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Article Summary: Joseph LaFlesche [Iron Eye], the last recognized chief of the Omaha tribe, signed the treaty of 1854 relinquishing all rights to the Indian hunting grounds west of the Missouri. Having seen the steady flow of white men to the frontier and having traveled with his French father, he could not have anticipated the vast changes the coming of the railroad would bring. His four daughters were born between 1854 and 1865, when the old customs were disappearing, and they learned to speak, dress, act and think as the white men did.

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Photographs / Images: Susette LaFlesche Tibbles; Rosalie LaFlesche Farley; Marguerite LaFlesche Diddock; Dr Susan LaFlesche Picotte

FOUR SISTERS: DAUGHTERS OF JOSEPH LA FLESCHÉ

BY NORMA KIDD GREEN

THERE were four of them; four sisters² born into a cultural atmosphere which was rapidly changing. In fact to a trained, intelligent observer it was rapidly vanishing. But there were no trained observers looking on and thinking about this over-whelming change, unless the girls' father might be considered one.

He was not trained, as a later period would use the term, but he was experienced and extremely wise. Moreover, he was a member of the group and could not completely stand aside and be detached in his observation.

¹ Joseph La Flesche (Iron Eye) was the last recognized chief of the Omaha tribe and appears in many histories of the Indians and of the West. Unless otherwise stated the sources for this article are the *La Flesche Family Papers* in the Nebraska State Historical Society and personal interviews made by the author.

² The author is well aware that Joseph had a fifth daughter — Lucy. But Lucy was a half-sister of the "four," spent most of her life on the Reservation and continued more in the Indian manner of living.

J. Sterling Morton, *History of Nebraska* (1907), II, p. 222.

Norma Kidd Green, wife of Dean Emeritus Roy M. Green of the University of Nebraska College of Engineering, will be remembered for her article, "Ghost Counties in Nebraska," in a recent issue of NEBRASKA HISTORY.

Nevertheless, his wider experience led him to see the possible destiny of these people with whom he had cast his own fate. He was outside of them and yet one of them, recognized as their leader. He believed the old order would vanish, whether or no, and that it was important for the Omaha Indians to follow the path of the white men.³

He had, therefore, with others signed the treaty of 1854 by which the Omaha tribe relinquished all rights to their hunting grounds west of the Missouri and accepted in its place a Reservation, bordering on the Missouri and farther north than their former home near the mouth of the Platte.

The steady trickle of white settlers increased after 1854, then slowed down a little during the Civil War; it seemed there might be time for the Omaha to establish new habits and sluff off old customs, if only the white men would remember their promises and continue to treat them as individuals and as adults, instead of as savage beasts or stupid children.

The Omaha chief, Iron Eye—Joseph La Flesche—had worked at Peter Sarpy's trading post and, with a partner had operated a ferry across the Elkhorn during 1846-47 when the Mormons were moving west from Winter Quarters. He had seen the energy, and the irresistible drive of white men when they had a visionary or an actual goal in sight. He had traveled with his French father and seen other tribes and the cities of white men. But even these glimpses of the force which would change the old tribal ways could not have prepared him for the advance of the railroads, for the white man's inexhaustible desire for land or for the increasing and devastating slaughter of the buffalo, which had meant food, clothing, and shelter to the Indians.

His daughters, Susette, Rosalie, Marguerite and Susan were born between the year of the treaty, 1854, and the

³ Fannie Reed Giffen, *Oo-Mah-Ha-Ta-Wa-Tha* (1898), pp. 33-4.

closing year of the war, 1865. Their childhood, young womanhood and years of increasing responsibility were in the crucial time when one old custom after another was dropped, smothered by the onward rush of the white men or forbidden by a power which was indistinct and little known when Susette hung in her cradle board in her father's earth lodge. They all four, however, grew to spend a great part of their lives, begging, cajolling, working with, petitioning, adjusting to and, at times, defying and openly fighting that power—the United States government.

Joseph believed the Indians must learn to live as the white men did, to use their tools, their skills and their learning; to speak, dress, act and think as the white men did. Susette, Rosalie, Marguerite and Susan La Flesche surmounted many difficulties and reached this goal. They did all these things in a manner that was acceptable, in many ways, professional by twentieth century standards. They accomplished it, moreover, before they were fifty years old.

Susette excelled in three lines. She became a lecturer, a painter and a writer. Above all she was the spokesman of her people, not for the Omaha alone but for all the Indians. She was first of her tribe to go to an Eastern school; then, after distressing months at home, she began to teach on the Reservation.⁴ The Indian Bureau had said Indians would be given preference for agency positions, but Susette was not readily welcomed and the whole situation was difficult.

