

“Rosalie”

Karen M. Morin

The village of Rosalie, Nebraska—population 178—sits in the south-central portion of the Omaha Indian Reservation in northwest Nebraska. My interest in this town stemmed from some archival research I completed recently on the nineteenth-century Omaha woman Rosalie La Flesche Farley, for whom the town is named. A critical reading of the landscape of both the town and reservation allows a measure of understanding about the “postcolonial” situation of the Omaha today.

I first took notice of the village of Rosalie about ten years ago, when I began reading the La Flesche family papers at the Nebraska State Historical Society. The La Flesches were an elite Omaha family in the nineteenth century, notorious for being, depending on your point of view, “progressive” Indians promoting survival of their people by assimilation into the invading white culture and economy, or self-centered “sell-outs” of traditional Indian ways. I do not know how many places in Nebraska are named after women, but no doubt very few, and here was the town Rosalie named after an Indian woman, Rosalie La Flesche Farley (1861-1900), who was one of the daughters of the last traditional Omaha chief. It is the only place named after a member of the La Flesche family, even though three of Rosalie’s siblings as well as her father rose to greater relative prominence in United States history than did she.¹

It was actually Rosalie’s Irish-born husband Ed Farley who named the town after his wife. The land on which the town was platted was known as the “Farley Pasture,” the 18,000 acres of “surplus” land left over after individual allotments dictated by the 1887 *General Allotment* or *Dawes Act* were made. Rosalie and her husband managed this land, and how they did so remains a sore spot to the Omaha to this day.² The town’s main street is called “Farley Avenue”—there is also a Rosalie Avenue and two streets known by their Omaha names, *Ne Shu Da* and *Wa Shu Da* (Figure 1).

My research on Rosalie La Flesche Farley concentrates on her “postcolonial geographies,”³ as read through the letters she wrote to her brother Frank in the 1890s when he worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) in Washington, D.C. and she worked as Omaha tribal book-

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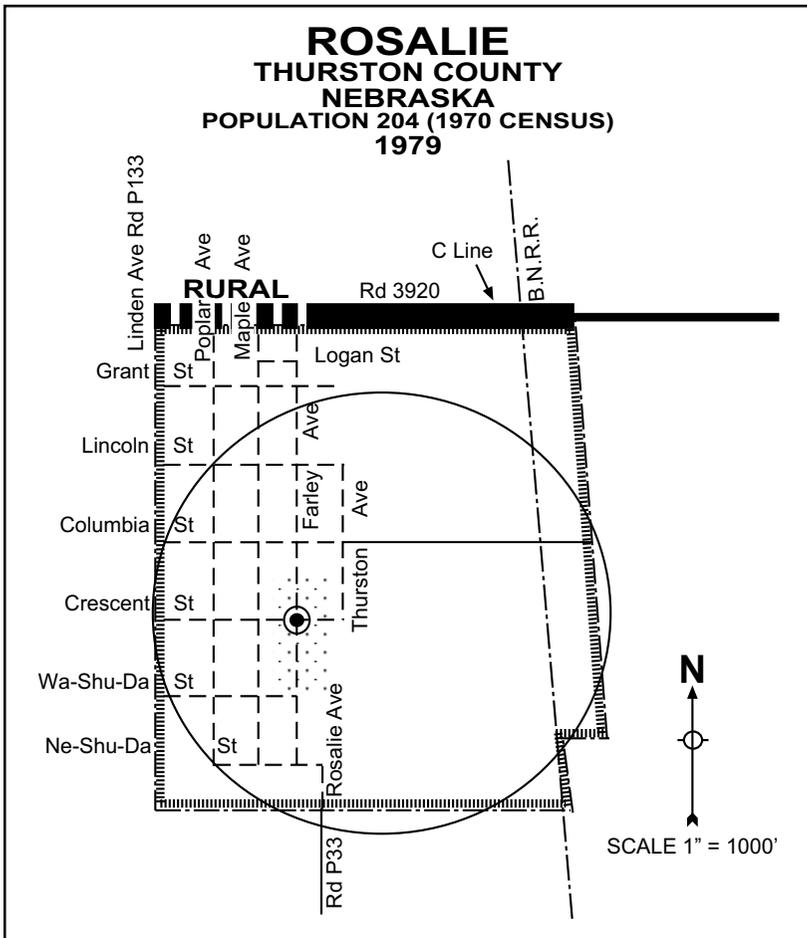


Figure 1. Map of Rosalie, Thurston County, Nebraska, 1979. This is a portion of a framed map that currently hangs on the wall of the Rosalie Post Office.

keeper and business manager. “Postcolonial geographies” here refers to the cultural affects of colonialism on Indian identity; in this case, the ways that Rosalie attempted to negotiate a range of competing cultures, economies, land tenure systems, and patriarchies in the face of American colonialism on the Omaha Reservation and the Great Plains more generally. Bringing women’s experiences, voices, and stories to our historical geographies of the American West and Great Plains—especially those of women who represent minority cultures or ethnicities—often requires reaching beyond “public” or published documentary sources to the women’s private sphere of letters and diaries. Interested more generally in the experiences of the Omaha during a post-allotment period when their land base was decimated by, among other things, new federal leasing laws, I

read Rosalie's archived letters with an eye toward examining her attempts to both "survive colonialism" and inhabit the complex, contradictory spaces of both "Indianness" and Victorian womanhood in the late-nineteenth century.

