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Article Title: Nebraska's Antoine Barada Again

Full Citation: Louise Pound, "Nebraska's Antoine Barada Again," *Nebraska History* 30 (1949): 286-294

URL of article: <http://www.nebraskahistory.org/publish/publicat/history/full-text/NH1949ABarada.pdf>

Date: 12/06/2016

Article Summary: Fanciful stories about Antoine Barada's parentage began to circulate long after his death. The stories claimed that he was the son of a French count who had fallen in love with an Indian girl while she was visiting Paris. Pound examines the sources of these stories and concludes that they are folklore rather than history.

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Cataloging Information:

Names: Antoine Barada, Michael Barada, Laughing Water (Laughing Buffalo), Josephine Vierhen, Madame Mousette (Moosac), Mari Sandoz

Nebraska Place Names: Barada, Richardson County

Sources Quoted by Pound: *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, II (1887); Lewis C Edwards, *History of Richardson County* (1917)

Keywords: Thompson-Howard bill, Omaha Indians

Photographs / Images: Antoine Barada (photo reportedly taken in the 1870s)

Nebraska's Antoine Barada Again

By Louise Pound

ANTOINE Barada of Richardson County, Nebraska, was a real person, notable among our nineteenth century pioneers. He was a man of fabulous strength who had an adventurous life and who developed into a prominent figure in Nebraska folklore. The Federal Writer's Project, Pamphlet 8 (1937), characterized him as "the strongest man who ever roamed the shores of the Missouri river." The headnote prefixed to mention of some of the tall tales concerning him ranks him as "second only to Febold as a legendary or mythical character of Nebraska." In an article on "Nebraska Strong Men" in the *Southern Folklore Quarterly* (VII, September, 1943, pp. 133-143) I referred to some of the stories of his prowess and quoted in full one known to Mari Sandoz. By our own time, folklore seems to have arisen concerning his ancestry as well as concerning his feats of strength. I bring up the matter now because of recurrent press items such as the following from the Lincoln, Nebraska, *Evening Journal* of January 23, 1949:

A.P. Falls City, Nebraska. An 84-year-old descendant of Count Barada, a French nobleman, will be buried here. William Barada died at Hiawatha, Kansas. He was a grandson of the Count who married an Indian girl and became a legendary figure. Survivors include seven daughters and four sons.

For one thing, this statement does not differentiate Antoine Barada, primarily the legendary figure, and his father Michael who is customarily described as a French nobleman, a Count. Another story is that Michael was a Spanish grandee. The Federal Writer's pamphlet serves as a chief source, no doubt, of the now stock story of

Antoine's romantic parentage, which it seems to accept without question:

Antoine Barada was the son of Count Michael Barada, a gay Parisian, and Laughing Water, a pretty Omaha maiden, whose romance is said to be one of the most beautiful in history . . . He died in 1866 and was buried beside his wife in Richardson County at the little village of Barada which was named in his honor.

Robert Maher, who wrote of Antoine's deeds the year before in the Lincoln, Nebraska, *Sunday Journal and Star* (June 14, 1936), gave him the same parents, Count Michael and Laughing Water. He commented:

Accounts of their romance and marriage comprise one of the tender chapters of the history of a period when eastern Nebraskans were too much concerned with the struggles for survival to give much heed to the sentimental.

Mari Sandoz, best known as the author of *Old Jules* (1935) and *Crazy Horse* (1942), who was an employee in the office of the Secretary of the Nebraska State Historical Society for a time and who served as assistant editor of the *Nebraska History* magazine, testifies that she knew stories of Antoine when she was a child. Miss Sandoz is unusually well versed in Northwestern Nebraska history and legend.

He was a half-breed, the son of Michael Barada who was supposed to be of royal connections in Spain . . . The town of Barada in Richardson County was named after Michael. Around 1934 when I was working at the State Historical Society, a letter came in seeking information on the Barada family, to settle, I recall now, an estate. Whether this was another of the recurring Spanish inheritance hoaxes I don't know. . . There was also a Michael Barada in the Custer County region for a while, I'm told.

