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Article Summary: In 1877 Susette, Rosalie, Marguerite, and Susan La Flesche wrote the letters to the *St. Nicholas Magazine* Letter-Box reproduced here. Their accounts of life at the Omaha Agency appeared in the children's magazine in 1880.

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Photographs / Images: Marguerite and Susan La Flesche, Mary Tyndall and Nettie Fremont (about 1880); Rosalie La Flesche Farley; Susette La Flesche Tibbles

La Flesche Sisters Write to St. Nicholas Magazine

BY DOUGLAS STREET

St. Nicholas Magazine was perhaps the best known and one of the most highly regarded juvenile periodicals of the 19th and early 20th centuries. Established in 1873 by the Scribner Company of Boston under the able editorship of Mary Mapes Dodge, this monthly held sway over the juvenile market for over half a century, establishing itself as the standard by which other such periodicals, including many of those operating today, were judged. During *St. Nicholas's* "golden age," 1873 to 1905, the 32 years under editor Dodge, the magazine attracted the most respected authors of the day, Longfellow, Kipling, Stevenson, Alcott, and others and boasted a juvenile readership which spanned the nation geographically and culturally. Though its heart and soul were firmly in New England, its eyes and ears relayed experiences and stories from every sector of America; its child readers saw and heard of life in such diverse places as the mining camps of Nevada and Alaska, the cattle ranches of Texas, the fishing villages of Maine, and the Indian reservations of Oklahoma and Nebraska.

While the periodical, month after month, supplied its readers with numerous stories, articles, and informative pieces, *St. Nicholas* at the same time encouraged its readers to reciprocate by supplying it with pictures, puzzles, stories, and letters to further enhance its appeal to America's children. One of the more popular features of this sort (and one of the most intriguing for cultural historians) was the *St. Nicholas* Letter-Box begun by Dodge in 1874. Not a new idea to be sure, it nevertheless became a solid feature each month with children from across America writing to *St. Nicholas* about themselves, their daily life experiences, and their amusing or exotic adventures. One such Letter-Box installment, that in the issue of September, 1880, featured "interesting letters written by children of the Omaha tribe of

Indians.” Specifically, these letters were written by four sisters from the Omaha Agency—Susette, Rosalie, Marguerite, and Susan La Flesche.

To the best of my knowledge these four letters have remained buried in *St. Nicholas* for over a century, with those people to whom the names have importance unaware of their existence. Though not of earthshaking importance, these four communiques remain interesting because of their authors and because of the time frame into which they fall. To be more correct, these missives fall actually into two time frames—the letters themselves were written in 1877, judging by the declared ages of two of the girls, yet they did not appear in the magazine until three years later. What prompted the sisters to write to *St. Nicholas* in the first place, and why the Letter-Box chose to include them in the fall of 1880 in the second, are matters evoking much food for speculation.

The four letters are introduced by the editor (most likely Mary Mapes Dodge wrote this, as she was at the time managing editor):

A good friend of ST. NICHOLAS has forwarded for the “Letter-Box” several interesting letters written by children of the Omaha tribe of Indians. We cannot make room for the whole of every one of the letters, but the parts we print are just what the little Indians themselves wrote.

The writer of the first letter, Susette La Flesche, is better known to many of our readers by her Indian name, “Bright Eyes.”¹

This preface presents us with several discrepancies. First, if these letters were “forwarded” by a “good friend of ST. NICHOLAS,” and why should the editor not be truthful, then how must we account for the fact that the letters were three years old when they finally reached print? It is quite possible that the one responsible for getting the letters into the hands of Dodge was Helen Hunt Jackson, a longtime contributor and friend of *St. Nicholas*, who had befriended Susette La Flesche in November of 1879 during Susette’s Eastern speaking tour, where, with Standing Bear and Thomas Tibbles, she called attention graphically to the tragedy of the Ponca of Nebraska.² Helen Hunt Jackson became one of Susette’s closest companions and strongest allies in the fight for recognition of and enhancement of the Indians’ rights.³ It is possible that Susette carried these letters of the Omaha eastward from Nebraska, where she gave them into the charge of Helen Hunt Jackson to ensure safe delivery and expedient publication in the Letter-Box department of Dodge’s *St. Nicholas Magazine*.

This could account for the time lapse from writing to publication. The letters could have been posted from the Omaha Agency in late 1877 to *St. Nicholas*, the periodical only discovering them when the Omaha Indians, and coincidentally Susette (Bright Eyes) La Flesche, were the talk of New England.

