Allotment, Alcohol, And The Omahas

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"The welfare of the Omaha is close to my heart . . . I am living among them and I know what I am writing about," wrote Noah La Flesche in a 1916 letter to the Superintendent of the Omaha School, the field official in charge of the Omaha agency. In a passionate tone, La Flesche went on to plead: "If we had a man who would take the drunken Indian, fine him, put him in jail till he sobered up, drinking would not be so bad. This is going to ruin the Omaha. I ask you to help us . . . we are in great need of help. Help us before another crime is committed."1

A member of the Omaha tribe, the “Upstream People” of northeastern Nebraska, Noah had witnessed cultural alienation and social decay on the Omaha reservation following the rapid rise of alcohol abuse in the wake of socioeconomic convulsions set in motion by the allotment of land in severalty in the early 1880s.

I have drawn upon the records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and archival materials at the Nebraska State Historical Society, Lincoln, to, first, provide an overview of the devastating changes following the implementation of the Omaha Allotment Act of 1882. Then my focus shifts to the Omahas’ responses to the ensuing alcohol abuse. As it turned out, Omahas embraced temperance and prohibition, but also adopted an indigenous approach to reform.

Fur traders brought alcohol to the Missouri Valley in the early 1800s. Stories of how traders plied Native peoples with alcohol abound in contemporary accounts, which also reveal the baneful impact of alcohol on the Indians, often resulting in cultural loss and destitution.2
Scholars agree that alcohol abuse was another tragic consequence of the lopsided Indian-white relationship. In general, scholars from most disciplines reject the “firewater” myth, the notion that American Indians are particularly susceptible to the ill effects of beverage alcohol. Alcohol abuse was not rooted in “Indianness,” whether culturally or biologically understood. In fact contemporary scientific research has proven that inebriated Indians and European Americans require comparable amounts of alcohol to achieve intoxicating blood levels; both racial groups also suffer the same levels of memory and verbal impairment.

Since alcoholism is a behavioral disorder, the causes of Indian drinking are to be sought in historical, social, and economic circumstances. Few scholars, however, have paid much attention to the responses of the Native peoples to this social disease.

Like other tribes of the central Plains, the Omahas suffered the influence of pede’ni, which literally means “firewater.” By the mid-1850s, heavy drinking afflicted a significant number of Omahas, enough to prompt the tribal council to support Chief Joseph La Flesche’s proposal to eliminate drinking among his people. Some twenty years before young La Flesche’s commitment to temperance had been strengthened when he witnessed the senseless murder of an innocent Indian by a drunken Omaha.

He believed that the survival of the Omaha nation rested on selective adaptation of the best elements of Euro-American culture—and heavy drinking was clearly not one of them. At the start of the campaign against drinking La Flesche or Iron Eyes (E-sta ma-za) thundered: “My children, drink is bad for the red man. We need to know what we are doing . . . We will have no more drink while Joseph lives.”

Under La Flesche’s leadership a police force of thirty men—an updated version of the soldiers’ society—was organized and uniformed. Besides maintaining order, they were to inflict corporal punishment on any drunken Omaha, regardless of the offender’s rank. According to one well-known story, Two Crows, himself a member of the police force, after one drinking bout summoned his comrades to inflict on him the prescribed punishment. Insisting that they set aside their hesitation, he bared his back and endured the whippings.

In 1864 the Omahas again demonstrated their commitment to temperance. The Winnebago tribe, having just made the move from Minnesota to the Dakota territory, suffered a crop-killing drought in the summer of 1863. Threatened by famine, they asked the Omahas for permission to move some of their people to the Omaha reservation. The Omahas agreed, if the Winnebagos would accept by-laws drawn up by the Omaha tribal council. The first by-law read: “Any member of said tribe of Winnebagoes who may be found intoxicated or in whose possession any spirituous liquors may be discovered, shall be severely punished, whether chief or otherwise.”

Such close control largely succeeded in checking the spread of this social disease. In his 1881 annual report, the field official of the consolidated Omaha and Winnebago agency, Arthur Edwards, lavished praise on his charges; they are, he wrote, “strictly temperate.” This situation persisted at least until La Flesche’s death in 1888. A year later, the annual report of the Indian agent indicated that there was still “little, if any drunkenness among the Omahas.”

This level of temperance was indicative of the Omahas’ relative success in accommodating whites’ physical and cultural intrusions. Guided by a practical, self-reliant ethos—one encapsulated by the Sacred Legend’s refrain, “and the people thought” —the Omahas chose selective adaptation. In the spirit of u’kite (“tribe” or as a verb, “to fight”), they requested the government in 1868 to implement the allotment provisions of the 1854 treaty so as to avert the possible threat of removal to Indian Territory. Soon after the Omahas began plowing fields, building frame houses, and tending livestock, though they still practiced cooperation and mutual hospitality.