When the Ponca tribe was removed to Indian territory, she accompanied her father on a visit of inquiry to them. When white men brought the case of Standing Bear to the courts and Judge Dundy handed down his famous decision "that an Indian is a person"⁵ in the eyes of the law, they saw the American people must be better informed on the Indian problem.

⁴ J. Sterling Morton, *History of Nebraska* (1907), II. p. 157.

⁵ *Ibid.*, II, p. 226.

With Chief Standing Bear, her younger brother, Francis, and her future husband, the newspaperman T.H. Tibbles, Susette traveled widely throughout the eastern part of the country. She spoke boldly of the injustice to the Indians and their consequent suffering. With Thomas Tibbles she appeared before committees for three sessions of Congress.

Extremely pretty, possessed of a modest dignity and speaking beautiful English,⁶ she stirred the consciences and opened the purse strings of her audiences. Many large and small projects for the Indians were organized by a wide variety of philanthropically inclined persons, including both aggressive "near-professional" reformers and the quieter Society of Friends. Organizations active today had their beginning in the altruistic emotions aroused by Susette. Many individuals continued a patient, practical helpfulness and became beloved friends of all four of the sisters.

Since her Indian name, Inshata Theumba, proved difficult for English-speaking tongues, its translation "Bright Eyes" was widely used. It suited her exactly and was poetic and beautiful. Probably very few realized it had been given her in contrast to her father's name of Iron Eye.

As Bright Eyes she became the Symbol of the Indian Maiden to a romantic sentimental public that had been nourished on Longfellow's *Hiawatha*. The poet, himself, added the final touch, when on welcoming her to his Cambridge home said, "This could be Minnehaha!"

Susette and Tibbles were married in 1882 and carried the message of the Indians to England and Scotland. For the next twenty years Susette lived more in the white man's world than in that of the Indians', yet she was always, emotionally, carrying their problems with her.

She also followed the frequently changing career of her journalist-politician husband. Probably much that she

⁶ *The Woman's Journal* quoting from *The Worcester Spy* (Mass.), November 29, 1879.

wrote is lost in the unsigned pages of newspapers, but several magazine articles and parts of two books can be identified. She joined with Fannie Reed Giffin in writing the now rare book, *Oo-mah-ha Ta-wa-tha* (Omaha City), published at the time of the Trans-Mississippi Exposition in Omaha,—1898. She illustrated this book with small sketches and colorful paintings; the first time, it is said, any book was illustrated by an American Indian.

Until shortly before her death she was working with Tibbles editing *The Independent* in Lincoln. She was increasingly ill, however, and they retired to Susette's allotment on the Omaha Reserve and more and more of the editing and writing was done by mail and by short trips to Lincoln. She died at the age of forty-nine, and is remembered as the first woman to speak for the Indian cause.

Rosalie is almost unknown to history but she carried one of the more difficult roles in the changing drama. She remained close to the old and yet she took on the new. She was the center of the family; the one who stayed near home and yet could understand the experiences of those who traveled. She represented the stability of home, yet a home in which the outside world was welcomed.

She was an efficient business woman, the "business head" of her Irish husband's stock feeding business. When, in the 1890's the "Farley pasture" and the Farley leases of Indian Allotments were questioned by white men who coveted the land, she made use of the white man's own institution—the courts. When her persecutors went further and tried to cover their duplicity by appeals to race hatred and more law suits, she clearly analyzed the issues involved and waited for her vindication with patience and dignity.

Not only did she keep the books of the business but the accounts of many small funds inspired by Susette's appeals in the East. Several different "Indian Associations" and many private individuals sent money to assist the Omaha Indians. These were often "named funds," intended for specific purposes. The donors soon recognized Rosalie

and Ed Farley as reliable agents and administrators of their gifts and Rosalie as an accurate bookkeeper.

She stood between two worlds; befriending the older Omaha men who had been of her father's young men's party in the '60's; after his death in 1888 they turned to Rosalie for sympathy and understanding. Yet she looked forward to the world in which her children would live. Realizing that many of the tribal habits would still remain when they were grown, she sent the two older boys to the Reservation to learn Omaha, but to the public schools to learn English.

She had ten children, eight of whom survived her. All the details of business and Indian affairs which she executed with precision and understanding were carried along with the endless washing, cleaning, baking, sewing, nursing sick children and taking part in the work of a lodge and of the church.

As far as can be learned she had no formal schooling beyond that offered on the Reservation through the Presbyterian Mission and the Government schools. But she kept steadily reading and inspired her children to do so; established the accepted fact that higher education was to be expected. All but one of them went to college, several graduated with fine records. Many of her grandchildren have continued into graduate work and occupy positions of influence in education, in business, in public service and in professional life.

She died three months after she had turned thirty-nine. The stone at her grave carries the fitting epitaph "The nobility and strength of two races were blended in her life of Christian love and duty."