It would be interesting to ascertain if indeed, in addition to the four La Flesche letters printed, there were other Omaha letters submitted, as the preface purports. Many would have deemed it more logical to print a cross section of letters from both Omaha boys and girls of different families, instead of utilizing solely the letters of the four La Flesche sisters. Yet, by that September of 1880, New Englanders young and old alike, were quite familiar with the La Flesche name; and nowhere was this more the case than in *St. Nicholas's* own backyard, Boston, Massachusetts. Bright Eyes had achieved celebrity status—she numbered among her outspoken admirers Poe, Longfellow, Whittier, Emerson, the Alcotts, and Mark Twain, to name a few. Her speaking engagements between October, 1879, and June, 1880 (when she returned to Nebraska), packed all the great halls of the East.⁴ Though in physical stature (as reported by the *New York Times*) “a little woman about twenty years of age, not over five feet in height,”⁵ her poise, grandiloquence, and influence proved her to be anyone but, referring back to the Letter-Box preface, a “little Indian.”

That Mary Mapes Dodge knew of Bright Eyes and her cause is undeniable. That Dodge had met and befriended her is likely. The fact that, though in theory the Letter-Box was for children, the editor allowed a letter from one known to be a mature woman well into her 20's, shows a decided social consciousness on the part of the editor and her periodical. Such a consciousness was a mark of *St. Nicholas* during the 32 year tenure of its first editor. Below is the first of the four letters printed, that of Susette.

DEAR ST. NICHOLAS: I do not know whether you allow “Savages” in your “Letter Box,” but my two younger sisters seeming to have no doubt whatever on the subject, Rosalie and I have concluded not to let them get ahead of us. Besides, nothing is ever complete unless “we four” are all “in it.” As my little brother Mitchell (who, by the way, considers himself the most important member of the family) is unable to write for himself, I will attempt to do it for him. He is six years old,—so old that he constitutes himself our protector on all occasions.

He tries to reassure mother by telling her that he will keep all the Sioux and Winnebagoes away from us. He can speak only a few sentences in English,



Marguerite (right) and Susan La Flesche, Mary Tyndall, Nettie Fremont, about 1880. . . (Below left) Rosalie La Flesche (Mrs. Edward) Farley. . . (Below right) Susette La Flesche (Mrs. Thomas) Tibbles.



although he chatters fast enough in Omaha, our own language. He admires the white people immensely. He said to me once:

"Sister, don't you like the white people? I do."

"I don't know," said I. "Why should I?"

"Oh, because they know how to do everything."

He is rather afraid of them, though, when he sees a good many of them together. The members of the "Joint Indian Commission" were out here a short time ago visiting the different tribes, and they called on us for a few minutes. While we were all busy entertaining and being entertained by them, we forgot Mitchell entirely. A gentleman—one of the employes [sic] of the Indian Reserve—came to the kitchen where Mitchell was and asked him if the Major (the agent of a Reserve is often called "Major" by Reserve people) was in the front room.

"No," said Mitchell.

"Then please go and tell the Major that I want to see him," said the gentleman.

"Oh, no," said Mitchell, "I can't."

"Why not?"

"Oh! I can't; there are too many white men in there for me."

When our visitors had gone away, we found Mitchell standing by the dining room window, with the tears rolling down his face, while he shook from head to foot with fright. I never knew him to be afraid of anything except white men, when he saw a good many of them together.

When he was three years old, he began riding horseback. When he was four years old, he rode alone to a neighbor's, nearly a mile off, although the road lay over steep bluffs near the Missouri River. Now, he can get off and on a horse without any help whatever. We often see little Indian boys younger than he riding out alone on the prairie, hunting horses with perhaps an older brother. Mitchell can go in among a number of horses standing close together, and bring out any one of them without making any confusion or getting hurt.

SUSETTE LA FLESCHÉ.

At the time this was written, Susette (1854-1903) was 23 years old. She was already graduated from the Elizabeth Institute in New Jersey and actively involved in the overwhelming problems and injustices caused by US Government intervention into the affairs of the Indian, most specifically Indians of the Ponca and Omaha tribes. It is a sharp bit of irony that has Susette asking the editor if "savages" are allowed in *St. Nicholas*. The attitude toward the whites reflected first by Susette the adult, and then by Mitchell the child, adds a double perspective to the red-white dilemma of the 1870s.

