

MARIA TALLCHIEF, IN HISTORY: OKLAHOMA'S OWN BALLERINA

By Frank F. Finney, Sr.

Indian history is inseparably woven in the fabric of the State of Oklahoma and many of its citizens with Indian blood have contributed much to its distinction and repute. In naming a few of these who achieved fame and acclaim in different ways we think of Will Rogers, General Clarence Tinker and Jim Thorpe of former days and in the scene of today, Maria Tallchief, whose talents have brought her recognition as one of the all time great ballerinas.

Maria, like many other native Oklahomans, is removed only a few generations from her full blood ancestors who hunted buffalo on the Oklahoma plains and lived in skin covered lodges. The name of her family was acquired from her great-grandmother's brother, a leading man among the Osages, Tall Chief. After Tall Chief's sister's second husband died, he took her sons, Maria's grandfather, Alex, Sr., and two of Alex's half brothers, Eves and Henry to rear under the name of Tall Chief.

In those days the Osages gathered in villages and lived in lodges. Tall Chief and his band lived in a camp near the confluence of Gray Horse Creek with the Arkansas River. This village was in the southwestern part of the Osage reservation and the Indians had to travel about twenty five miles to the agency for their supplies. They became tired of this and asked the agent for a store to be established nearer to them.

One day in the 1884, three white men¹ called on Tall Chief at his camp where they knew was a good spring of water, looking for a location for their store. Tall Chief said to them, "This spring is claimed by all of the Osages. I will show you where you may build your store." Going with them several miles to a point up the stream the chief said, "Here is the place; no one claims it." There on the banks of Gray Horse Creek, they found near the riffles where the agency trail crossed the creek, another spring of living water running from the rocks. The store was built on level ground several hundred feet from the creek. This was Gray Horse Trading Post.

¹ James E. Finney, Thomas M. Finney, Charles Schiffbauer.

The John Florer and L. A. Wismeyer stores² which were built at the Gray Horse Trading Post were the only ones in the western part of the reservation for a number of years supplying the Tall Chief band and other Indians with their goods. In 1902 the Santa Fe built its railroad through the reservation and Mr. Wismeyer founded the town of Fairfax on Salt creek at a location about three miles from Gray Horse on the railroad. He moved his store building in sections by teams to the new town where most of the inhabitants of Gray Horse moved. It was at Fairfax that Maria Tallchief and her younger sister Marjorie³ were born.

Their father, Alex Tallchief, Jr., who died last year was virtually a full blood Osage Indian of $\frac{7}{8}$ ths degree. From their grandmother the girls acquired their relationship with the prominent Bigheart family. James Bigheart, was a noted leader of the tribe and one time principal chief of the Osage Nation. The mother of the girls who resides at Fairfax is of Scottish-Irish descent.

Mrs. Milton Sabin who lives in Oklahoma City, fortunately for Maria's future career, was conducting dancing classes at Pawhuska, Hominy and at several schools on the reservation. Mrs. Sabin had received her training as a dancing teacher in Boston and it seems unusual that services of one of her capability in teaching the highly polished and difficult ballet could be found in the Indian country where she came and where the native form of dancing among the Indians and "square" dancing among the white people prevailed.

Mrs. Sabin says:

I began giving lessons to Maria when she was three and a half years of age. All Indians have a natural grace of motion which Maria and Marjorie possessed, but regardless how much talent any one has, it has to be developed properly and requires much work and practice by the pupil. No one else but myself gave any lessons to Maria before the Tallchief family left for California when she was nine years old to further the careers of the girls. Much credit must be given to their mother who saw that her daughters unremittingly applied themselves. Maria also had great musical ability. At four she could play as many as fifty pieces on the piano and it was a question even after they were in California whether she would make her career as a musician or a dancer. It was not until she was given an opportunity in Los Angeles to play the piano in the first half and dance in the second half in a try-out performance that it was decided that she should curtail her efforts in music and concentrate on the dance.

² The first trading business at Gray Horse was established by J. E. Finney and Chas. Schiffbauer. John N. Florer soon took over the business. L. A. Wismeyer a little later also established a licensed Indian trading business there. T. M. Finney was at that time conducting an Indian trading business at the Kaw agency.

³ Mrs. George Skibine, formerly Majorie Tallchief, 60 rue des Fontanelles Seures, France. She now dances with the Paris Opera Ballet.

While Maria devoted much time to the study of dancing under competent instructors, she also managed to attend and graduate from the Beverly Hills high school. After her debut at the age of seventeen in a Hollywood Bowl performance, she went to New York City where her extraordinary talent was recognized and she was engaged by the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo Company. She appeared first in Canada and then in Paris where she was the first American to dance in the Opera. After five years of sensational success in Europe, Maria returned to the United States and caused critics to "gasp at the seeming impossibility of her techniques" displayed in the ballet. Since her early triumphs, she has continued to embellish her career as a foremost ballerina by performances with the New York City Ballet Company in America and by frequent appearances in Europe. She is now the wife of Henry D. Paschen, Jr., a construction executive of Chicago and the mother of a year old daughter, Elise. After a maternity leave she is again appearing with the New York City Company.

In the summer of 1953, Maria came for a brief visit to her home town of Fairfax in the land of her forefathers who frequently held their dances to the beat of the drums. These native Indian dances were a far cry from the lyrical flowing and beautiful ballet performed by Maria with music from some great orchestra, but all Indians loved to dance and it is not hard to believe that her heredity had some part in her own love and aptitude for the more elegant form of the art.

June 29, 1953, was designated by the Oklahoma State Senate as "Maria Tallchief Day" and the streets of Fairfax were bedecked with banners for a full day celebration. Friends and kin came from miles around and State and Osage Tribe officials were at hand to do her honor. The Governor made her an honorary Colonel on his staff and Principal Chief Paul Pitts of the Osages in a ceremony at the Tallchief theater placed on her a headdress and pronounced her an Osage Princess.

Applause from enthusiastic audiences attending her performances on her tours was gratefully received by Maria Tallchief but upon her own assertion, none of these ovations was as heart warming or gave her as much satisfaction as the welcome given her by the people of her own State of Oklahoma.⁴

The durability of the esteem and admiration held for Maria Tallchief was shown on her return to the state in February of the current year (1960) to fill an engagement with the Oklahoma City Symphony at the City Auditorium. During the

⁴ The front cover of *Newsweek* for October 11, 1954, in color carried a fine close-up photo of Maria Tallchief, and a story under "The Dance—Talented Tall Chief: We find Our Own Ballerina."

evening preceeding the Sunday afternoon concert, Maria with some of her family attended a ceremony in which a bronze figure, nearly five feet in height, was unveiled at the home of Mr. and Mrs. Guy James. The statue, modeled by the sculptor, Keating Donahoe, portrays her in a graceful pose as the "Swan Queen" of the Swan Opera Ballet. A second bronze from the original model was given her from a civic group in the name of the Oklahoma City Chamber of Commerce, and this her friends throughout the state applaud as a pleasing and lasting tribute to the native girl who with the charm and perfection of her art has added luster to the name of Oklahoma.