

The Life and Death of a Make-Believe White Man

By Timothy G. Anderson



Timothy G. Anderson began working for his hometown weekly newspaper, the *Oakland (Neb.) Independent*, when he was 16, and he was hooked. After earning a bachelor's degree in journalism at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln in 1974, Tim worked for newspapers in Nebraska, Missouri, Florida, and New York, including *New York Newsday* and the *New York Times*.

In 2005, he left newspapers to teach journalism at the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. He retired from teaching in 2015.

Tim's first book, *Lonesome Dreamer: The Life of John G. Neihardt*, was published by University of Nebraska Press in 2016, and a paperback edition will be released in May 2020. He is currently working on a biography of John Collier, Franklin D. Roosevelt's Indian commissioner from 1933 to 1945.

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In September 1878, Joseph La Flesche dictated a letter to his younger half-brother Frank. Joseph, who earlier had served for a dozen years as the last traditionally chosen chief of the Omaha Indians in Nebraska, was nearly sixty years old by this time.

Frank, with whom Joseph had shared a father, was a leader of the Ponca tribe and had recently accompanied his people in its move from Nebraska to Indian Territory, later the state of Oklahoma. Joseph was concerned that he had not heard from his brother for months.

In that time Joseph, known to the Omaha as Iron Eye, had sent his brother three letters, and he had not received a single reply. In this September letter, Joseph reported to Frank about the Nebraska weather and about their family. Joseph wanted to travel to visit his brother, he told him, but the Indian agent responsible for the Omaha reservation was what Joseph called "generally unwilling" to let his Indians leave.

Then Joseph changed topics—"I will speak on another subject," he announced in the letter—and it was clearly a subject the brothers had discussed before. Reading the letter today, we sense that we're entering

into the middle of a conversation.

"I did not say, 'Abandon your Indian life,'" Joseph wrote his brother. "I did not say, 'Live as a white man.' Nor did I say, 'Live as an Indian.'" Then he continues. "Depend upon God," he said. "Remember Him. For if, instead of remembering God, you love this world alone, you shall be sad." He goes on for a few more sentences before announcing ceremoniously, "Now I have written enough on this subject" (quoted in Dorsey, *The Dehiga Language*, 488).

Joseph goes on to ask about some Pawnees he knows in Indian Territory and how many horses Frank now owns. But it is clear that the issues of Christianity and cultural identification—though Joseph would never have called it that—were his main reasons for writing his brother. These were issues that consumed Joseph La Flesche throughout his life, issues that he worried about as a tribal leader, issues that eventually split his nation. For Joseph, the son of a French fur trader and a Ponca woman, the perilous navigation between the worlds of this continent's indigenous peoples and the white Europeans who now swarmed across the land was in his very DNA.

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Omaha tradition says the tribe originated in the woodlands by a large body of water, today usually believed to have been the Great Lakes. Slowly, over the centuries, these Indians, which included not only what would become the Omaha nation but also the Poncas, Osages and several other tribes, made their way west. At what we know as the Mississippi River, the Indians separated. Most went downriver, but one group went upstream. These people became the Omaha, a name which means “going against the wind or stream” (Dorsey, *Omaha Sociology* 211).

The Omaha crossed the Missouri River as well, slowly making their way, over the generations, through what today are the states of Missouri, Iowa, and Minnesota. By the mid-eighteenth century, when they numbered slightly more than 3,000, the Omaha had arrived at an area southwest of the present community of Sioux City, Iowa (Boughter 11). It was here that Lewis and Clark, during their historic adventure in 1803 and 1804, met briefly with tribal members and noted in their journals that a smallpox epidemic had wiped out nearly half the main Omaha village (Moulton 32). Conflict with the powerful Lakota to the north forced the Omaha to move to what is now central Nebraska. By the time Joseph La Flesche was born—sometime between 1818 and 1822—the tribe probably numbered only about 2,000 (Wishart xiii).

Eventually the Omaha

returned eastward, a move that was not entirely their idea. The U.S. government chose to resettle them for a time at what it called the Bellevue Agency alongside the Missouri River and south of the city that would be named for the Omaha nation. The Omaha acquiesced because they felt safer from the Lakota while living at the Bellevue Agency, and they had no plans to ever leave that safety.

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And so, when the U.S. government, in May 1855, ordered the Omaha to move some seventy miles north to a new reservation located in an area they knew as Black Bird Hills, they were not happy. They feared the new location would make them more likely to be raided by the Lakota. Among the tribal leaders who sought to assure the Omaha that they would be safe and happy in their new home was their new principal chief, Iron Eye, Joseph La Flesche.

* * *

Joseph La Flesche’s father, also named Joseph, was French. He worked for John Jacob Astor’s

American Fur Company and did business regularly with the Omaha. He also traded with the Ponca, the Iowa, Otoe and Pawnee tribes (“Joseph La Flesche” 274).

