have all seen pictures or carvings of the proverbial Mexican who sits slumped over his knees, and when asked to do anything whispers, "Manana." He is the typical mescal eater.

As a religion or cult, peyote is certainly "Quiessent." Some persons want their liquor drinking men to start using peyote because it makes them agreeable and easy to handle. In fact, peyote eaters get to the place where they do not care what happens in some cases. The effect seems to vary with individuals. Some seem to get along fairly well to their own satisfaction and use it more or less regularly. But two cannot be produced who use it who have enough control over their own powers to run their own business and support themselves.

There is also another angle to this that has an immediate effect upon family life and self-support; it not only costs money to buy the peyote for the "Saturday-night sings," but whoever puts up a meeting is expected to furnish enough meat and flour for a feast Sunday noon. So the young, ambitious farmer is besieged by his neighbors and urged as a patriotic duty to furnish meat for this "Native American Church."[33]

Many white neighbors insist that this is the major cause for non-support and poverty among the Poncas. But

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[33]The incorporated name of the religion.

they do not dare to go on record regarding this, or they would not be allowed to lease Indian land, so many of them resent the implication of the idea.

By 1928 conditions were bad enough to appeal to the tender hearts of the philanthropically inclined and to the sob sisters. They came.

In October, 1928, the National Board of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church held their annual meeting at Wichita, Kansas. The Methodist missionary took a group of his Indians up to sing for them. As it was Indian year for the society anyway, they decided to give to the Ponca mission a community hall.[34] And as the Ponca mission is close to Wichita, many came down at the adjournment of the conference to the sod-breaking. Their sympathy was easily stirred by the plight of the "poor Indian," and they went back to their Eastern churches determined to do something to redeem him. They began to urge the local Home Missionary Auxiliaries to send supplies to Ponca.

This action did help the dime store business. In the year 1936-1937 the missionary invoiced $4500 worth of goods received.[35] Among them were $600 worth of rubber

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[34]Several of those who went are still glad to say that they got the hall for a song.

[35]Annual Report of the W. H. M. S., 1937.

dolls, rubber automobiles, and other toys. There was more than $1000 worth of food supplies; there were stacks of quilts, towels, soap, baby clothes, paper and pencils, girls' dresses, dress lengths, men's neckties, and socks, besides much used material that was not evaluated.

Taking it all together - land lease, oil royalties, church gifts, and what not - the white man is being skinned.

And the Ponca Indians on the reservation have just about reached the bottom when it comes to self-support. No matter what the government reports say, there is not enough farm equipment owned by Poncas on the reservation to properly till and harvest over two hundred acres of land.[36] Several of the families living away from the agency have fair-to-excellent gardens. Some of them keep a few cows and chickens.

At the agency, in 1939, there was installed an efficient irrigating system so that the twenty to fifty families living at the camp near the agency might have a good garden. The government put a good man, a graduate of the College of Agriculture of the Oklahoma A. and M. College, in charge to see that everyone who wanted to garden could have a square deal.

He got a white farmer to plow the garden. They

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[36] Ibid.

planted about three acres of it to beans and peas. About half of the other three acres, or more, was used for private gardens by the campers. When the pease and beans got prime, the C. C. C. I. D. boys canned them and gave them away.

This year the same two men have put their three acres in sweet corn. Three government employees and one Ponca camper have gardens on the other half. The rest of the ground is idle.

> Religion is the chief concern of mortals here below;
> May I its great importance learn, its sovereign virtues know.[37]

Religion, with the Indian unaffected by Christian teaching, is all one piece with life. One may have certain ecstatic experiences that relate to some deity or spirit, but also all the acts of life are religious.[38]

When the Poncas came to their present location, they were almost without exception sun worshipers. Wa-Gun-Deh was the chief All-Powerful Spirit. But for practical purposes, one had to deal with the everyday manifestation of spirits about him.[39] And the sun had chief place. Getting up at sunrise and praying toward the rising sun is

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[37] Methodist Hymnal, 1905, No. 314.

[38] Memoirs of Albert Makes Cry.

[39] Memoirs of Browning King.

still a solemn rite with practically all the older people and a large number of the middle-aged. Some of the younger ones are made to but wonder why.[40] The pow-wow is the remaining vestiges of the old sun dance. It is a time for a high good time and revelry now, and in the last few years, a time to gather gate receipts from the white onlookers. There is no particular religious significance to it to anybody now.[41]

One of the remaining ceremonies that went with the sun dance season is the stomp dance. This is a courtship season for the adolescents. It is a variation of "Here we go 'round the mulberry bush," wherein the young people change partners. It is usually started at night after the white visitors have gone home from the pow-wow. It is started at the pow-wow grounds and adjourned to the ball diamond, where the lights won't interfere. It is sometimes carried on till sunrise. Very few white people who have any moral standing ever see this phase.