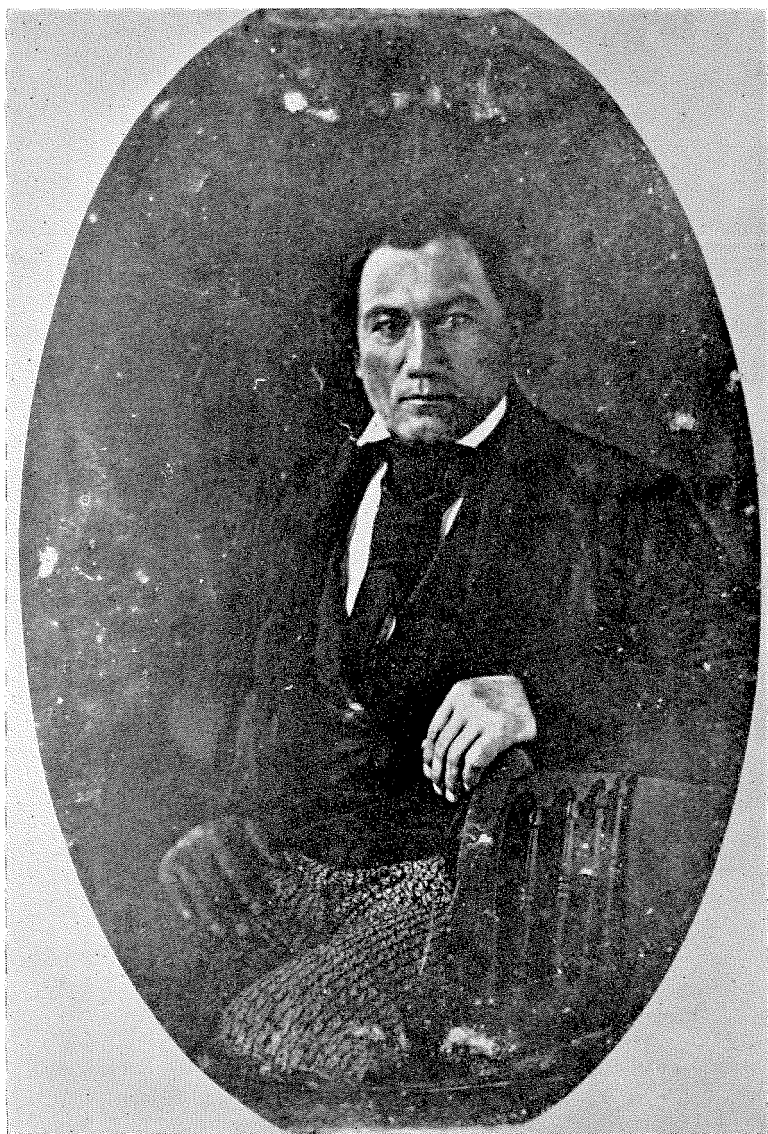
An entry in *Nebraska Place-Names* (1925), compiled by Lilian Fitzpatrick and published in the University of Nebraska *Studies in Language, Literature and Criticism*, reads:

Barada. This place is situated in Barada Precinct and it and the precinct were named after one of the first settlers, Antoine Barada (1807-1887), a French-Omaha half-breed whose wife was a French woman. He named the village after himself.

The year 1887 entered here as that of Antoine's death is given in several other sources. And some state that the town and precinct of Barada—the name has initial accentuation—were named after Michael. It is likeliest, however, that they were named not after Michael nor by Antoine after himself but by others because of the residence of Antoine and his family in the vicinity. The name Barada may suggest that he was Spanish-Indian but there is no doubt that he was French-Indian, as suggested by the name Antoine and as stated in most accounts of his parentage. The statement that Michael Barada was "a gay Parisian" and that his "romance" with a "pretty Indian maiden, Laughing Water" was "one of the most beautiful in the world" sounds as though it owes something to glamorous furbishing, as will be seen.

There is one good source of information concerning Antoine that seems in general to be overlooked, namely that in the biographical section, pp. 321-347, of the *Transactions and Reports of the Nebraska State Historical Society*, II (1887). In this section are printed seventeen biographies of well-known Nebraskans; his is the fifteenth, pp. 343-346, and is given by no means the briefest space. The secretary of the Society was then Professor George E. Howard of the Department of History of the State University, a fine scholar, trained in Germany. The biographies may have appeared under his supervision, some perhaps from his pen. The account of Antoine begins:

Among the many noted Nebraskans gathered to their fathers in the past few years, there were none whose deeds of bravery and adventurous life compare with those of Antoine Barada, who died in the summer of 1866 at the little town which bears his name in Richardson County . . . His career as chief, captive, trader, scout and pilot deserves more than passing note.



ANTOINE BARADA

A photo reportedly taken in the 1870's, identified by Lewis C. Edwards, Falls City, in 1917.

