

Doctor to the Omaha

by Ted Saxton



- 1 There was something extraordinary about the dark-haired woman who graduated from the Women's Medical College in Philadelphia in 1889. At a time when there were few women doctors, Susan LaFlesche was the first Native American woman to graduate from medical school.
- 2 Susan was proud of her achievement, and she had no doubts about what she would do now. Susan would return to her tribe, the Omaha, and their reservation in Nebraska. There she would dedicate her life to helping her people as a doctor.
- 3 Twenty-four years earlier, on the same reservation where she was now returning, Susan LaFlesche was born. It was a time of great change for Native Americans. The buffalo herds were disappearing from the Great Plains, and the traditional Native American way of life was vanishing too. Like other Native Americans on the Plains, the Omaha signed a treaty giving up most of their hunting ground. The reservation they lived on had only three hundred thousand acres.
- 4 Susan's father, Iron Eye (or Joseph LaFlesche), was chief of the Omaha. He strongly believed that his people would survive in the changing world only if they could adapt to new ways. He built and lived in a wooden, two-story frame house instead of a traditional earthen lodge or teepee. He began to farm the land. Iron Eye wanted other Omaha to live in such houses and become farmers too. Some followed his lead, but many preferred the traditional ways.
- 5 Iron Eye was eager for his children to adapt to a different way of life. In this effort he did not give Susan an Omaha name. None of his daughters received the traditional Omaha tattoos on their foreheads and throats either. Iron Eye sent all his children to the mission school on the reservation. It was a rule at the school that students use English instead of their own language, Omaha. Susan worked hard to master reading and writing in this language, and she made good progress.

6 But life on the reservation was hard. As the world changed around them, the Omaha encountered new germs, and they ate unfamiliar foods. Sickness was widespread. There was a government doctor on the reservation, but Susan noticed that he did not seem to care much about his patients. It was also no surprise that many Omaha preferred the traditional remedies of their own doctors. As Susan observed these problems, an idea about what she would be as an adult began to form in her mind.

7 In 1879 when Susan was fourteen, she traveled east to study at the Elizabeth Institute for Young Ladies in New Jersey. This was her first time away from the prairies. The new world she was entering seemed awesome and unfamiliar, but Susan met the challenge with courage. She studied hard. All the while, she was learning how to live and adapt in this new world. She told people about the Omaha with pride, explaining that all Native Americans deserved fair treatment. After successfully finishing her classes at the school, she won a scholarship to the Hampton Institute in Virginia. It was while attending classes in Virginia that she made her life-altering decision. She would train to be a doctor.

8 Susan arrived at the Women's Medical College of Pennsylvania in Philadelphia in October 1886. At first she was homesick. She also worried that she would be unable to keep up with the demanding workload of medical school. But Susan was strong-willed and hardworking, and it was because of these qualities that she graduated in the top half of her class. Susan was proud of her accomplishment, but she regretted that her father never saw her graduate. Iron Eye had died the year before.

9 After graduating Susan returned home to the prairie. There was much work for her to do. At first, she was the school doctor at the Omaha reservation, but she soon became the government doctor for the whole reservation. She had more than one thousand patients, and they were scattered all over.

10 It was a tough life. Some patients came to see her, but usually Susan went to them either on foot or by buggy. Sometimes she would set out early in the morning and return home exhausted late in the evening. Even in the snow and bitter cold of winter, she would ride out again to tend caringly to the sick.

11 Over the next five years, Susan LaFlesche

treated hundreds of patients for serious illnesses such as cholera, dysentery, and typhoid. She also did her best to explain to the people how they could keep themselves healthy so that they would not need medical attention. Often on her travels, she would dream about having a hospital built on the reservation. However, there never seemed to be enough money to make her dream come true.

12 Eventually, the punishing work began to take its toll. Susan became ill more frequently, and late in 1893, she had to resign because of her health. Susan rested for a few months and it was during this time that she met Henry Picotte, a Native American of the Sioux tribe. They fell in love and married the following summer.