The elder La Flesche became involved with a Ponca woman, and they had a son, whom they named Joseph. The boy’s father was often gone, traveling to trade furs, and his absences eventually led the boy’s mother to leave him and marry another man from her tribe.

Young Joseph was bright, and when he was a few years older he began to travel with his father as he traded with tribes, eventually learning to speak the Iowa, Pawnee, and Otoe languages (Fletcher and La Flesche 632). When his father’s work took him to the new nation’s western fur trading center—St. Louis—the boy accompanied him, learning a bit of French and getting his first glimpse of the staggering numbers of white people: That city’s population, less than 6,000 in 1830, grew to more than 16,000 ten years later, and to nearly 78,000 by 1850.

From the time he was about sixteen years of age—sometime in the mid-1830s—until he was nearly twenty-six, young Joseph was employed himself by the American Fur Company. But in 1848, when the Omaha were moved to the agency near Bellevue, and he was given the choice of living as a white man like his father or as an Indian like his mother, he chose to make his life with the Omaha. Here, Joseph and a partner opened a ferry service, eventually running flatboats across the Platte

and Elkhorn rivers (“Joseph La Flesche” 274).

“There was a time,” Joseph La Flesche told an interviewer late in life, “when I used to look only at the Indians and think they were the only people.” Eventually, though, his view changed. “After a while the white men came, just as the blackbirds do, and spread over the country. Some settled down, others scattered on the land. [...] It matters not where one looks now one sees white people” (Fletcher and La Flesche 638). As the interviewer wrote at the time, “He had seen enough of the world to recognize that the white race were in the country to stay and that the Indian would have to conform more or less to white ways and customs” (Fletcher and La Flesche 632).

Joseph, in addition to running his ferries, spent a great deal of time with the tribal elders, becoming knowledgeable in tribal customs, rituals, and lore. Finding ways for the Omaha to survive in this changing world was beginning to occupy the tribe’s leadership, and Joseph, always ambitious, started to think seriously about this challenge himself. Sometime between 1845 and 1850, when Joseph would have been about thirty years old, Big Elk, then the Omaha’s chief, invited Joseph to join the tribal council (Boughter 78). Big Elk held the white race in high regard (Boughter 23). Over time, and as the stream of whites grew larger, Big Elk came to believe that the lives of the Omaha would never be the same (Boughter 33).

Joseph La Flesche agreed with Big Elk, his mentor and adoptive father, and not long after Big Elk’s death in 1853, Joseph became principal chief—the first and only Omaha chief to have had any white blood.

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It is at this point, in the mid-1850s, that we first see the manifestations of Joseph’s thirty years of experience with the competing cultures on America’s Great Plains. The Omaha did not live in a vacuum; they were well aware of the hostilities between the U.S. Army and other Plains tribes. Relations between the Omaha and the white government, traders, and settlers had always been friendly, but it was clear to Joseph and others that the Omaha would need to adapt to survive. Too often white people believed there were two sides to the Indian question: the progressives who worked to assimilate and the traditionalists who stayed true to the old ways of life and were hostile to white intrusion. The reality was that thousands of Indians were making individual decisions regarding their futures and those decisions ran along a spectrum with assimilation and hostility as the two extremes.

Joseph had come to believe that a fusion of the white and Omaha worlds was inevitable (Alexander 328). Based on his travels and experience, he shaped a pragmatic approach, a middle path that would allow his people to flourish in an uncertain world without losing all touch with their tribal traditions. As he wrote his brother twenty

years later, he was pushing an approach that wasn’t Indian, that wasn’t white, but was some new third amalgamation. He promoted his ideas, worked out over the dozen years he served as principal chief of the Omaha, by living them, and by having his family live them, as an example to his nation.

First, Joseph La Flesche traded earthen lodges for wood-frame houses. He hired white carpenters to build a wood-frame house for him and his family and successfully encouraged other Omaha to do the same. Joseph patterned his village, one of three on the reservation, after nearby white communities, and for a time, with its nearly twenty homes, it was larger than some of those small towns. But the name given to the village by the more traditional Omaha signaled that not all tribal members appreciated their chief’s efforts. They called it the “make-believe white man’s village” (Boughter 77).

Second, he divided a 100-acre field into smaller plots so that each man in his village could have his own small parcel (Fletcher and La Flesche 633). He believed the Omaha, to flourish, would need to forego the traditional common ownership of land, and these tiny individual farms were just a first step. Eventually he would urge the U.S. government to divide the Omaha land into individual allotments.

Third, he outlawed alcohol on the reservation. For Joseph, the key to successful acculturation lay in the intelligent selection of which components to adopt

and which to exclude. Of all the products introduced to the Omaha by the white man, none had taken a greater toll than the use and abuse of alcohol, and Joseph worked diligently to curtail the flow of alcohol, banning it outright for a time and making drunkenness a crime punishable by whipping.