The references herein to "Mitchell" create a problem in that, while Norma Kidd Green, in her comprehensive chronicle of the La Flesche family, *Iron Eye's Family*, details in a knowledgeable manner the children of Joseph La Flesche, nowhere does she

mention a son named Mitchell. La Flesche did have a young son named Carey, who, according to Green, was born in 1872. One could argue that Mitchell is another name for Carey, who would in 1877 have been 5, or a newly turned 6 years old, the age stated in Susette's letter. Marguerite would seem to give such a hypothesis credence with reference in her forthcoming letter to her having "three sisters and two brothers." We know of brother Frank (1857-1932) and of brother Carey being the only two relatives (an older brother Louis had been dead since 1860).

Unlike Susette and Marguerite, the then 16 year-old Rosalie La Flesche (1861-1900) is less vindictive and more informative in her letter to *St. Nicholas*—she talks of an adventure closely rooted to the center of Omaha culture, the hunting of the buffalo. Only a year before this writing, due in part to the decline in the buffalo populations and in part to the gradual stripping away of Indian ritual and culture by the US Government, the Omaha were forced by law to abandon their yearly ritualistic buffalo hunt. The consequences were traumatic. No one could have guessed by Rosalie's writing.

DEAR ST. NICHOLAS: I am one of four Indian girls who read you and like you very much. We live at the Agency, where we go to school with about sixty other Indian girls and boys. Perhaps you would like to know how we go on the hunt. Sometimes the whole tribe goes, leaving at home the folks who are too old to go. When we were too young to go to school, father used to take us everytime they went, but when we got old enough, we used to stay at the Omaha Mission, a boarding school kept for the Indian children. One year they were going out on the buffalo hunt, and, as we were not going to school that year, father took us girls. We were so glad to go, as we had not gone for a long time. Sometimes they would travel almost all day, and I used to be glad when they all stopped to camp, for I would get tired of riding. In a few minutes all the tents would be up and the women would be getting dinner while the men were out hunting. As soon as we girls were off our horses, we used to run down to the creek, or off into the woods, and get poles to make ourselves little tents. When the men came home with a lot of meat everybody was glad. As soon as the men got home they used to roast the buffalo ribs, while the women were getting the meat ready to dry. Mother used to let me have all the little pieces of meat to dry for my old grandmother, who had to stay at home. As soon as they had all the meat and skins they wanted, they would start for home.—Yours truly, ROSALIE LA FLESCHE.

The realization that the buffalo were gone and the hunts would be no more brought a sense of chaos to the people of the Omaha. As Norma Kidd Green points out:

The final acceptance of this fact threw the tribe into despair and confusion. They felt some dreadful and malevolent power was operating against them. The hunt not only meant the year's supply of meat and robes but it was intricately woven into the governmental, religious and ceremonial life of the people. Their most cherished symbol, the Sacred Pole, called the Venerable Man, was necessary to the existence of the tribe, but it could not operate without certain ceremonies which depended on the buffalo. They lost unity and security and all reason for morality when these rites were neglected and suffered a complete loss of standards to measure right and wrong.⁶

For the 16-year-old Rosalie memories are all that may remain. Yet where Rosalie writes with a sense of longing, her sister Marguerite comes more to the point. Herein the sense of bitterness toward the white ways undoubtedly experienced by many of the tribe at this juncture in history, has welled up in the words of this 15-year-old Omaha girl. One wonders what the child from Boston, Philadelphia, or St. Louis would have thought upon encountering Marguerite's lament, "Sometimes I am sorry that the white people ever came to America." In Marguerite's letter we experience the most overt outcry against the white man's attempts to "civilize" the Indian.

DEAR ST. NICHOLAS: I am an Indian girl fifteen years old. I have three sisters and two brothers. Two of my sisters are older than I am. We four girls are keeping house by ourselves at the Omaha Agency. It is three miles from our own house, where our father and mother live. We are living on a Reserve, where nothing but Indians, called Omahas, live, except the employes [sic] of the Reserve.⁷

Sometimes I am sorry that the white people ever came to America.

What nice times we used to have before we were old enough to go to school, for then father used to take us on the buffalo hunt. How glad we used to be when the men were bringing in the buffaloes they had killed! I do wish we could go again. Whatever the white men take away from us, they cannot take away the love of roaming. I cannot write anything exciting, as nothing hardly ever happens, unless a number of Senators and Congressmen happen to come along and stir us up. All of us girls, and brother Frank, are very fond of reading and like you very much,—Your reader, MARGUERITE LA FLESCHÉ.

According to Green, Marguerite (1862-1945) "has been described as 'delicate' both by her family and by white friends."⁸ There seems little indication of such frailty here.