In summary, the account states that he was born in 1807 near what is now Fort Calhoun in Washington County. His father Michael was a white man and represented the Omaha tribe of Indians at the conference which drafted what is known as the treaty of Prairie du Chien in 1836. His mother was a full-blooded Indian woman. At seven he was captured by Sioux in one of their forays on the Omahas but was spared the fate of his companions. After two years he escaped and returned or was returned to his parents. Colonel Rogers of the United States Army planned to place him in the Military Academy [West Point] but his aunt, Mme. Mousette, in St. Louis, persuaded him to hide and not go to the academy. From boyhood he exhibited extraordinary muscular powers. When employed in Missouri as superintendent of quarries he is said to have proved his strength by lifting clear 1,800 pounds. In 1832 he returned to his tribe to visit his parents. Again in St. Louis, he married a French woman, Josephene (Josephine) Veien in 1836. In 1849, the Gold Rush year, he went overland to California, meeting many adventures and exciting incidents on the way and when returning. He remained on the West Coast six years. He had often visited his mother's tribe in Richardson County. After his return from the West he finally settled there on a farm. He brought up a family of three sons [Michael, William, and Thomas] and four girls. He died in 1866 and is buried in the Catholic cemetery just east of the village of Barada. His biographer in the *Transactions* comments that he had the appreciation of "many friends, acquaintances and strangers for his kind words, good deeds, and generous acts."

This brief account of his life should be that which is most nearly authentic since it was written nearest the time of his death, whether he died in 1866 as stated in the *Transactions* (possibly a misprint for 1886), or in 1887, or in 1885, the year given on his tombstone. It nowhere states that his father was a Parisian Count or a member of a noble Spanish family. Nor is there any

reference to his father's romance, "one of the most beautiful in history."

Some years later, in 1917, appeared another pretty dependable account. This is in Lewis C. Edwards' *History of Richardson County*, chapter VIII, p. 191. The author makes no claim to have known Antoine but he had information from members of the Barada family. Edwards states that Antoine was "born at St. Mary's near Fort Calhoun across the river from Omaha." His father Michael was an educated Frenchman from France employed by the United States Government as an interpreter, and he served in that capacity in the making of the famous treaty of Prairie du Chien, negotiated in a town of that name in Wisconsin. The elder Barada and his wife "were stationed at Fort Lisa about 200 miles north of St. Mary's above Omaha." Here the lad was stolen by the Sioux and a ransom demanded of his parents. He was recovered six months later by the payment of "two ponies." Some soldiers promised to take him east to be educated at West Point Military Academy. He was taken down the river to Carondelet south of St. Louis. Here he was left stranded by intoxicated soldiers and found and returned to his aunt, Mrs. Moosac. Later he was employed in a stone quarry. He was a thick heavy-set man of broad shoulders and prodigious strength. He married a French woman, Josephine Vierhen, who was familiarly known as Marcelite.

In Edwards' *History* of 1917 is a short paper headed "Pioneer Exploits by Antoine Barada," written by him, it is stated, in response to solicitations for sketches of early times. By 1917, Antoine had been dead many years. It hardly deserves the credence of preceding accounts for it goes astray in the second sentence, "My parents were of French descent and coming from New Orleans were called Creoles." The Louisiana Creoles were white persons descended from the French or Spanish settlers of Louisiana. Antoine's mother was an Indian, not a Creole. The account speaks of his having been reared

"in every luxury of civilized life" but that he preferred adventure and entered as a mere boy into the employment of the Northwestern Fur Company and traveled back and forth to the mountains. In 1856 he settled on a farm, the second settler in the region, and the precinct was named after him. According to Edwards the inscriptions on the stones at his and his wife's grave say: Antoine Barada. Born August 2, 1807. Died March 30, 1885. Josephine Barada. Born March 22, 1817. Died May 8, 1889.

What is the source of the tale of the gay Parisian Count and his romance with the Indian maiden? How did it make its way into circulation? It seems to have emerged about 1933-34, perhaps from the Barada family, or from a lawyer, or from a friend and since then has been handed on. It was given prominence in the Sunday magazine section of the St. Louis *Post-Dispatch*, May 20, 1934. A preceding account, the initial appearance of the story so far as I have been able to learn, came from Edward Harlan, president of the Tribal Council of Omaha Indians, when the Thompson-Howard bill seeking to establish Indian rights was introduced into Congress by representative Edgar Howard of Columbus, Nebraska. Howard was United States Congressman, 1922-35. The bill provided for placing certain members of the Barada family, "descendants of Count Michael and Laughing Buffalo," on the official rolls of the Omaha tribe, in order to make them eligible for land allotments. The story of Michael's romance was included in the report made by the Committee on Indian Affairs which accompanied the bill pending in 1934. It would be of great interest to see this report in view of the light it might throw on the initial account of the Barada ancestry. One infers that the tale was helpful in the passing of the bill. Yet it is hard to see how Antoine's descendants of the 1930's could be expected to give altogether trustworthy information concerning Michael's coming to America. Without written records to fall back on, relying on story, how many of us in the twentieth century could tell much concerning

the romances of our grandfathers in the eighteenth century?

