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Article Summary: Omaha Indians led by Joseph La Flesche built a village on reservation land in northeastern Nebraska in 1856-1857. The sod or timber houses constructed there formed a "make-believe white man's village" that existed for about twenty years and was the home of many Indian leaders.

#### Cataloging Information:

Names: Henry Fontanelle, Wa-non-ku-ge (Old Noise), Joseph La Flesche, Big Elk, Alice C. Fletcher

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Photographs / Images: sketch of the Make-Believe White Man's Village in Knox County about 1860 with a list identifying the houses' owners, inset photo of Joseph La Flesche

## THE MAKE-BELIEVE WHITE MAN'S VILLAGE

By NORMA KIDD GREEN

In the summer and early fall of 1854, prospective settlers gathered on the eastern bank of the Missouri River and looked longingly at a high table land of the new territory of Nebraska on the western bank, a few miles above the old American Fur Company trading post at Bellevue. They envisaged this as the site of a flourishing city, the "Gateway to the West" and the starting point for a railway which would stretch across the plains, conquer the mountains, and continue to the Pacific.

A few zealous people crossed the river and staked out what they considered town lots. However, they were ahead of the schedule of both the Federal Land Office and the Indian Bureau, and their claims were disallowed.

On March 16, 1854, a delegation of Omaha Indians signed a treaty in which they relinquished all claim to lands south of a line extending due west from the mouth of Aowa Creek near present-day Ponca, Nebraska.<sup>1</sup> The treaty provided that the Omaha could select a reservation south of this line which they elected to do, perhaps to lessen the chance of contact with their enemies the Sioux.<sup>2</sup>

Then during 1856 and 1857, little by little, a house or a stable or a store would be erected on the table land where a city was developing. At the same time on the Indian Reservation some seventy-five miles to the north, another village was being built by the dispossessed native Americans whose tribal name ironically was being used for the future Gateway City in the area they had abandoned. This reservation village was unlike any the Omaha Indians had ever built during their long history and their residence in this area.

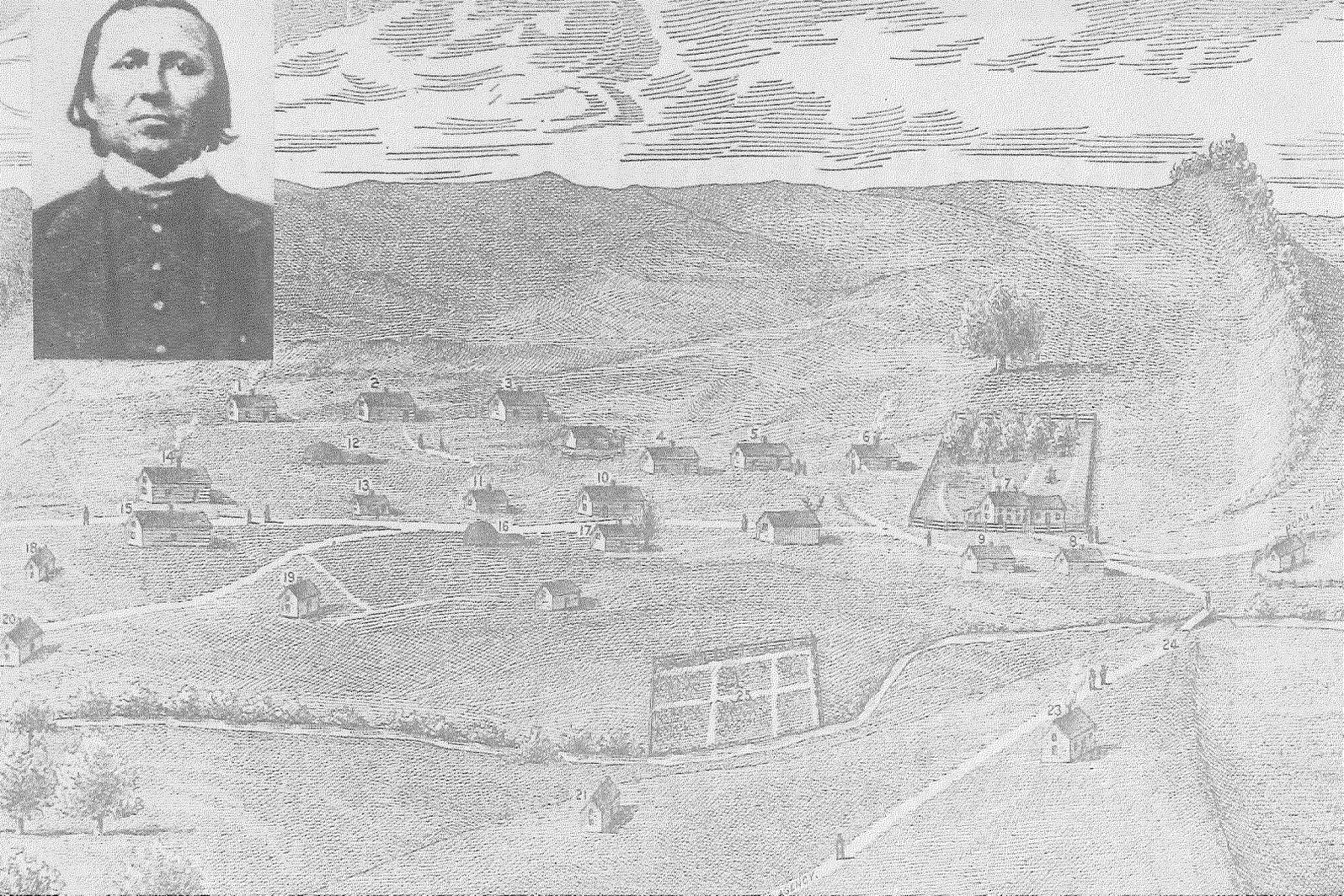
The tribe was large enough to make several villages, and they had planned to have one central village between the two branches of Blackbird Creek.<sup>3</sup> Giving up their hunting ground had been a hard thing, and it was still harder to do other new things after that. Although the central village was still called "Big Village," it did not include all the tribe. They broke up into their accustomed bands with earth lodges and tipis grouped near each other.