13 Susan began to practice as a doctor again after the birth of their first child. There were now new settlers on the reservation as well as Native Americans. These residents rented land from the Omaha. Susan treated everyone equally. When people needed help, she helped them.

14 Susan was faced with yet another challenge in 1905 when Henry died, leaving her with two sons. The adjustment was difficult, but Susan did not stop working. That same year, she became a medical missionary to the Omaha tribe. Along with her medical work, Susan campaigned vigorously for health reform. She spoke out on behalf of her people, fiercely defending their right to be treated as "independent and self-reliant." In 1910 she went to Washington, D.C., and lobbied against government regulations that interfered with the Omaha people's ability to lease their land and receive payment.

15 As Susan battled for her people's rights, she won another battle in 1913 that she had started several years before. Even though money was scarce, Susan never gave up the fight to have a hospital built on the reservation. At last the community raised enough money, and the hospital was built. It opened in 1913, two years before her death.

16 Susan LaFlesche Picotte was a link between the new and the old ways for her people. As her father wished, she lived in the changing world and learned its ways. She used what she learned to benefit her people and to help them adapt to the new world. But she never forgot who she was—an Omaha. Toward the end of her life, Susan wrote newspaper articles about Omaha legends and customs. After her death much of her funeral was conducted in the Omaha language.

COMPREHENSION

Write the letter of the best answer to each question.

- 1 What was special about Susan LaFlesche?
 - a She was the first woman ever to graduate from medical school.
 - b She was the first Native American ever to graduate from medical school.
 - c She was the first Native American woman ever to graduate from medical school.
- 2 Which sentence best shows Iron Eye's attitude?
 - a He believed that the traditional ways were best and insisted his daughter have an Omaha name.
 - b He completely rejected the traditional ways and sent his daughters to a school in Omaha, Nebraska.
 - c He thought the Omaha would have to learn new ways in order to survive.
- 3 Why was sickness so widespread on the reservation?
 - a The diet was poor.
 - b There was an outbreak of serious disease.
 - c The Omaha had been exposed to new illnesses.
- 4 Which description best fits Susan when she left the reservation for medical school?
 - a Angry at the way her people were treated
 - b Nervous and shy
 - c Brave and determined
- 5 When Susan became the reservation's doctor, why was the job so hard?
 - a She was the only doctor treating many patients over a huge area.
 - b The government objected to her appointment as reservation doctor.
 - c The Omaha did not want her to be their doctor.
- 6 Why did Susan resign from the job?
 - a She married Henry Picotte.
 - b She had been ill.
 - c She was offered a job as a medical missionary.
- 7 Which statement was true of Susan when she started treating people again?
 - a She treated some people outside the reservation.
 - b All her patients were on the reservation.
 - c She treated only the Omaha.
- 8 After her husband died, how did Susan change her work?
 - a She worked even harder at practicing medicine and in defending her people's rights.
 - b She retired to spend more time with her family.
 - c She stopped practicing medicine and turned to other ways of helping her people.
- 9 Which sentence best summarizes the life of Susan LaFlesche Picotte?
 - a She acted as a bridge for her people between traditional Omaha ways and the ways of a changing world.
 - b She battled to do away with all the traditional ways of the Omaha and to replace them with the new ways.
 - c She worked to keep the old ways alive, believing that Native Americans should continue to live the way they always had.

LEARN ABOUT WORDS

VOCABULARY

- A** You can often tell the meaning of a word by reading the words around it.

Look at each number in parentheses. Find the paragraph in the story with the same number. Then find the word that fits the given meaning. Write the word.

- 1 area of land set aside for people to live on (2)
- 2 change to be suitable to new needs (4)
- 3 came into contact with (6)
- 4 cures and medicines (6)
- 5 requiring a lot of effort (8)
- 6 extremely tired (10)
- 7 tried to persuade lawmakers (14)
- 8 carried out a campaign to persuade government officials (14)



VOCABULARY (continued)

- B** A word may have more than one meaning.

Look at each number in parentheses. Find the paragraph in the story with the same number. See how the word in **bold type** below is used in the paragraph. Decide whether it has meaning **a**, **b**, or **c**. Write **a**, **b**, or **c**.