The Poncas brought with them some knowledge of the Christian faith from their Niobrara home. And they have had the influence of Christian missionaries almost ever

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[40] Ibid.

[41] George Eagle was the last Ponca who urged his people to remember the sacred meaning of the pow-wow dances. He died in August, 1937.

since they came to their present location. In 1886 the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church took over the work of the interdenominational missionary society that had been operating for two years[42] and have maintained from one to three missionaries there ever since.[43]

About 1907, for some reason, the Poncas began to attract the attention and interest of other denominations. Within the next year or two the Nazarenes tried to organize a work. The Nazarenes held a big camp meeting in the timber near the agency and served lunch to everyone that came. Large crowds attended. But when the meals stopped, so did the Indians.[44]

In 1927 the Southern Missionary Baptists tried to gain a foothold and with more success. They organized a work that is still functioning. Both of these groups, or at least their representatives, worked through the Methodist mission. In fact evangelists preached in the Methodist chapel with the sanction of the missionary in charge.[45] The reason given for these attempts were that the spiritual

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[42]Annual Report of the W. H. M. S., 1886.

[43]Ibid.

[44]The Indians still speak of that time as the high point in church feasts.

[45]Memoirs of W. O. Magner.

state of the Poncas was deplorable and that the Methodists were not meeting the needs.[46] The reason the Nazarenes and Baptists used Methodist property was that the agent in 1907 was a Nazarene[47] and in 1927 was a Baptist.[48] The Methodist missionary was earnestly seeking aid to help in the work of redemption, and the agent insisted that unless he get this particular evangelist he would attend to it himself.

In 1939 the Nazarenes again made an effort to establish a work. At the present there are a missionary and his wife employed and a small building used as a residence and meeting house purchased. A congregation is also organized.[49]

In evaluating the contributions of a people, one usually calls to mind certain outstanding individuals.

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[46]Memoirs of Mary Gladys Sharp. Miss Sharp is a Baptist worker among the students at Chilocco. She says that the report was that dead Indians were taken out and buried in a blanket without a word of Christian hope. It probably happened several times. There were several decidedly loyal sun worshipers even at that late date. She also says that the pow-wow dances had an influence in determining them to start. She was one of the helpers in getting the work organized here but was not implicated in the preaching to the Methodist congregation.

[47]Memoirs of Mrs. A. J. Sims.

[48]Memoirs of W. O. Magner.

[49]Suzette Buffalohead, once a Methodist, has been a charter member of both the Baptist and Nazarene churches. She says that as soon as the Nazarene church gets going, she is going to start another.

This is as it should be, for after all, our acts are done individually. But some influences seem to pass out from a man because of the group within which he is counted. The Poncas are no exception to this. They do make a contribution to the world by the simple process of being Indian Americans.

For one thing, the Indians have been guinea pigs par excellence for social experiment. But as this is not a paper on sociology, the various experiments tried out upon them by the government, political, social, church, and business groups will not be dealt with. We will just call attention to the present "New Deal" experiments in government, and cite you to the fact that if you are interested, you will almost surely find that each one of the present noble experiments have been tried out previously somewhere by the Office of Indian Affairs.[50] We might be saved some serious blunders if our honest politicians and statesmen knew more actual Indian history. The same holds true for our churchmen.

When it comes to individual contributions of outstanding merit, the philosophy of "skin the white man"

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[50]This was brought up April 4, 1940, at Fort Wingate at a meeting of the Yale Race Relations field party with government employees. It was pointed out that our present relief organization tended to demoralize its clients like government annuities to the Indians. The author was present at the meeting.

works with deadly precision in its reaction. The energetic and progressive are regarded with suspicion and looked upon as traitors to the tribe. The Indians know that some day they are going to have to "take the white man's way" and support themselves. But they do not intend to do it as long as they can eat bread in the sweat of the white man's face.[51]

Another guinea-pig lesson for the world is the insufficiency of a materialistic philosophy of life.

> With the Indian, food is the chief thing in life. He judges your whole character by the way you handle the things you have to eat.[52]

If this philosophy is sufficient, then it would have produced sufficient strength of character on the reservations for the needs of the Indians. As it is, reservation life is so rotten and artificial that it would collapse in short order if government agencies and church missions were withdrawn. If this is not so, then let us be sensible and stop our tremendous expenditures in these fields.

Because of these factors, the individuals of Ponca

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[51]After a heated discussion by the tribe in the spring of 1937 as to whether they would accept the Thomas Rodgers bill and start farming again, one of the men said something like this: "We know that some day we will have to work and support our families like white men. And we can do it if we have to. But we are going to put it off as long as we can. So you keep on telling us what we ought to do. We may get mad at the time, but we know you are right."