One group led by Henry Fontenelle strung out along Wood Creek just north of Decatur. Another band stayed nearer to the South Blackbird and the future location of the wagon road to the agency. The headman here was Wa-non-ku-ge, Old Noise, one of the signers of the treaty.<sup>4</sup> Nearer to the river and to the new mission perched on a hill, members of the Young Men's Party were building that strange village, where the roomy earthen lodge and the easily moved tipi — in spite of a proven usefulness — were disregarded in favor of sod, or logs, or sawed timbers for the kind of houses that white men built.<sup>5</sup>

Here the leader was Joseph La Flesche, the son of a French father and an Indian mother.<sup>6</sup> He always went by his father's name La Flesche, but he had been adopted by the wise chief of the Omaha, Big Elk. He had been placed in the same tribal grouping as Big Elk and had been given an Indian name, Ensh-ta-ma-za, which meant Iron Eye. Big Elk had often warned the tribe that they must learn the ways of the white men for he was convinced they could no longer live as their grandfathers' grandfathers had lived for the game would be gone, the white men would increase in numbers, and the whole pattern of life would be different. Joseph completely agreed and in every possible way tried to encourage and lead the Omaha to make use of the tools and take over the manner of white living.

For their new kinds of buildings the Mission offered the use of its saw mill. Joseph LaFlesche took advantage of this offer, using his own oxen and paying the sawyer and the hands, he paid the Mission \$10 per thousand feet of lumber. He was said to be the first Indian to build his own frame house west of the Missouri. He and his family moved in by November of 1857 and other "young men" were soon building and joining him.

This became known as "Joe's Village." Visitors from the East reported they had seen Joe's Village<sup>7</sup> or Joe La Fletcher's



Village. Members of the Chiefs' Party derisively called it "The Make-Believe White Man's Village."<sup>8</sup> In 1861 there were nineteen full houses there, while at the same time Decatur, an almost entirely white settlement, could boast only twelve.

The government made several attempts at assigning definite plots of land to each family and to single men and women past 21 years of age. One might say most of these efforts died on the vine — they started well but were never completed. Often Indians were not enthusiastic, for they were reluctant to leave the companionship of the village and live on isolated farms. Nearly always efforts toward land settlement became entangled in the inevitable red tape. It had been thought this village would last but a few years and would be a step toward plans even more like white towns, but with all the delays the "Make-Believe" village lasted nearly twenty years. Dr. Joseph Paxson, Quaker government physician at the Winnebago Agency, rode through and around this village as late as 1870 and noted in his diary that it was "not unlike those seen in Virginia during the late war."<sup>9</sup>

When allotments of land were finally made in 1872-1873, one by one the houses in the village were abandoned as the owner moved to his allotment. Sometimes he even took the house with him rather than build a new one. "Joe's Village" might have become a "ghost town" save for the constant short supply of building materials which left no building standing for any length of time. The final act was the disappearance of the land itself, as the Missouri River, spring after spring, cut farther

*Make-Believe White Man's Village (facing page) in Knox County about 1860. Joseph La Flesche (inset).*

1. *Um-pa's house.*
2. *The-me-ka-the's house.*
3. *Wa-tha-bae-zin-ga's house.*
4. *Me-ha-ta's house.*
5. *Bron-tee's house.*
6. *Um-pa-ska's house.*
7. *Joseph La Flesche's house.*
8. *Wa-na-shae-zin-ga's house.*
9. *Tae-on-ka-ha's house.*
10. *Ca-hae-num-ba's house.*
11. *Num-ba-tae-wa-thae's house.*
12. *Ta-hae-zin-gae's house.*
13. *Ne-ma-ha's house.*
14. *Du-ba-mon-ne's house.*
15. *Wa-jae-pa's house.*