- 9 treated** (11)
a tried to cure
b gave someone something nice
c acted or behaved toward someone
- 10 practice** (13)
a do an activity repeatedly to get better at it
b do the work of a doctor or a lawyer
c act habitually in accordance with something

WORD STUDY

- C** The fox was **in the henhouse**.
I pointed **to the picture**.

The words in **bold type** are prepositional phrases. Every prepositional phrase begins with a preposition (such as *in* or *to*) and ends with a noun. Some other common prepositions are *at*, *by*, *for*, *into*, *of*, and *up*. If the words in **bold type** in the sentences below are prepositional phrases, write *PP*. If they are not, write *No*.

- 11** Susan grew up **on the reservation**.
12 The newcomer was nervous when he arrived **in the big city**.
13 The young student studied hard **at school**.
14 Susan paid attention **to her teachers**.
15 **For a week** the newly arrived student was homesick.
16 The doctor had **more than one thousand patients**.
17 The new hospital opened two years **before Susan's death**.
18 She was a great leader **of the Omaha**.

- D** Some other common prepositions are *before*, *after*, *over*, *under*, *about*, and *like*.

Each sentence contains two words in **bold type**. If the two words are prepositions, write *Prep*. If they are not prepositions, write *No*.

- 19** She rode **under** the bridge and **over** the meadow.
20 Jasmine liked to relax **at** home **after** a long day.
21 They **fell** in love and married **that** year.
22 My cat **guards** the house **when** I am away.
23 We live **in** the town **above** the river.
24 Bea and Shana walked **around** the park looking **for** Katy.
25 Please do not waste **my time**!
26 I jumped **into** the pool **after** lunch.

- E** They served *peas and carrots*.
Would you like to *eat now or wait awhile*?

The words *and* and *or* are conjunctions. Conjunctions are words that are used to connect other words or groups of words. In these examples the word *and* connects the words *peas* and *carrots*. The word *or* connects the phrases *eat now* and *wait awhile*. Other common conjunctions are *but* and *for*. Read the sentences below. The words or word groups that need to be joined are in *italic type*. Choose the conjunction that makes the most sense. Write the conjunction.

- 27** *The lessons were difficult*, (but, or) *she studied hard*.
28 *The girl sang*, (or, and) *the boy played his guitar*.
29 *I have to work*, (or, for) *I need the money*.
30 She wanted to become *a lawyer* (but, or) *a doctor*.
31 *Susan* (but, and) *Carla* went to the park.
32 *I would like to talk longer*, (for, but) *I must leave now*.
33 I do not know whether *to go* (or, for) *stay*.

Comprehension

- | | |
|-------------|-------------|
| 1 c | 6 b* |
| 2 c | 7 b |
| 3 c | 8 a* |
| 4 c* | 9 a* |
| 5 a | |

If you missed any of the answers marked with a star (*), go to **Skill Builders Card** 217. Then come back to the Brown level.

Vocabulary

- | | | |
|----------|----------------------|---------------------|
| A | 1 reservation | 5 demanding |
| | 2 adapt | 6 exhausted |
| | 3 encountered | 7 campaigned |
| | 4 remedies | 8 lobbied |
| B | 9 a | 10 b |

Word Study

- | | | |
|----------|--------------|--------------|
| C | 11 PP | 15 PP |
| | 12 PP | 16 No |
| | 13 PP | 17 PP |
| | 14 PP | 18 PP |

If you missed three or more answers in Part C, go to **Skill Builders Card** 125. Then come back to the Brown level.

- | | | |
|----------|----------------|----------------|
| D | 19 Prep | 23 Prep |
| | 20 Prep | 24 Prep |
| | 21 No | 25 No |
| | 22 No | 26 Prep |

If you missed three or more answers in Part D, go to **Skill Builders Cards** 123–124. Then come back to the Brown level.

- | | | |
|----------|---------------|---------------|
| E | 27 but | 31 and |
| | 28 and | 32 but |
| | 29 for | 33 or |
| | 30 or | |

If you missed two or more answers in Part E, go to **Skill Builders Card** 135. Then come back to the Brown level.