Despite the drive for “civilization,” some traditions persisted. The Omaha’s transition
from agriculture-hunting to small-scale subsistence farming did not lead to full assimilation. In the mid-1870s Quaker visitors noted that many Omahas shuttled, depending on the weather, between their frame houses and warmer tipis. The people continued to hunt in the old way, which included the erection of hu'thuga, or structured camp for the biannual buffalo hunt. Even after the semiannual ritual ended in early 1877, the Omahas refused fully to mimic the white way of life. In 1880, the ethnologist Reverend J. Owen Dorsey observed that fewer than 175 members of the tribe (the total population was approximately 1100) had land under cultivation. Though white education had been available on the reservation since 1854, by 1879 an Indian agent counted only 131 literate Omahas.

Even Chief La Flesche, the leader of the progressives or “young men’s party,” eschewed total assimilation. Though he built one of the first frame houses on the reservation, he lived in a tipi during the bison hunts. To enforce his ban against drinking, he resorted to a traditional punishment, flogging. Later he embraced Christianity but never gave up polygyny. La Flesche endorsed European-style farming, allotment, education, and later citizenship for his people, but all of this was to be carried out “through accommodation to Omaha traditions, not through assimilation to white ways.”

ALLOTMENT AND DISPOSSESSION

In 1878 La Flesche and fifty-one other progressives petitioned President Rutherford B. Hayes for individual legal titles to their land. The white man’s law, they believed, could help them avoid suffering the same fate as the Poncas, who had been forcibly removed the previous spring despite having taken allotments and started farming. The desire to preserve cultural and political independence was clear: “This great country that we called our own . . . is fast filling up with white people . . . we want to stay here as long as we live . . . We ask that Congress . . . secure to us and our children what belongs to us and treat us like men and not like little children.”

The demands of the progressives, however, only represented a minority view. One scholar estimated that on the eve of the passage of the Omaha Allotment Act only one-fourth of the tribe supported allotment. Another one-third vehemently opposed it, while the rest, although not in favor, went along with the proposal. Why some opposed the process was undocumented; perhaps they recognized that allotment would break down the communitarian ethic, open “surplus” lands to white settlement, and eventually result in the alienation of much reservation land.

Omaha opposition, however, did little to halt the Allotment Act. The progressives triumphed, albeit with unexpected, tragic results. Though touted as a way to halt the threat of dispossession, allotment led to destitution and dissipation. The division of land ended the sway of temperance. For white reformers and the Office of Indian Affairs (OIA), this attempt to bring civilization to the Indians did little to bring them closer to republican citizenship.

Much of the trouble stemmed from liberal land sale and leasing policies. Although the Dawes Act prohibited leasing during the trust period, policymakers in 1891 allowed Native Americans who “by reason of age or other disability” could not work the land to lease it for three years for farming and grazing purposes or ten years for mining. By the end of the century, leasing was also extended to able-bodied Indians who could or would not use their land.

On the Omaha reservation, leasing policies wrought disaster. Rather than promoting self-support and industry, they encouraged Indians to live off rents, and often leasing was the first step toward the sale of Indian land. The first signs of trouble surfaced in 1891. Robert H. Ashley, the OIA agent, reported that some Omahas, preoccupied with leasing, “have badly neglected their crops” while “whiskey makes sad havoc.” The next year Ashley alerted his superiors to the “alarming extent”
of the use of intoxicants. By early September 1892 the OIA inspector William W. Junkin reported that "a majority of the [Omaha] Indians have leased their land and are in the condition of, idleness and poverty."19 One unidentified Omaha Indian commented: "Nearly all of the land is leased, and most of the Indians have scarcely a thing to show for the rent they receive."20

Such destitution, wrote Dr. Susan La Flesche, the first Native American woman to receive a M.D. degree, stemmed from the fact that "the men spent their rent money for liquor" while "no machinery was bought, no household improvements were made, and complete demoralization ... prevailed." "The Indian," as Dr. La Flesche recalled, "lived only from day to day" and "made no provision for the future."21 Indeed, as that unidentified tribal member put it: "Leasing is ... ruining the Omahas in every way."22

Speculators often leased Indian lands at very low rates, ostensibly for grazing, but later subleased them at much higher rates to white farmers. Omahas received "few dollars of the lease money," according to one OIA inspector.23 Leaseholders not only underpaid Omaha lessors but were sometimes delinquent in their payments and did not keep other promises.

One Omaha lessor, George Miller, testified that the lessee had promised to pay him $200 for 240 acres, but six months later, Miller had received only two horses and no cash. Another lessor, John Springer, suffered a similar fate. He had leased two hundred acres of his land, but later discovered that, without permission or additional compensation, his lessee had sublet seventy additional acres to another Euro-American.24

Many Omahas could not secure compensation for their losses. Allotment had left the Omahas in an anomalous situation. Though subject to Nebraska laws, because they paid no taxes, they were discouraged from using state and local courts and were denied basic services. Unsatisfied with their precarious legal situation, some of the progressive leaders, including Councilmen Sindahaha, White Horse, and Two Crows, demanded self-government in the mid-1880s. Despite the strenuous opposition of some conservative councilors and supporters, the OIA granted a measure of self-rule. All agency employees were discharged and almost the entire agency complex, including the shops, school houses, and mills, was turned over to the Omahas. But as early as 1887 OIA officials rescinded their decision; most of the complex was in disrepair and the Omahas did not have the technical skills to maintain it.25

Native Americans often leased land to whites to pay debts or secure loans. Some desperate Indians leased land to whites without obtaining Indian Office approval.26 Others, egged on by their prospective lessees, occupied unallotted land and, in clear violation of OIA regulations, leased it out. By 1892, 90 percent of the Omahas had leased all or part of their lands and were getting by on rent money.27 Unattuned to the intricacies of a money economy, many quickly raked up sizable debts and eventually had to sell their land.