While one can easily note the barbs directed at the white man's government and its representatives, at the extinction of the buffalo and the gradual degeneration of the old ritualistic society precipitated by that same white intervention, in the writings of Marguerite and older sister Susette, the voice of innocence,

embodied in the last letter to *St. Nicholas*, may prove pointed in a less direct, more subtle way. Susan La Flesche (1865-1915), the youngest of the four and the most enculturated into the white world, still sees with the eyes of a child; yet those eyes are no less acute in childhood than those of her sister emerging into adulthood. So the youngest of the four gives the reader yet another glimpse of Omaha life at the Agency one year after the Ponca tragedy and the outlawing of the buffalo hunt, two years before her sister and Standing Bear made their famous tour to the Eastern cities on behalf of the Indian cause:

DEAR ST. NICHOLAS: I am a little Indian girl twelve years old. I go to school at the Omaha Agency. I study geography, history, grammar, arithmetic and spelling. I read at the Fifth Reader. I have three other sisters and two brothers. Sometimes father, mother and grandmother come to see us. My father was a chief for fifteen years.⁹ My brother Frank once killed a deer, right by our house. Some Senators and Congressmen came to see the Omahas. They all came to our house and sang "Hold the Fort" with us. My oldest sister played backgammon with one of the Congressmen and beat him—Yours truly,
SUSAN LA FLESCHE.

Ten years later this young woman entered the Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania; she became this country's first Indian woman physician. She returned to the Omaha and served them as doctor until her death in 1915.

To reread the 19th century issues of America's premier children's magazine, *St. Nicholas*, is to turn back the hands of time to capture the essence of a time obscured by a century of newer experiences. Many of the names and titles first appearing in that periodical have gone on to lasting fame and respectability, winning notable places in the annals of American history and literature. A young boy from California named Jack London was so impressed with *St. Nicholas* he wished to see his name there in print—eventually both he and America had that opportunity. A teen-aged poet had a poem published in the magazine she had read faithfully since childhood; it was the first of many for Edna St. Vincent Millay. *St. Nicholas* contains the thoughts and feelings and creations of many such figures. Mary Mapes Dodge and William Fayal Clarke after her fostered an editorial policy which truly established a national scope for this American periodical, one which encouraged children and the childlike from all walks of American life to become contributors as well as subscribers—Indians included. And happily, four rather extraordinary sisters

eagerly though unobtrusively did so, affording today's reader yet four more fragmentary glimpses into a world and a culture long ago paved over in the names of progress and civilization.

NOTES

1. All four of these letters appeared in the "Letter-Box," *St. Nicholas Magazine* (September 1880), 918.

2. For a discussion of the Bright Eyes-Helen Hunt Jackson relationship, refer to Dorothy Clarke Wilson's *Bright Eyes* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1974), 233-235.

3. Wilson, 233.

4. For accounts of the Eastern tour of Standing Bear, Susette, Frank, and Thomas Tibbles, consult Wilson, 218-260, and Norma Kidd Green's *Iron Eye's Family* (Lincoln: Nebraska State Historical Society, 1969), 60-64.

5. Wilson, 248.

6. *Iron Eye's Family*, 52. The reader desiring a more detailed account of the role of the buffalo in Omaha society is directed to various sections in Alice C. Fletcher and Francis La Flesche, *The Omaha Tribe* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1972).

7. Fletcher and La Flesche in *The Omaha Tribe*, 629-630, give the following account of the new reservation and agency buildings.

The agency buildings on the new reservation were placed about three miles west of the Missouri river on the only road in that region which ran from the trading posts on the south to those that were near the Missouri farther to the north. . . . In the course of a year or two the Omaha divided and settled in three villages: one in the southeastern part of the reservation; another (the largest) near the agency; the third to the northeast not far from the banks of the Missouri. . . . At the time when the Omaha reservation was established the Missouri river was the highway of travel. The steamers from St. Louis brought the supplies needed for the agency and the mission. The landing place was on the bottomland below the mission buildings. Here the agency shops were first erected and in these the boys from the mission school were permitted to work and learn something of the carpenter's and the blacksmith's trade. Later a boarding school was established at the agency, to which the shops were removed, and a saw mill and a grist mill were built. All these were given up before the close of the last century.

8. Green, "Four Sisters," *Nebraska History* 45 (June, 1964), 170.

9. Joseph La Flesche served as chief of the Omaha from his father's death in 1853 until 1868, when he resigned his position under pressure from the U.S. agent attached to the Omaha Agency.