Whoever was responsible for the launching or publicizing of it, the glamorous account by Keith Kerman of the Sunday magazine staff of the *Post-Dispatch* must have done much to float it into currency. It does not appear in the available printed accounts before 1934, so far as I know, but it does in all those written later. I am indebted for seeing a typewritten transcription of the St. Louis newspaper story to Mr. John Wiltse of Falls City, the author of "Tales of Antoine Barada and his father Michael," a well-written paper prepared for a program and now in the files of the State Historical Society. It occupies four single-spaced pages. Here, in summary, is the tale of the romance of the Count and his Indian bride. It is so glamorous and farfetched, yet stock, that one wonders at its unquestioned acceptance. Omitting many details it is as follows:

Young Michael Barada was twenty as he sauntered along a fashionable Parisian street, his sword in its jeweled scabbard swinging jauntily. In front of the house of a nobleman a rose dropped at his feet from a window. He looked up in time to see the face of a girl and fell impetuously in love. Returning to the scene the next day, he found that she had just left Paris to sail for America. She was an Indian girl who with others of her race had been brought to Paris by the French government that Parisians might see aboriginal Americans and they in turn might see France. The girl was Tae-Gle-Ha, or Laughing Buffalo. She was seventeen. The young gallant knew nothing of Indian tribes or the part of the country to which she had sailed. Nevertheless he took ship, landing in Montreal in the late 1780's. He had one clue in his search for her. It was that in the Northern and Western Indian languages the word *tae* meant buffalo. He held to his purpose and journeyed to many tribes in many regions. His stupendous search lasted ten years. At last he found Tae-Gle-Ha in a village of the Omaha tribe.

She was twenty-seven and still unmarried—perhaps because of her glimpse long before of the young Parisian gallant. Two weeks later they were married, first by Indian ceremony and later by a Jesuit priest. Barada became a member of the Omaha tribe. They moved across the Missouri river with the Omahas into what is now Nebraska, living in the first house built by a white man in the region.

An account in the Falls City *Journal*, the leading Richardson County newspaper, written five years later than Kerman's of 1934 and reprinted in the Lincoln, Nebraska, *Sunday Journal and Star* of December 31, 1939, differs in a few details. One is this:

The French nobleman met Antoine's mother when the Indian girl was in school in France under the sponsorship of a rich and kindly French family which had taken a liking to her during a visit to the United States. Count Barada followed Laughing Water to America and married her.

The stories of Antoine agree that when a lad in St. Louis, after his return from the Sioux, he stayed with his aunt, Mme. Mousette (Moosac in 1917), living a civilized life in Missouri rather than a tribal one with the Omaha Indians. Obviously this aunt with the French name was Michael's sister rather than Laughing Buffalo's. How about her? She too, if Michael's sister, was of noble birth. How did she reach St. Louis? She did not accompany Michael on his ten year search but must have come to America later. If so, in view of her birth and position in Paris, why make the venturesome journey across the Atlantic, surely an unusual one for a French noblewoman of her day, or later, especially since it was to a pioneer region.

Doubtless Laughing Water (apparently echoing Longfellow's Minnehaha) is a more attractive name than Laughing Buffalo. Yet with the change goes the one clue that enabled the Count, in the story of his romance, to find his inamorata. He could find Laughing Buffalo (Tae-Gle-Ha) but never Laughing Water.

Finally, there is another consideration to be taken into account, an important one, too. If Michael Barada was a young gallant at the court of King Louis XVI, the late 1780's and early 1790's seem a strange time for him to desert the King and the court for his long quest of the once-glimpsed Laughing Buffalo, temporarily in France at that unlikely time. This was the period of the French Revolution and 1789 was a cataclysmic year. King Louis was beheaded in 1793, and the French nobility abolished. If Michael was really a Count, a likelier story would state that he came to our shores after the outbreak of the Revolution to escape French conditions. Landing at New Orleans, he penetrated into the central west and, like many white men, such as Manuel Lisa or Kit Carson, married an Indian girl. Given this situation, his patrician sister might more probably have followed him to the New World, coming from New Orleans to St. Louis. One doubts, however, that Michael Barada was a Count, and one surely doubts the details of his romantic quest.

Probably coming allusions to Antoine and Michael Barada will repeat the story of the gay young Parisian and his romantic winning of his bride. But how far should it be credited, in these days, and continue to be handed on as valid biography? Folklore is of interest and it has its degree of importance, but it should be distinguished from history.

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