[52]Memoirs of Tony Knight.

birth who have attained distinction for services rendered have not lived within the bounds of the Ponca reservation. But one figure is of sufficient national importance that he cannot be left out of any American history that deals fairly with crises. That one is Chief Standing Bear. Although his history belongs properly to that of the Northern Poncas, he was of such force of character that he had his influence upon the Oklahoma ones also.

At the time of the removal, he gathered his family and a few of his followers together and stole away to make his way back to their old home. He was apprehended near Omaha, Nebraska, by soldiers of the United States army and thrown in jail without warrant or hearing. His case attracted the attention of several white people in Omaha, who secured his release. He and others then toured the country telling what had happened. Because of that, a Congressional investigation was finally started. The Poncas won their case at court, and the plains Indian was admitted to be a man before the law. After that, there were no forcible military removals of American Indian tribes.[53]

There have been several Poncas who have left the

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[53]Memoirs of Ellen Cerre and Zilla Big Goose, nieces of Chief Standing Bear; Sen. Misc. Doc. 49, 46 Cong., 3 sess., p. 80.

reservation and have taken their places in the life about them with sufficient credit and energy to become respected for their own worth. Some are mentioned highly in connection with their occupations.[54]

Evaluation

If there is ever going to be any significant advance for the Ponca Indians from now on, it is going to be up to themselves. There are available to them all the public institutions for betterment that there are to the white people of Oklahoma, and, in addition, the resources of the United States through the Office of Indian Affairs. Any man of character can borrow money to start himself in farming if he has the desire. And if he just has land he can pasture, he will be given a herd of ten Hereford cattle with the privilege of paying back one heifer for each one received.[55] Along with this, he will receive free instruction and supervision as long as he needs it.[56]

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[54]Their names are seldom mentioned on the reservation. In fact, if an Indian works, he is almost excommunicated. He is not allowed to hold any tribal office if he lives off the reservation; i.e., if he works, he is out politically.

[55]There have been several who have availed themselves of the opportunity to start a herd, but to date only one herd remains in the charge of a Ponca.

[56]The government employees take real pride and interest in their work and are for the most part competent.

The public school is open to his children, with free lunch at one point on the reservation, and at the public high school in Ponca City.[57] Free books and an occasional issue of clothing are also included.

There are on the reservation three Christian churches organized for Poncas besides two or three school houses where whites and Indians worship together.

Besides all these, there is also the Native American Church for those who wish to remain Indian. It serves as a patriotic outlet for many, as it is the only purely Indian organization on the reservation. To worship with this cult is presented to the young men as a patriotic duty. And if one says anything contrary to the use of peyote, he is immediately branded as unpatriotic.

The use of the drug produces a sense of well-being and stupor in the addict so that the present ills are more docilely borne. Progress and moral reform may no sooner be expected from this cult than from any group of narcotic addicts. The drug is often administered as medicine to patients for divers and sundry pains.

It is a tragedy that a narcotic has been incorporated with elements of generosity inherent in Indian life and certain teachings of the Christian church.

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[57]Several families camp near the agency so as to get their children in White Eagle school, where lunch is served.

Conclusions

After studying carefully the lives of my Ponca friends, evaluating what documents are available, and comparing these with my scant observation of reservation life of other plains Indians of Oklahoma and elsewhere, my conclusions are:

That the Poncas cannot continue a close reservation life without harm coming to them, and possible destruction. The idea of "skinning the white man instead of the buffalo" has almost destroyed their initiative and will to live.

That the Poncas are now as competent as they will ever become under any government-supervised reservation system.

That if special government support were removed the Poncas would be capable by their own effort of living on as high an economic plane as they are now doing.

That the present low state of morals is the result primarily of the choice of the Poncas.

That the Office of Indian Affairs should immediately begin a policy of less agency help instead of more. The Indians are capable now of doing much of the work done by paid officers if they want it done. And if they do not want it done, it is of little value for someone else to do it for them.

That Congress should set a date in the near future after which children born shall not be counted as wards of the government.

That the churches maintaining missions on the reservations should reevaluate their programs and expenditures to see if they are working at the job of world redemption or entertaining a bunch of loafers. The Gospel is needed here, as anywhere, and many Indians look upon the missionary as a real friend. But the churches are spending much effort and money in duplicated activity and for things the Indians can do better themselves if they want them done.

That the use of peyote should be separated in the minds of everybody concerned from religious faith and practices. Nobody objects strenuously to anbody's sitting up all night and pounding a kettle and praying, although one may have his opinion as to the necessity of so much speaking in addressing the Almighty.

That Congress should include the peyote or mescal in the list of habit-forming narcotics.

That everyone concerned should remember that an Indian is a human being like any other person. To treat him as such is to invite his confidence, for he is apt to react to a given situation just as any other person.

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