Dispossession dramatically rose once the safeguard of inalienability was removed from trust allotments. In 1902 Congress allowed heirs to sell trust estates. The Burke Act of 1906 allowed owners of allotments whose trust period had yet to expire to dispose of their land. From 1907 onward, sick, disabled, and incompetent Indians could sell their interests. Both bureaucrats in Washington and agents in the field favored the sale of unused lands, so ownership changed rapidly. Allotment, by breaking tribal land into smaller holdings, soon resulted in lands too small to farm, forcing many heirs to sell their holdings by the beginning of the century.28

In 1909 the situation on the Omaha reservation took a turn for the worse. The findings of a competency commission led to the issuance of fee patents to more than two hundred Native Americans. Removing restrictions on Indian land alienation placated local whites who wanted more reservation land on the tax rolls of Thurston County, which had been created from former reservation lands. About a
third of those the commission forced to assume title to their land had earlier objected to the process. Within less than five years, ninety-five percent of the allottees had surrendered their deeds. 29

Often land grafters, including merchants, bankers, and liquor sellers in the neighboring towns of Pender and Homer, maneuvered inebriated Indians into fraudulent land transactions. Susan La Flesche recounted the story of Omaha Louis Levering, who lost his land after he signed away the title to Thomas Sloan, a mixed blood of dubious affiliation. Apparently Sloan, an attorney himself, was working in collusion with an Anglo-American real estate company interested in taking control of reservation land. W. E. Estill, a partner of Sloan’s, La Flesche claimed, had plied Victoria Wood Phillips with whiskey “to induce her to sell her land” and had misrepresented the exact amount she was to receive for the transaction. Then there was the case of Henry Parker. Estill had offered Parker whiskey to persuade him to sell forty acres of his land and had then defrauded Parker “out of a portion of the purchase price giving him a worthless note without security.” 30

Francis La Flesche, the Omaha ethnologist, attributed the general tragedy to the “lack of business training and experience” on the part of his people; he acknowledged that they “are not yet able to handle the large sums of money . . . received.” 31 One Indian, according to Susan La Flesche, sold his entire holdings for a mere six thousand dollars. Then he held a celebration where whiskey flowed freely, distributed money to his guests, and bought himself a few buggies. Within the year, he had spent all of the proceeds of the land sale. 32

Still, Francis La Flesche was more inclined to blame the Indian Office, which, he complained, had failed to provide the Omahas promised technical assistance and advice. 33 Francis’ and Susan’s sister, the activist Susette La Flesche Tibbles, offered the final verdict: “Indians may be worse off than before becoming citizens.” 34

For Native Americans, the loss of land left indelible psychological scars. Omaha Indians, according to OIA officials, typically squandered their meager earnings from leasing and the sale of land. OIA inspector William W. Junkin observed, “Leasing is very demoralizing to Indians; they receive a few dollars of the lease money, and squander it in gambling, drinking, and idleness.” 35 Such observations, however, failed to take into account the broader picture.

Indians who lost land were deprived of more than just natural resources. Since land represented existence, identity, and a place of belonging, and not real estate to be bought and developed, Omahas found that their whole way of life was now under full assault. Their culture and religion already discredited by the Americanization policy, their land and economic resources gone, and citizenship and political autonomy meaningless, some Omahas resorted to alcohol abuse. 36

OMAHA TEMPERANCE INITIATIVES

Contemporary scholars argue that heavy drinking is used as a means of coping with unpleasant emotions or situations and serves escapist functions. Alcohol gave the Native American a sense of superiority and confidence, albeit ephemeral in nature. Nancy Lurie even argues that by participating in this shared recreational activity, Native Americans were engaged in a means of “asserting and validating Indianness” in the absence of other means. 37 On the whole, the Indians’ deep sense of inadequacy and inferiority growing from their relations with Euro-Americans is considered to be the most important factor for the rise of alcoholism among some Native American tribes.

