

History of the Umo^hoⁿ

Aho! That^h it^h e udoⁿ!

Hello! It is good that you are here!

-UNL Omaha Language class See emblem

By Robyn Tait

Profile Link: Elise Harlan

Introduction:

To learn more about the real history and origins of the Omaha people, Tait examines historical sources that depict the complex relationship between Omaha Indians and whites. Although Omaha tribes thrived on trade relations with whites until the eighteenth century, by the nineteenth century, white dominance had created dire circumstances for tribes in which they often either perished or had to leave the city. The author also traces the incessant struggle between white settlers and native Omaha Indians that resulted in leasing and ultimately losing their own lands, a process that eventually led to the deterioration of traditional tribal cultures.

To give a glimpse into the history of the UMO^hoⁿ (Omaha) people, I will rely heavily on historian Judith Boughter's *Betraying the Omaha Nation, 1790–1916*. This is the first and, I believe, only comprehensive history of the Omaha to date, written and researched primarily as Boughter's master's thesis for the History Department at University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) under Dr. Michael Tate (Boughter xi). It is also the only book on the Omaha that Elsie Harlan endorsed ([insert WCAP interview of Elsie Harlan here](#)). In addition, I will draw from an interview with Robin Riddington (Omaha member), Dennis Hastings' *Blessing for a Long time: The Sacred Pole of the Omaha Tribe* (on the history of their culture and recent events of cultural renewal), an interview with Alice Fletcher (nineteenth century

ethnographer), and Omaha member Francis La Flesché's unprecedented, comprehensive study, *The Omaha Nation*.

Chief Blackbird, Waschinga Sahba

As this tribe was described as "friendly" and was situated on the banks of the Missouri, they came into a lot of contact with whites even in the very early days of trade on the river. According to Boughter, they had a good relationship with the French fur traders (4). In a 1794 account by French trader Jean Baptiste Truteau, the Omaha "were in a position to control all trade that passed by their village" (Riddington and Hastings 59). They were led by a great chief, Blackbird, described by Truteau as "a man who by his wit and his cunning has raised himself to the highest place of authority in his nation and who has no parallel among all the savage nations of this continent" (qtd. in Riddington and Hastings 59). This strength put them in a position to "define the terms of their own trade, as well as the trade of tribes further upstream" (Boughter 4). Chief Blackbird was also strong enough to stave off the incessant attacks from the Sioux to their north. Sadly, after a smallpox epidemic in 1800 claimed his and hundreds of other lives, "the tribe's influence and population quickly waned" (Boughter 5).



Rare Book and Special Collections Division, Library of Congress

Figure 1 : "Waschinga Sahba's Grave on Blackbird Hills" Karl Bodmer (1809 - 1893). Blackbird's grave is the little pinnacle at the very center of the picture, on the crest of the distant bluff (*Discovering Lewis and Clark*).

Mormons /Latter Day Saints

The Mormons, led by Brigham Young on their way to Utah in 1846, squatted illegally on Omaha lands for two years, their well-known "winter quarters." Though visiting The Mormon Trail Center at Historic Winter Quarters in north Omaha will give the visitor a good feeling for the tough times the Mormons faced, the museum gives almost no insight into the dire straits in which the Mormons left the Omaha. Several thousand Mormons used all available firewood and shot all the small game. The Omaha made an illegal treaty with the Mormons, letting them stay in return for armed protection from the Sioux. However, protection was rarely enough, and as the Omaha were "unsuccessful in recent hunts and unskilled as farmers . . . [they] either stole or starved" (Boughter 51). Loss of game and firewood meant many Omaha either stole Mormon cattle or starved or froze to death—that is, if they weren't killed by raiding Sioux (Boughter 52).

Interestingly, however, the Mormons left something that has become a positive force among the Omaha—their faith. Many Omaha, including Elsie Harlan Clark, relish the spiritual faith and direction provided by the Church of the Latter Day Saints (LDS).

Land Loss

In 1854, the Omaha “ceded to the United States their extensive hunting grounds” (Fletcher and La Flesche 33) and reluctantly moved north, closer to the feared Sioux, with promises of military protection that never came. Then in 1865, they were forced to sell “half of [their] reservation to the Winnebago” (Indian Relief Council 1). Land predations did not end here. Boughter describes their predicament:

White settlers and speculators resented Indian ownership of fertile northeastern Nebraska lands and, beginning in the early 1850s, used every means at their disposal to separate the Omahas from their real estate. Unfortunately, Nebraska senators and congressmen worked closely with land speculators to promote special legislation that – little by little, law by unfair law—encouraged Indians to lease and eventually sell most of their land. (3-4)

Sociological “Guinea Pigs”

Frequent friendly contact with the white settlers, combined with the willingness of several Omaha chiefs to embrace white culture, resulted in the Omaha becoming “guinea pigs” for several disastrous Indian programs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries (Boughter 4). These included land allotments, land leasing, and “competency commissions” (Boughter 4). Early



Figure 2: Omaha Scouts in 1865

ethnographer, Alice Fletcher, studied and lived with the Omaha for several years starting in 1881. In her report, she states, “their ancient tribal organization has ceased to exist, owing to changed environment and the extinction of the buffalo, and the immediate presence of the white man’s civilization” (Fletcher and La Flesche 33). Though sympathetic to the Indians, her enthusiastic support of land allotments, dividing reservation land up into individual parcels for each member, shows the limitation of her understanding of tribal ways. This disastrous allotment system was first tried on the Omaha, which resulted in half their land being gobbled up by eager white settlers, and then, five years later in 1887, the Dawes Act extended allotment to the whole country.

Whiskey

“Rival fur companies competing for pelts introduced the Omahas to liquor” (Boughter 28). Whiskey quickly became a necessary component of all trading deals, used by unscrupulous traders to get the Indians drunk and swing the deals their way. Alcohol has continued to be a force of dissolution and dissipation for the tribe, contributing greatly to poverty, malnutrition, violence, and death. As Boughter describes it, “Liquor robbed them of their dignity and destroyed the vitality of their traditional culture” (45). The role of white traders, bootleggers, and “grocers” in surrounding the reservation and illegally supplying Indians with liquor, while simultaneously taking advantage of them and stealing their goods and lands, cannot be ignored. It has been suggested that the Indian genetic makeup, being unused to alcohol, does not have a genetic map to enable the body to break down alcohol —thus increasing their susceptibility to it. A more cynical, but perhaps not less accurate evaluation is that “Native Americans drink too much because it is the only ‘game’ they can chase any longer” (Wagner email). Present day Indians suffer from intergenerational stress—many generations of post-traumatic stress. Is it any wonder they use alcohol and other drugs to self-medicate (Dr. Robins interview)?

Works Cited

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