Marguerite has been described as "delicate," both by her family and by white friends. She was frequently ill and her school days were constantly interrupted. She and the younger sister Susan went to the Elizabeth Institute for Young Ladies at Elizabeth, New Jersey. There, beside the "common branches," they studied philosophy, physiology and literature.

Back in Nebraska Marguerite applied for a position as teacher in the Mission and Agency Schools, giving as her qualifications the superior training she had received at Elizabeth, the fact that she spoke fluent Omaha and felt she could manage the children, "although strangers may not think so."⁷ She was employed and the teachers began to depend on her as an interpreter in both the literal language sense and in the extended meaning of the word. From this time on, Marguerite never completely ceased being a teacher and an interpreter. She did, however, become a student again at the Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute, where she graduated in 1887.

Hampton also brought her a romance, for she came to care for a fellow student, Charles Felix Picotte, half-French and half-Sioux from the Yankton Agency. His father, also Charles F., had been official government interpreter at Yankton. Charley wanted to be a lawyer, but the years of study looked overwhelming and teachers advised against it. At the same time Marguerite was urged to forget any idea of marriage and devote a single life to teaching or to missionary work. It must have all looked difficult and separation impossible, for they were married in 1888. Charley, himself, was far from well, but he assumed certain family burdens coming after Joseph's death and, for a time, traveled with Susette and Tibbles among the Sioux. But he became more and more ill and died in 1892.

After Hampton, and during her brief marriage, Marguerite was either matron or teacher at the Agency School. After Charley's death she continued as a teacher until, in 1895, she was married a second time—to the Agency's farmer and industrial teacher, Walter Diddock.

They were busy at the Agency for a number of years and then lived briefly in Pender and in Bancroft. Five children were born to them; a baby boy died at fifteen

⁷ Letter, Marguerite La Flesche to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, August 30, 1882; Records of Indian Bureau, item 16156; National Archives.

months, but two sons and two daughters survived both parents and are busy, able and useful citizens today. Walter Diddock bought lots on the second public sale when Walthill came into being. He built a comfortable house and moved his family there in the spring of 1907. The Diddock's became outstanding leaders in a new and growing community.

Marguerite continued informally as a teacher, for she was repeatedly sought as an interpreter for congressional committees, at court sessions, at funerals and at tribal meetings. Beyond this she met the constant stream of requests for advice, for letter-writing and for general assistance from her Omaha neighbors, both on and off the Reservation. Often she served as an interpreter of the Omaha way of living and thinking as she spoke to small informal groups and large public meetings.

This drew her into a second phase of her life and a farther step along the path of the white man. With a pleasant, adequate home, a knowledge of the old ways but with skills in the new, the habit of steady reading and with many friends engaged in educational activities, Marguerite became known as a hostess.

Many groups of the town and the church met in her home; former teachers, leaders and students of Indian affairs, artists, musicians, writers, clergymen and anthropologists were house guests overnight or for many weeks. The smiling little Indian girl shown in a picture taken in Elizabeth had become the dignified, dark-eyed club woman, reserved and retiring but constantly contributing to the community. Ironically, the "delicate" sister survived all the others, for she alone, passed her "four score and ten."

Susan the youngest, was born in 1865, years after the family was settled in the "make-believe white man's village,"⁸ so ridiculed by the conservative Indians. After the tribe had become settled on the Reservation, the young

⁸ Alice C. Fletcher, *Historical Sketch of the Omaha Tribe of Indians in Nebraska*, (Washington, D. C., 1885), pp. 6-7.

men's party, led by Joseph La Flesche, had built houses of log and frame. The two-story house in this village was the home of the La Flesche family for many years after the fall of 1857.⁹ It may be that only Susette was born in an earth lodge, certainly the younger sisters,—even Rosalie, had no visual memory of a lodge. In 1898 their mother had drawn a circle on the earth behind her own newer frame house, had put sticks into the ground to mark the position of the upright supports and explained the plan, the process of building and the arrangement of a lodge to Rosalie and Susan.¹⁰

The frame house was a big move toward the white man's world. Then before Susan was eight or nine, Susette had returned from school, the three older sisters were speaking English, encouraged by their father. The fourth sister started out in the new society from a different background than had the first. Susan, also, had a large share of the firmness and the intensity which characterized their parents. It is not entirely surprising that she went farther and faster than the others.

Besides two and one-half years at the Elizabeth Institute she had two years at Hampton Normal and Agricultural Institute where she graduated in 1886 with special honors.¹¹ That fall she entered the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania. The next three years in Philadelphia opened to her the world of western art and music, made her at ease in beautiful homes and brought her many lifelong friends. In this way she approached Susette's experiences among white people of wealth and education. She finished in 1889 at the head of a class of thirty-six earnest and dedicated young women, many of whom had had preparatory work at outstanding universities.¹² She

⁹ Letter, Dr. Charles Sturgis to Dr. Walter Lowrie, *Presbyterian Missionary letters*, No. 57, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.

