

Joseph LaFlesche, (Insta Maza). (1820-1888)

Joseph LaFlesche was the son of a Ponca mother and a French trapper-trader father. A Metis or French-Indian from the Lower Missouri River area, he later became an Omaha Chief. His mother was the sister of Ponca chief Standing Grizzly Bear. She left LaFlesche because of his long absences from home and married a full-blood Indian. As a consequence Joseph's uncle raised him until he was old enough to accompany his father on business. During his apprenticeship with his father he learned to speak the Ponca, Ioway and Omaha languages. LaFlesche spoke no English, but did speak French.



In his early adulthood he worked for Peter Sarpy at his Bellevue post. It was here that he met Sarpy's stepdaughter, Mary Gale (Omaha/Otoe/Ioway and Anglo-American). LaFlesche and Gale were married in 1846. They had five children: Suzette (b. 1854), Rosalie (b. 1861), Marguerite (b. 1862), Susan (b. 1865), and Louis who died in childbirth. All of the girls went on to become accomplished and famous. Joseph LaFlesche was an early advocate for mainstream education for Omaha children and he supported the missionary's efforts to establish schools among his people. He and his wife also ensured that all their children obtained advanced education.

Joseph refused to abandon all Omaha traditions, and for a while he maintained three wives—Mary Gale; Tainne; and a third woman, whom he took as a wife in 1862. Tainne probably died in April 1883 and Mary Gale died on February 28, 1909.



Joseph's second wife was an Omaha woman named Ta-in-ne (Elizabeth Esau). They had three children, Lucy, a graduate of the Hampton Institute, Francis, an anthropologist, author and lawyer, and Carey, an Omaha Agency clerk, ceremonial leader and interpreter.

LaFlesche witnessed much violence in his life. After observing the murder of an Omaha at the hands of drunken relatives, LaFlesche became a lifelong abstainer. The Sioux killed his mother in an 1851-52 attack on the Ponca's.

Due to the lack of clan affiliation, the Metis usually did not have political authority as chiefs in the Central-Siouan communities. However, Joseph LaFlesche did gain recognition as a headman. This was because he was wealthy and made constant provision for needy band members. As well as being a merchant-trader, LaFlesche operated a ferry at Council Bluffs and when the Mormons arrived, he made \$2,000 over one winter. He also operated a flatboat on the Elkhorn River.

After being cheated out of his father's inheritance LaFlesche moved away from the non-Native community and became involved in Omaha tribal politics. In 1848, he bought two horses for \$60 and gave one to Chief Big Elk II. Big Elk then formally adopted LaFlesche by performing a Pipe Dance for him. By this means, Joseph acquired a clan affiliation and he was given the name Insta Maza or Iron Eye. Big Elk II died in 1853, but while on his deathbed he told LaFlesche that he wanted him to become chief. He also placed his young son, Cross Elk, in LaFlesche's care with instructions to make the boy chief when he came of age. However, the boy died and Joseph became recognized as the son of Big Elk. To certify LaFlesche's claim on leadership Big Elk gave him all his peace medals and government documents. After LaFlesche gave several feasts and distributed presents and horses to the other chiefs they agreed to Big Elk's arrangements for LaFlesche to become interim chief. Joseph served as chief for 13 years, 1853 to 1866.

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