16. *Wa-zin-ga's house.*
  17. *Ne-ou-ga-shu-dae's house.*
  18. *Wa-ne-ta-wa-ha's house.*
  19. *Ma-he-nin-ga's house.*
  20. *Sin-dae-ha-ha's house.*
  21. *Wa-ha-nin-gae's house.*
  22. *Ma-wa-da-ne's house.*
  23. *Grae-dun-nuz-ze's house.*
  24. *Bridge over stream.*
  25. *Vegetable garden, La Flesche's.*
- Nos. 12 and 13 are sod houses.  
Nos. 7 and 8 are frame houses.  
The four structures not numbered  
are barns.*

and farther into the rich soil of its flood plain and at last there was no ground where one could say, "This is where the village stood."

One single list of names and a tiny sketch drawn from memory are all that remain of the actually substantial make-believe village. The Omaha tribe was represented in the Indian exhibit shown at the fair in New Orleans in 1882. A series of models depicting activities of the tribe were made for the fair and pictures drawn of these models. The pictures were used to illustrate a pamphlet, "Historical Sketch of the Omaha Tribe of Indians in Nebraska," by Alice C. Fletcher, a student of ethnology who had been the allotting agent.<sup>10</sup>

This list can hardly include all of the heads of families who lived in the village during its twenty years, for the drawing accompanying this article shows fewer dwellings than are mentioned at later dates. No doubt it does, however, give those who were the strongest supporters of the Young Men's party. By careful comparison with government annuity and census lists, it may be reasonably assumed that fourteen of the twenty-two men mentioned were in their 20's — hence young men. That left seven in the 30's and over who still must have been "young" in their outlook. Joseph La Flesche himself was 34. The real patriarch was Grae-dun-nuz-ze, Standing Hawk, who was 41. It can be understood then that in the 1880's at the time of real allotting the young men's party was made up of men approaching their 60's. The names given are: Um-pa, Tae-on-ka-ha, Wa-tha-bae-zin-ga, Me-ha-ta, Bron-tee, Um-pa-ska, Joseph La Flesche, Wa-na-shae-zin-ga, Ca-hae-num-ba, Num-ba-tae-wa-thae, Ta-hae-zin-gae, Ne-ma-ha, Du-ba-mon-ne, Wa-jae-pa; Wa-zin-ga, Ne-ou-ga-shu-dae, Wa-ne-ta-wa-ha, Ma-he-nin-ga, Sin-dae-ha-ha, Wa-ha-nin-gae, Ma-wa-da-ne and Grae-dun-nuz-ze.

Other writing about the tribe and about Joseph's family constantly repeat these names. That La Flesche was looked upon as the leader was emphasized as late as the 1890's. One of the "young men," no longer young and never inclined to the clearest thinking, had gotten himself quite entangled in a law suit. He said to one of Joseph's daughters, "If your father had been here, I would have talked to him and he would not have let me go so far."

On the whole this town existed for twenty-odd years and contributed the leaders for years to come. The government ordered the Indians to take Anglicized names — that is, names which the agents could pronounce, and these occupants of the village became the Tyndals, the Clines, Hamiltons, Gilpins, Freemonts, Stablers, Woodhulls, McCauleys, Lovejoys, the Wellses, Parkers, Morrises and other known today. These families sent some of their children far afield along the white man's puzzling ways. Others stayed nearer home; for the Census of 1926 shows resident Omaha who are direct descendants of each name in the village list.

Today all these names may be found among those who count Macy, Nebraska, as their postoffice, living in the area which had been home to their people for many hundred years. For a time their people resided in a "make-believe" village, but in reality they are the first and the real Nebraskans.

## NOTES

1. Charles J. Kappler (editor), *Indian Affairs. Laws and Treaties*, 2 (Washington, D.C., 1904), 611-614.
2. Letters of Presbyterian Missionaries among the American Indians, Presbyterian Historical Society, Philadelphia (which society has given permission for the author to quote).
3. Alice C. Fletcher and Francis LaFlesche, "The Omaha Tribe," *Twenty-Seventh Annual Report of the Bureau of American Ethnology* (Washington, D.C., 1911), 6.
4. *Ibid.*, Kappler.
5. Joseph A. Paxson, "Diary of Joseph A. Paxson, Physician to the Winnebago Indians, 1869-1870," editor James L. Sellers, *Nebraska History*, 27, (1946), 143-204.
6. *Ibid.*, Alice C. Fletcher and Francis LaFlesche, 631-632.
7. *Ibid.*, Paxson, 155.
8. *Ibid.*, Fletcher and LaFlesche, 633.
9. *Ibid.*, Paxson, 155.
10. Alice C. Fletcher, *Historical Sketch of the Omaha Tribe of Indians* (Washington, D.C.: Judd and Detweiler, 1885).