The availability of intoxicating beverages became a key element in the cycle of land sale, low self-esteem and morale, heavy drinking, and continued poverty. Francis La Flesche, in a letter to a nephew, observed that leasing, land sale, and the illicit traffic of liquor “have
done them [Omahas] more harm than anything that happened to them in their history.38

Some Omaha Indians refused to accept this cycle of dissipation and poverty, seeking to end the tragedy through prohibition and religious revival. In 1891 educated Omahas organized a law and order committee that provided names of whiskey traffickers and bootleggers to the reservation agent for subsequent legal action. One Euro-American visitor to the reservation observed that "their efforts are meeting with some success . . . several offenders have already been brought before the courts through the efforts of this committee."39

In the same year, Omahas, including Susan La Flesche, lobbied to enact prohibition in Thurston County, the area with the heaviest concentration of Omahas. All across the country local-option laws had become the rallying cry of national temperance organizations, particularly the Anti-Saloon League, which was active in Nebraska.40 But pro-temperance forces in Thurston County ran up against the chicanery of liquor dealers. Taking advantage of the Omahas' illiteracy, dealers issued them ballot tickets stamped "Against Prohibition." La Flesche and other supporters explained the tickets to the Omahas, but the liquor interests, supported by local politicians, had the edge. They told the Indians that, as citizens, they had the same rights as the white man and could drink all they desired. The laws against the sale and distribution of liquor to Indians—the Trade and Intercourse Acts—no longer applied to newly enfranchised Omahas. Enough Omahas ended up voting against prohibition to keep the county wet. Many of the anti-prohibition Omahas had apparently sold their votes to the whiskey peddlers.41

In 1892, Wajeppa, a successful Omaha farmer, hosted a rousing temperance meeting attended by leading Omahas, including members of the La Flesche family. Afterward Wajeppa passed a petition asking the Indian Office to fund the enforcement of existing anti-drinking laws from the proceeds of leasing unallotted tribal lands. The Indian agent wholeheartedly supported the proposal, but the OIA did not respond. Thirteen years would pass before the OIA secured the first appropriation from Congress to attempt to stop the sale of alcoholic beverages.42

In 1892 Congress banned the sale of liquor by both non-Indians and Indians on all reservations, but enforcement of this law was no easy task.43 Some Omahas, citing their right to drink whiskey, declined to testify against liquor dealers. Local officials and residents of the surrounding towns, fearing negative publicity or even bodily harm, also refused to testify. In any case, the twenty-five dollars and court costs charged convicted liquor peddlers deterred few and emboldened some.44

With hardly any restrictions, bootleggers in the nearby town of Bancroft openly sold whiskey to Indians. Liquor also flowed into the reservation from a number of white lessors who operated unlicensed saloons, such as one Susan La Flesche described as akin to "a fountain and the liquor wells from it as if from a spring."45

To combat the whiskey sellers, the Omaha tribal council in 1894 requested that the OIA revive the police force, which had been disbanded following Joseph La Flesche's death. The next year, the council pleaded with the visiting OIA inspector to remedy the "demoralizing state of their people, resulting from the excessive use of intoxicants." The council requested "the adoption of law or rule by which the present alarming state of drunkenness among them may be corrected." Finally, they repeated their request for a police force and offered to contribute five hundred dollars toward its establishment. Although the inspector concurred with the council, the Indian Office ignored the recommendations.46 Anti-liquor sentiment among the Omahas persisted, however. In 1897 educated, progressive Omahas supported the passage of the Meiklejohn Law. Early in 1896 the increasing use of alcohol by Omahas and other Indians had prompted Nebraska Third District Representative George D. Meiklejohn to
sponsor a bill to “prohibit the sale of intoxicating liquors to Indians providing penalties therefor[sic], and for other purposes.” Some 52 female and 183 male members of the tribe signed a letter to Commissioner Daniel M. Browning urging him and all “friends of the Indians” to help secure its passage. These Omahas acknowledged “the impossibility of restraining . . . Indians from its [alcohol] use”; apparently only coercive methods would work. The proposed bill, which became law on 30 January 1897, made it unlawful for anyone to sell or supply alcohol to allottees whose land was still held in trust, or to any Indian supervised by the government. The penalties for trafficking ranged from imprisonment for not less than sixty days to fines up to $200.00.47

The law clearly negated the citizenship provisions in the Dawes Act, which had ended federal powers of guardianship. Meiklejohn supporters argued that this inconsistency was unavoidable because federal district courts had ruled that the 1892 revised statute prohibiting the sale of liquor on Indian reservations was inapplicable in cases involving Indian allottees. Two years after the passage of the Meiklejohn Law the Commissioner of Indian Affairs reported that “the traffic . . . has been decidedly interfered with.”48

Trouble surfaced again in 1899, however, when the U.S. deputy marshals, sent to the reservation in 1897 to eliminate bootleggers, were removed by a spendthrift Indian Office. Bootleggers from Sioux City quickly swarmed the reservation in search of potential customers.49

Within a year Susan La Flesche wrote to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs pleading for the re-appointment of the marshals. “Of what use will be the money saved,” she asked “if our people are to be demoralized, mentally, morally and physically?” She recounted stories of drunken brawls resulting in deaths, women who pawned their clothing for drink, and “little children . . . reeling on the streets,” while families “suffered for food.” When she admonished some of the intoxicated Omahas, they retorted that “the government says we can drink again.” Apparently, they interpreted the pullout of the marshals as the end of anti-drinking laws.50