¹⁰ Letter, Rosalie Farley to Alice C. Fletcher (October), 1898; Bureau of American Ethnology, Smithsonian Institution, No. 4558.

¹¹ *The Woman's Journal* (Boston), May 27, 1886.

¹² Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania, *Fortieth Annual Announcement*, May, 1889.

was appointed as one of the six internes for the Women's Hospital.¹⁸

Then, as the first Indian woman physician, she returned to her people to serve as doctor at the agency school and later to the whole tribe. This was heavy work, for the Indians were widely scattered, and most of the time she traveled on horseback, day or night, in all kinds of weather. Four years later she resigned and (to everyone's surprise) married Henry Picotte, a brother of Marguerite's Charley.

They lived on Susan's allotment near her father and not far from her "sister-mother," Rosalie. Two sons were born to them and for a time they lived in Bancroft; but wherever she was, Susan continued to care for the sick of both races. Seldom did her own affairs detain her and when she was at home, each night she placed a lighted lamp by the window where the light would shine on the doorstep. Many white people as well as Indians found their way in the dark to ask for help.

Henry died in 1905 and when the new town of Walthill was founded (1906) Susan joined Marguerite and Walter Diddock in this new community. Their comfortable, modern homes were just across the street from each other and Marguerite and Susan often worked together in interpreting and in meeting the constant requests of the Indians.

Susan became an outstanding leader and citizen. She was one of the organizers of the County Medical Society, health officer for the town and a member of the State Medical Society. She was on the Board of the State Federation of Women's Clubs and lobbied at the legislature for better laws on public health. She established the hospital in Walthill, which was named for her after her death. It was said that in twenty-five years she had treated every member of the Omaha tribe and saved the lives of many.

¹⁸ Letter, Susan La Flesche to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, June 13, 1889, Records of Indian Bureau, item 15736, National Archives.

She led a delegation to Washington and obtained the stipulation that every deed for property in Walthill (or in any community established within the Reservation) should forever prohibit the sale of liquor. She became an eloquent temperance speaker carrying on her father Joseph's long battle against whiskey.

She was the only Indian ever appointed medical missionary by the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions.¹⁴ But her missionary efforts extended beyond physical care and she labored earnestly in every possible way for the economic, social and spiritual advancement of her people. In Bancroft and in Walthill she led the young people's groups and firmly supported the church.

Like Marguerite she became known as a hostess; musicals, family parties, legislative committee meetings, parties for close friends or distinguished guests were held in her living room with its great mantelpiece carrying the words, "East, West; Home's Best." At last this room was the scene of her funeral conducted by two Presbyterian clergymen and closed by a prayer in the Omaha language.

Susette, accompanied by her husband, had been the first of the four sisters to present the Indians' problems to Congress. She was followed later by Rosalie and Susan. Marguerite, with many actual years under government appointment, met the impact of its power and its red tape in her day-by-day work. Susan was drawn into the most open battles against governmental bureaucracy.

Less than thirty years after Susette faced her first audiences Susan was moved to a passionate outburst. When it was suggested that the trust period for Omaha lands be extended ten years, the Omaha tribe was restive, resentful and definitely rebellious in mood. Susan was their most articulate voice. Speaking before the Secretary of the Interior and others she said:

We have suffered enough from your experiments—
we have been practically robbed of our rights by the gov-

¹⁴ Rev. Julius F. Schwartz, D. D., *History of the Presbyterian Church in Nebraska*, Golden Anniversary Edition, (1924), p. 35.

ernment—In the name of justice and humanity—we ask for a more liberal interpretation of the law.¹⁵

In an open letter to the newspapers, she said:

As for myself, I shall willingly and gladly co-operate with the Indian Department in anything that is for the good of the tribe, but I shall fight good and hard against anything that is to the tribe's detriment, even if I have to fight alone.¹⁶

The sisters had made their place in the new culture, had become competent and accepted citizens in the white man's society. Now it seemed another task remained—to make both groups, both the white world and the Indians understand what they had accomplished and what their people could become.

¹⁵ *Walthill Times*, March 4, 1910.

¹⁶ *Walthill Times*, December 31, 1909, reprint of Dr. Picotte's letter to the *Omaha Bee*.



Susette LaFlesche Tibbles, 1854-1903



Rosalie LaFlesche Farley, 1861-1900



Marguerite LaFlesche Diddock, 1862-1945



Susan LaFlesche Picotte, 1865-1915