Fourth, he limited adherence to Omaha rituals and traditions that he considered outmoded or harmful. Important Omaha of the day—and Joseph as a principal chief would certainly have been considered important—were allowed to mark their children with signs of honor: girls with tattoos and boys with ear-piercing. Joseph chose not to permit his children to be marked, saying, “I was always sure that my sons and daughters would live to see the time when they would have to mingle with the white people, and I determined that they should not have any mark put upon them that might be detrimental in their future surroundings” (Fletcher and La Flesche 634).

Fifth, he demanded that young people obtain a formal education. Joseph regretted that he had never received any formal schooling, and when it came to his children—in fact, when it came to all young Omaha—he demanded they get an education at the nearby Presbyterian-run Mission School.

Sixth, Joseph believed that the Omaha needed to become U.S. citizens. The old tribal organization would only hold them back, he believed. He began to push for the abrogation of the chieftainship, eventually starting a petition drive

that would, in effect, eliminate his own position of authority (“Joseph La Flesche” 274). As a friend of his wrote years later, “This remarkable move to abolish chieftainship on the part of the man holding [...] the office of head chief, in order to secure the future good of the people, is characteristic of Joseph La Flesche” (“Joseph La Flesche” 274).

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Finally, Joseph La Flesche believed the Omaha needed to make Christianity part of their religious experience. Joseph had converted to Christianity himself after much thought and study, and as the impact of white culture had grown among the Omaha, he had witnessed their adherence to their own spiritual traditions wane. Young people especially, enamored of white ways, lost interest in the rites and rituals. So Joseph campaigned for Christianity—at a significant personal cost: at the time, Omaha men could take up to three wives, and Joseph had done

so. Now, recognizing the Christian faith’s definition of marriage as being between one man and one woman, he cut ties with two of his wives, though he continued to support all of his children.

As a writer noted in a study of the Omaha twenty years ago, “Most of the evidence shows a man who correctly gauged the future and wanted his people, and especially his own family, to be prepared for the white world.” She added: “In trying to force his people along the white man’s road, perhaps he pushed too hard (Boughter 78). Some Omaha chose to follow Joseph’s teachings and example, but many others did not, leading to a split in the Omaha nation.

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Today, Joseph La Flesche’s legacy is difficult to discern. He certainly prepared the Omaha nation for the future. But he also led the U.S. government to believe all Omaha could be like Joseph, leading to disappointment and friction.

But perhaps, like parents everywhere, Joseph La Flesche can best be judged by looking at his children. Seven of them reached adulthood, four of them daughters of Joseph’s first wife, Mary, and three of them his children with his second wife, Ta-in-ne. All became, as one writer has called them, “outstanding personalities who combined deep loyalty to the tribe with dedicated Presbyterianism” (Herzog 226).

Daughter Susette, for example,

was a writer, book illustrator, Indian Rights activist, and lecturer, who traveled the eastern United States with the Ponca Standing Bear after his famous trial in Omaha. Susette, also known as Bright Eyes, and her husband, editor and activist Thomas Tibbles, eventually returned to live near the reservation.

Daughter Rosalie became an accomplished business woman on the reservation, essentially the secretary/treasurer of the tribe. She and her husband for a time managed the Omaha's common pasture, and by all accounts they were honest and shared their profits with the tribe (Boughter 146). She was also known as a beloved hostess, friend, and consultant for Indians as well as whites.

Daughter Marguerite attended the Hampton Industrial and Agricultural Institute in Hampton, Virginia, before returning to the reservation as a teacher, and her home became a center for many church organizations and community projects.

Susan, perhaps the best known of Joseph's children, was the first native American physician, the first American Indian to be appointed as missionary by the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions, and a popular lecturer and social

reformer. When she finished her medical training as the top graduate at the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania she was offered numerous opportunities to stay on the East Coast to work. Instead, she returned to the reservation and opened her own hospital.

Francis, usually called Frank and the best known of Joseph's children with Ta-in-ne, became the nation's first Indian ethnographer. He became famous for his research and writings on the Omaha and the Osage, was elected to membership in the Washington Academy of Science, and received an honorary doctorate from the University of Nebraska. He also wrote a well-received memoir of his time at the reservation's mission school, called *The Middle Five*. When he retired, he, too, returned to the reservation to live out his years.

Lucy and Carey, Ta-in-ne's two other children, like their half-sisters Marguerite and Susan, attended the Hampton Industrial and Agricultural Institute before returning to the reservation to live.

Joseph La Flesche's children, drawing on their father's teachings and example, succeeded in the wider—and whiter—world, yet never lost their devotion to their tribe. What looked to many like

a dividing line between races and cultures was simply a road that the La Flesche family crossed at will. For all their success in the white world, Joseph La Flesche's children never turned their backs on their tribe, and all eventually returned to live out their lives on the reservation, an act that must be seen as a tribute to their father.

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Correction

In the Torch Foundation Memorial List published in the Fall 2019 issue, Dr. Francis Moul was mistakenly identified as a Torch Patron. He should have been shown as a Torch Bearer, honored by Theodore and Norine Haas, Maxine Moul, and Anne D. Sterling. The Foundation sincerely apologizes for the error.