This incident also showed the intra-tribal conflict engendered by the progressives’ crusade. The Indian Office had previously fired a field official who, according to Susan La Flesche, had struggled effectively against liquor. In response to the claim that the official’s Indian defenders were “factionalists,” La Flesche retorted sharply: “The so-called ‘factional fight’ was between Right and Wrong . . . I know I shall be unpopular for a while with my people, because they will misconstrue my efforts but this is nothing, just so I can help them for their own good.”51

Susan La Flesche’s actions, like those of the rest of the anti-drinking faction, probably infuriated tribal members who favored freedom of choice. She gave shelter to the abused wives and children of drinkers. At other times the progressive-dominated tribal council consulted her before they submitted names of drunken individuals to the tribal attorney for federal prosecution. She spoke in support of politicians who wanted to prohibit the sale of liquor and extolled the efforts of OIA officials who arrested the whiskey peddlers. Convinced of the righteousness of her crusade, she minced few words and probably riled many on and off the reservation.52

Some of the resentment against Susan La Flesche reflected resentment against her family. Her sister Marguerite La Flesche Diddock, as an OIA field matron in the 1890s, had challenged traditional marriage patterns and pressured the Indian agent to suspend entitlements to those who resisted Euro-American conventions. Another sister, Rosalie, and her husband, Edward Farley, faced charges of mismanagement of tribal land and became embroiled in a bitter, protracted lawsuit. All three women were daughters of the man who had convinced the tribe to surrender lands in what most traditionalists saw as a betrayal of Omaha autonomy. The family’s half-blood
origins and their ties to the white world only served to deepen the rift between the progressives and traditionalists.53

Such intra-tribal tensions undermined the progressives’ efforts to stamp out insobriety. The failure of the Meiklejohn law was obvious. In 1902, the Indian agent complained that “simple fines and jail sentences have little terror to those engaged in this business.” Other critics noted that the light penalties did little to deter habitual drunkards. The final blow for the Meiklejohn law came in 1905, when the Supreme Court in Matter of Heffruled it unconstitutional as applied to Indian allottees. In this case, the Supreme Court overturned Albert Heff’s conviction for selling liquor to a Kickapoo allottee, nullifying the Meiklejohn Law. The court ruled that allotted Indians were no longer wards of the federal government and therefore were free to buy whiskey without restriction. The superintendent of the Omaha agency reported an increase in liquor consumption immediately after Heff.54

With the failure of federal measures, Omaha reformers now returned to local option regulation. Susan La Flesche again wrote to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, calling for deed restriction on the sale of liquor in towns created from former reservation lands. She believed such a ban would work since the Supreme Court had recently deemed it constitutional. In true progressive-era fashion, she singled out the railroad magnate developing former reservation lands—James J. Hill—as the champion of the liquor interests that would “erect saloons and sell liquor in these new towns [and] render the situation among my people doubly horrible.”55 Indeed, liquor was already flowing freely from fledgling towns into the reservation. In his 1903 annual report, the superintendent of the Omaha and Winnebago agency claimed that 90 percent of the alcohol imbibed on the reservations during the past year had originated in Homer, only a few miles north of the Winnebago reservation.56

An Omaha delegation to Washington followed up Susan La Flesche’s call for action in the next year, while, back in Nebraska, La Flesche took to the lectern, imploring her mixed audiences to support prohibition. Liquor, she declaimed, had “degraded the Omaha Indians.” She placed the blame squarely on saloon keepers and claimed that the Indians were innocent victims who truly desired to abandon drinking. Inviting her audiences to join the fight against saloons, she pleaded with them not to “straddle the fence” but to “vote for the right.”57

Sometime in late 1906 or early 1907 the Secretary of Interior finally approved the deed restriction on former reservation lands.58 If the Heff decision had left the federal government no way to keep liquor peddlers away from allotted Indians, the temperance provision could check the supply of liquor on the outskirts of the reservation, and, perhaps, keep the reservation dry.

Towns bordering the reservation that had already refused to license saloons or had licensed them to sell alcohol only to non-Indians supported deed restriction. The temperance crusade was picking up momentum in Nebraska, which had passed a law in 1906 prohibiting the sale of liquor to Indians, minors, and habitual drunkards. Enforcement had been hampered by the lack of adequate funds so the federal restriction was welcome. The restrictions did make it more difficult for Indians to obtain intoxicants.59

As early as 1907 a special liquor agent reported that “there is less real drunkenness among the Indians than formerly” and that they cooperated wholeheartedly in all efforts to prosecute bootleggers and liquor dealers. In a letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Dr. La Flesche echoed this optimism; she described her people as “working better” and “beginning to get interested in the church.” By 1908, John M. Commons, the OIA agent on the reservation, reported that there was a “growing sentiment amongst them [Omahas] in favor of sobriety, industry, and proper living in every respect ... only a minority remain drunken.”60

In mid-January of 1908 the tribal council offered to adjudicate cases of insobriety and
withhold all funds from any guilty party for a specific length of time. The Indian Office turned the council down, to keep councilors from meddling in “personal matter[s].” The reservation agent would, however, hold up the annuity monies and rents of drinkers—a course of action supported by the tribal council.

