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♦ Famous American Indians ♦

DR. SUSAN LA FLESCHÉ

The First Indian Woman Physician

By VINA SMITH, Chemawa Student

Susan La Flesche was born in a tepee on an unsettled Indian Reservation in Nebraska before it became a State. She was the daughter of Chief Joseph La Flesche, last chief of the Omahas. From him she and her sisters inherited a great strength of character as well as a love for the beautiful. He was considered one of the greatest of Indian chiefs. He had the reputation of being a just man at all times. Once when he knew that his neighbors, the Winnebagos, were starving he moved them to his own reservation, sharing with them his food and land. He then secured governmental ratification for his act.

One of her sisters became an authoress, going by the Indian name of "Bright Eyes." She did much to arouse a feeling of fair play for the Indian.

Susan La Flesche stands out unique among the American Indians because of the short time it took her to reach the highest civilization. Her keen mind and unlimited courage were the source of her rapid advancement. At the age of thirteen, when she had finished her elementary education, in first a mission school and then a government school, she was taken East to Elizabeth, New Jersey, with her sister, "Bright Eyes," where they were placed in a preparatory school for three years. She next graduated from Hampton College, and then entered the Philadelphia Woman's Medical College, where she graduated two years later at the age of twenty-two. She received first honors in a class of one hundred.

After a year of hospital service she was appointed as government physician among her people, the Omahas. She ministered night and day, suffering very much herself for four years, from the exposure and hardships she received during her long rides over the reservation. Her health then broke and she was compelled to resign. Going to Bancroft to recover she was sought by both whites and Indians who admired her proficiency.

In 1894 she married Henry Picotte, a French Sioux Indian, intending to give up her work and live quietly,

but the needs of her people were ever before her and so she soon resumed her practice and gradually she assumed a spiritual leadership as well. She worked so unselfishly and thoroughly in relieving and uplifting the Indians that she had a great deal of influence in the community. Besides her practice she raised and trained her two boys carefully, cared for her sick husband, conducted services in her little mission church. She did a lot of temperance work and performed her social duties, and above all, she never lost her close relationship with her tribesmen. She led a delegation of her people to Washington, D. C., where they protested against the sale of liquors among the Indians. The government then prohibited it forever among the Indians.

Henry Picotte, her husband, died in 1905, leaving her to care for her two sons, Caryl and Pierre. She built an attractive home and spent the rest of her time as a medical missionary among the Indians.

She was very much interested in helping lectures, conventions, institutes and women's clubs. She held important positions in state and national federations. Her particular interests were society and sociological matters. Later she confined her work to the Presbyterian Hospital at Walthill. This hospital is a fitting memorial to such a woman as she. It is located and equipped as she planned. It is one of her "dreams come true" for her people.

Home and hospitality were very dear to her. Over her fire place she had "East, West, Home's Best." Her home was beautifully furnished and modern, a great contrast to the tepee and buffalo hunting. "Plenty of air and sunshine—that is nature's medicine," said Dr. Picotte, "but I have hard work to make my people understand this."

In spite of tribal prejudices and physical limitations she was recognized as the person having the most influence among her people. Just before her death in 1915 she said in answer to words of commendation: "I cannot see how any credit is due me. I am thankful I've been called and permitted to serve. I feel blessed for that privilege above all measure."

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