The agency of the Omahas notwithstanding, whiskey still flowed freely into the reservation. The temperance provision did not cover at least five nearby towns, including Bancroft, Pender, and Homer, which sat on largely non-Indian lands and had licensed saloons. Bootleggers and their Indian “runners” sold high priced whiskey to Omahas while other white merchants looked away, since drunken Indians were big spenders. Alcohol flowed from the saloons into the reservation, and with the appearance of the automobile the restriction became meaningless. The Superintendent of the Omaha Indian School reported in 1914 that the “liquor traffic seems to be in a flourishing condition.”

Liquor led to tragedies. In April 1914, a drunken young Indian man killed the elderly Henry Warner during a brawl. Later the killer committed suicide. The deaths spurred more letter writing, petitions, and meetings with OIA officials. In October 1915, Francis La Flesche wrote to Commissioner Cato Sells, urging him to appoint more capable liquor agents. The following spring a delegation visited the assistant commissioner of Indian Affairs, asking officials to take “immediate action” against the liquor traffic. Nothing happened, leading Francis La Flesche to accuse the OIA of failing in its responsibility.

**Spiritual Healing Through Peyote**

Contemporary research, however, indicates that prohibition generally does not decrease demand for drink, although it does reduce consumption. For some Indians, religious traditions provided a reason not to seek out liquor. Christianity offered some Omahas deliverance from insobriety. In 1908 Susan La Flesche, a devout Presbyterian, credited the Word of God for reducing alcohol consumption, relating the story of one grandfather “who drank very hard” but won his fight against “demon rum” once he began attending church.

Although Protestantism had some influence on the Omahas, the peyote religion rapidly gained a stronger following. Some Native Americans have successfully combatted alcoholism through revivals of Native spiritual movements such as the Sun Dance, the Handsome Lake Cult, and shamanic healing. In the early twentieth century a number of tribes in the West, including the Omahas, discovered peyotism, an aboriginal American religion, notwithstanding its superficial syncretism with Christianity. In the Omaha version, though adherents invoke the name of Jesus Christ and use Christian symbols such as the cross, copies of the Bible, and a heart-shaped fireplace representing Christ as part of the ritual, the etiology of peyotism is based upon traditional Indian beliefs. Adherents use Native paraphernalia such as gourd rattles, feathers, staff, and pipes, and consume parched corn in sweetened water, fruit, and dried sweetened meat, reminding them of their ancestors' mixed economy. More important, peyotists ingest buttons of the peyote cactus, attaining visions of shamanic images with healing powers.

Used in pre-Columbian Mexico, peyote spread northward to the American Southwest in the early eighteenth century, and by the 1870s the Kiowas and Comanches helped to diffuse peyote to the Great Plains. In the early 1890s the Comanche peyote leader Quanah Parker visited the Otoes, who eventually incorporated Christian elements into peyotism. One unidentified alcoholic Omaha visited the Otoes in the winter of 1906-07 and was told that the plant and its attendant rituals would cure drinking. Upon his return to the reservation, he and a few other alcoholic Omahas formed a mescal society. Traditiona
of baptisms during the early 1900s, remained small; in 1913 only about fifty had formally joined the church. In contrast OIA officials estimated that one-third of the tribe was using peyote buttons by 1914, and ethnologist Melvin R. Gilmore maintained that at least half of the tribe had adopted peyote by 1911.

Consuming peyote buttons produces a mild hallucinatory state that allows users to reconnect with their spiritual traditions. Peyotism’s ethical code encourages restraint, responsibility, and the avoidance of destructive practices, including the use of alcohol. In 1912 sixty-six members of the Omaha Mescal Society claimed that the peyote religion had “made a wonderful difference and change for the better.” In 1912 a delegation from the Omaha Mescal Society visited the Indian Office in Washington hoping to convince the federal government to lift the ban on the importation and use of peyote on Indian reservations. During their meeting with OIA officials, delegates testified how peyote had changed their lives. Daniel Webster confessed that before peyote, he had spent all of his earnings, including lease payments, on whiskey. With peyote he had stopped drinking and become a self-respecting citizen with an extensive farm and new home. Hiram Mitchell explained that the effects of peyote were unlike those of alcohol. Liquor made him so he “knew not what good was.” After selling some land, he had gone on a wild, continuous binge. But after using peyote, he had turned religious and could take care of his stock and farm. Harry Lyon explained that attending peyote rituals let him “think about my old ways at the past time [that] make me feel sorry . . . now I have quit this bad habit and now I have got a good living.”

The apparent transformation of these men impressed even such skeptics as Susan La Flesche, who had first called peyote a “great evil.” By 1914, she was willing to admit that the “mescale” or peyote button had “helped them [adherents] to keep sober,” and served as “a physiological antagonist to liquor.” Thus, peyotists gave up drinking, “began to build up their homes, to save their money and became more thrifty.”

Late twentieth-century research shows that peyote had little, if any, physiological effect in curbing the appetite for alcohol, but some present-day psychologists are convinced that peyote and the rituals surrounding it can serve as an effective form of indigenous therapy. By moving along the “Peyote Road,” following the ethical code, followers remain sober and responsible tribal members with their “Indianness” restored. Once they rediscover spiritual communion and faith in Indian religious values, they also regain the part of their identity they lost in the process of Americanization. Peyotism offers more than just an escape from alcoholism; it allows adherents to reconnect spiritually with their traditions.

All across the West, peyote adherents of various tribes since the early twentieth century have testified to the rehabilitative effect of peyote. The Omahas’ plea for tolerance, however, fell on deaf ears. The Indian Office refused to lift the ban against peyote, and even stepped up efforts to destroy buttons smuggled in via Texas. The Indian Office believed that peyotism led to the “loss of physical and mental vigor” and encouraged “idleness.” OIA officials held that peyote, like alcohol, was addictive, though according to contemporary research, peyote is neither a narcotic nor habit forming. J. S. Slotkin argues that the OIA opposed peyotism because it countered cultural conformity and “Americanization.” One Omaha peyote user told paternalistic OIA officials, “You think you are doing right when you try to stop us but I do not believe that you are doing the best for us.”

In 1915 another delegation of the Mescal Society, by then the Omaha Peyote Society (later the American Indian Church Brother Association and at present the Native American Church), tried to convince OIA officials to sanction their purchase and use of peyote. Individuals recounted their personal experiences, emphasizing the transforming power of the peyote. Delegate Stewart Walker admitted that he had sold off his land and spent his
money on liquor and gambling until he had sobered up one morning to find his baby dead. Peyotism had led him back to a good life. The delegation also submitted a petition signed by all members of the society, who swore that their organization “stood for better things in religion and higher morals,” and was instrumental in reclaiming them “from an abject slavery to alcohol” and reforming them into “creditable members of the tribe.”

In 1918 an Omaha delegation again visited Washington to defend their right to practice peyotism. They appeared before a subcommittee of the House of Representatives holding extensive hearings on a pending antipeyote bill. Also at the hearing was Francis La Flesche who testified that he “cannot talk about peyote without a feeling of gratitude” since the “Indians who have taken the new religion strive to live upright, moral lives.” La Flesche also quoted a letter from his late sister Susan. She had written, “They have taken to a new religion, and members of that new religion say that they will not drink; and the extraordinary part of the thing is that these people pray, and they pray intelligently, they pray to God . . . to bring them up to live sober lives.”

Together with other Native Americans and supporters, these Omahas helped to defeat the bill, but the antipeyote movement did not pass away. The 1920s would witness the passage of antipeyote laws in various western states, though not in Nebraska, where almost no Omaha adherents were prosecuted.

The Indians who defended peyotism in 1918 knew they would have to conform to the other religious institutions in America in order to survive. In August 1918, Oklahoma peyotists met at El Reno, Oklahoma, to incorporate the Native American Church in order to prevent national legislation against peyote and strengthen the status of peyote in the country. In 1921 the Native American Church was legally incorporated in Nebraska, helping Omaha peyotists to defeat a state antipeyote bill in that year. The Native American Church still maintains a visible following in the 1990s.

In the long run both the government and its Indian supporters failed to keep liquor off the reservation. Prohibition and Protestant campaigns for temperance reduced the level of alcoholic consumption, but a resounding success in the fight against “demon rum” eluded both the Indian Office and acculturated Omaha Indians. The divisions within the tribe made impossible any consensus on the proper course of action. Although both the top brass and the field officials of the Indian office demonstrated concern about alcoholism, lack of funding prevented them from translating good intentions into action. Euro-Americans in search of profit, assisted by some unscrupulous Omahas, also derailed control efforts.

Acculturated Indians did back the OIA, promoting prohibition and temperance. It could be argued that they adopted these measures to halt the erosion of tribal identity. But such remedies, though they helped check the traffic, did little to address the fundamental cause of the malady, the sociocultural losses that Native Americans confronted by the turn of the century. Temperance via peyotism, however, succeeded because of its revivalist appeal and traditional messages.

By adhering to the teachings of the “Peyote Road,” peyotists reconnected themselves with traditional precepts emphasizing an inner strength that allowed them to break their drinking habits. Unfortunately, OIA opposition to the diffusion and practice of peyotism hampered the movement and may have denied some the opportunity to end the cycle of despair and dissipation.

NOTES


9. Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Annual Report [hereafter CIA, AR], 1881, p. 188.

10. Robert S. Gardner to CIA, 28 June 1884, Reports of Inspection of the Field Jurisdictions of the Office of Indian Affairs, 1873-1900 [hereafter RIFJ], RG 75, BIA, reel 32, M-1016, National Archives and Record Services, Washington, D.C. [hereafter NA]. See also Samuel S. Benedict to CIA, 5 March 1883; RIFJ; Matthew R. Barr to CIA, 10 January 1884, RIFJ; CIA, AR, 1889, p. 239.


13. J. Owen Dorsey to Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 28 May 1880, Letters Received by the Indian Office, 1824-1881, Nebraska Agencies, 1876-1880 [hereafter Letters Received], RG 75, BIA, reel 527, M-234, NA; CIA, AR, 1879, pp. 708-09.


15. Petition of Fifty-one Omahas to President of U.S., 12 January 1878, Letters Received, reel 524, NA.


18. See McDonnell, Dispossession of Indians (note 17 above), pp. 43-44.

19. James McLaughlin to CIA, 19 June 1895, Ashley quoted in RIFJ; CIA, AR, 1891, p. 290, CIA, AR, 1892, p. 306, William W. Junkin to CIA, 14 September 1892, RIFJ.

20. Quoted in Francis La Flesche, "An Indian Allotment," The Independent 52 (8 November 1900): 2688.

21. Susan La Flesche to CIA, 28 August 1907, Central Consolidated Files [hereafter CCF], File 7312-07 (126) Omaha, RG 75, BIA, NA; Susan La Flesche to Thomas [sic] W. Jones, 27 January 1900, Letters Received by the Indian Office, 1881-1907, [LR1], RG 75, BIA, File 6049, NA.

22. La Flesche, "An Indian Allotment" (note 20 above), p. 2688.
23. Junkin to CIA, 14 September 1892, RIF; Arthur M. Tinker to CIA, 10 March 1899, RIF.
24. Exhibit D, Exhibit E, Junkin to CIA, 14 September 1892, RIF.
26. McLaughlin to CIA, 19 June 1895, RIF.
33. La Flesche, "Protection of Indian Lands" (note 31 above), p. 72.
35. Junkin to CIA, 14 September 1892, RIF.
38. Francis La Flesche to Caryl Farley, 3 February 1901, LFP, NSHS.
42. "Omahas Drinking," The Word Carrier 21 (August 1892): 21; see also CIA, AR, 1905, p. 27.
43. CIA, AR, 1894, p. 63; CIA, AR, 1892, p. 104; U.S. Statutes at Large 27 (1892): 260.
44. Boughter, "Betraying Their Trust" (note 25 above), pp. 201-02; Arthur M. Tinker to CIA, 22 December 1891, RIF, Report 105.
45. Susan La Flesche, letter, probably spring 1893, printed in "From Dr. Susan LaFlesche," The Indian's Friend 5 (June 1893): 3.
46. CIA, AR, 1894, p. 189; McLaughlin to CIA, 19 June 1895, RIF.
48. CIA, AR, 1895, p. 51; CIA, AR, 1897, p. 56; CIA, AR, 1894, p. 62; CIA, AR, 1895, p. 57; CIA, AR, 1899, p. 36 (quoted).
49. Bancroft Blade, 22 December 1899.
50. Susan La Flesche Picotte to Jones, 27 January 1900, LR1; CIA, AR, 1902, p. 52; Susan La Flesche, "Another Appeal," The Indian's Friend 12 (March 1900): 8.
52. Peggy Pascoe, Relations of Rescue: The Search for Female Moral Authority in the American West, 1874-1939 (New York: Oxford University Press, 1990), p. 135; Susan La Flesche, Diary, 26, 27 September 1910, 19 January 1911, LFP, NSHS.
55. Susan La Flesche to CIA, 16 October 1905, LR1, File 84470, RG 75, BIA.
56. CIA, AR, 1903, p. 203.
59. Boughter (note 25 above), "Betraying Their Trust," p. 205; Bancroft Blade, 1, 8 May 1908; William Johnson to CIA, 28 August 1907, CCF, File 73132-07 (126) Omaha; Walthill Times, 20 November, 11, 25 December 1908; "Winnebago and Omaha Agencies, Annual Report, July 1, 1910," SNSR.
60. William Johnson to CIA, 28 August 1907, CCF, File 73132-07 (126) Omaha; Susan LaFlesche to CIA, 20 November 1907, CCF File 90863 (162) Omaha; John M. Commons to CIA, 14 January 1908, CCF File 43935 (126) Omaha.
61. Commons to CIA, 14 January 1908, CCF.
62. "Testimony of Susan La Flesche Picotte" (note 32 above).
63. CIA, AR, 1903, p. 203; A. O. Wright to CIA, 16 November 1904, Winnebago Agency Subject Files, Box A-106, Federal Records Center, Kansas City.
64. Green, Iron Eye's Family (note 1 above), p. 152.
66. "Testimony of Susan La Flesche Picotte" (note 32 above). The document does not name the murderer nor indicate if he was Omaha or from another tribe.
67. Francis La Flesche to CIA, 30 October 1915, CCF, File 116515 (126) Liquor Traffic; La Flesche to CIA, 10 April 1917 (quoted), CCF, File 36342 (126) Omaha.
74. "Omaha Indian School," Annual Report, 1914, p. 3; "Mescal Society" (note 71 above), pp. 4-5.
77. "Testimony of Susan La Flesche Picotte" (note 32 above), Susan La Flesche, Diary, 3, 19 November 1910, LFP, NSHS.
81. F. H. Abbott to Omaha delegation, 25 March 1912, CCF, File 2989-1908 (126) Pt. 1-C