The Omaha Reservation in Colonial Context

The first time I drove to the Omaha Reservation looking for Rosalie was in the summer of 2000 and I was deeply struck by how prosperous it appeared—crops thriving and wave after wave of tall green, gold, and brown plants of corn, soybeans, oats, alfalfa, and barley fields interrupted only by roads and highways. The place looked alive, rich, *growing*, and, strangely enough, de-peopled. The large corporate-sized farms that had taken over most of the reservation produced a contradictory scene of both growth and emptiness. It was not until my second trip back to the reservation in December 2001, specifically with the intention of taking a closer look at the town of Rosalie, that I realized that the pattern set in place 100-plus years ago had persisted. Most of the reservation ranch and farmland is not in the hands of the Omaha, and most of the Omaha people living on the reservation reside in its three deteriorated towns—Rosalie, Macy (location of tribal headquarters, government offices, schools, and community buildings), and Walthill.

In the early 1880s, in an effort to derail the possibility of removal to Indian territory, the Omaha were used to "prove" the success of individual allotment of reservation land, despite the severe economic hardship it brought about and which the BIA and Congress ignored as they formulated the *Dawes Act*.⁴ Following allotments, the Omaha (a word that translates as "going against the current") were quickly pressured by land speculators and settlers to sell or lease their land, which they did. Without clear title or property rights, and prevented from mortgaging allotted land in order to acquire the capital necessary to make improvements, many Omaha were forced into leasing arrangements and lived off the rent of their lands. By 1892, 90 percent of the Omaha had leased all or part of their allotments and had in fact moved off of them, "getting by" on rent money.⁵

The effects of this duplicitous land alienation process in the nineteenth century are obvious today. The original reservation boundary "negotiated" in the mid-nineteenth century is essentially the same today, encircling 198,550 acres (compared to the 2.7-million-acre homeland the Omaha held before the forced treaties of 1854 and 1865). But as several Omaha describe it,⁶ reservation land today is a "checkerboard" of different and competing interests that even the county assessor has trouble keeping straight.⁷ The tribe collectively owns about 11,805 acres, and another 17,155 are allotted to individual Omaha, totaling 28,960 acres in trust—in contrast to the 169,590 acres sold off to whites. The latter are fee property administered and taxed by the state of Nebraska.⁸ It took me a while to comprehend how the Omaha could own and control so little of their

own reservation. Though the reservation boundary is legally meaningful in several regards,⁹ the *de facto* forced selling and leasing of Omaha homelands is a disgraceful part of American history and historical geography.

The Omaha Reservation sits picturesquely on the western shore of the Missouri River, overlooking the historic scene of the Lewis and Clark expedition. My recent travels there reminded me of how beautiful the Great Plains landscape is; the intimate relation of earth to sky, the browns of the earth against the white of the sky in winter, and the charm of austerity (Figure 2). Rolling hills, streams, and wooded areas of cottonwood, as well as various brushes and shrubs frame the scene. Farther west, low rolling hills hug the river and level off into agricultural land. Tribal land is mostly in row crops, but also in cattle grazing and forestry. As with much of the Plains, summers are hot and humid, marked by severe thunderstorms that bring most of the twenty-six inches of annual rainfall, and winters are severe. While an annual pow-wow brings visitors to Macy every August, the lack of any major transportation service on the reservation makes for few visitors.



Figure 2. Omaha Reservation, traveling east to Macy, Nebraska, on Hwy. 94, looking south. Photograph by Lana Miller.

With, of course, one exception. As is the story for an increasing number of Native Americans suffering from poverty and high unemployment, the Omaha own and maintain a gambling casino, complete with a motel and convention center. The casino brings what wealth there is to the Omaha, and in addition to tribal and federal government operations themselves, the casino is a major employer on the reservation. It opened in 1992 with 500 new jobs, 73 percent of which are held by Native Americans, with over 60 percent of those in managerial positions held by Omaha tribal members.¹⁰ Proceeds have gone to healthcare, old debts, and improvement of the water and road systems on the reservation, among other things.

The Historical Geography of Rosalie

Few casino benefits seem to have trickled down to the village of Rosalie, however. In its dereliction the village attests to a Plains farm economy that favors only large corporate operators. And the remnants of the village that remain—the post office and gas station—seem to bear almost no reference to its original namesake. It is “white.” While the place name survives, little reference to Omaha cultural history is apparent. Rosalie La Flesche Farley died at the age of thirty-nine of inflammatory rheumatism, leaving eight children, one under the age of three. Undoubtedly the long succession of lease disputes and legal battles she fought over the communal pasture did little for her health. While she and her husband had been profitably managing the pasture, there were many who believed that they took more than their share of the tribe’s profits; meanwhile land speculators and squatters did everything they could to discredit her among the Omaha and nullify her control of the land.¹¹ To this day, as tribal historian Dennis Hastings claims, there is an “offish” feeling amongst the Omaha toward her and the La Flesches.¹²

While 5,227 people live on the reservation, only approximately 37 percent or 2,040 of the registered 5,441 Omaha live there. Thus, the reservation is dominated by a white majority. Most of the Omaha who live on the reservation live in the administrative center of Macy, while 490 live in the town of Walthill and only four Omaha currently reside in the town of Rosalie. The remaining Omaha who claim tribal membership live and work in cities, primarily Omaha and Lincoln, Nebraska, and Sioux City, Iowa, twenty-six miles to the north—the reservation’s service center.

As with many towns on the Plains, Rosalie, or *Luezialie* in Omaha, emerged as a product of the railroad. The town was platted in 1906, and the Burlington-Great Northern line arrived there in 1907, bringing new businesses, travelers, and mail (twice a day). Rosalie became a shipping point for cattle, and for much of the twentieth century it was a town of cattlemen and women, and farmers. They built square houses (many of which still stand today) out of cottonwood. The town was officially incorporated in 1909 with 220 residents. One of the most significant features of Rosalie today is the grain elevator towering over the Chicago, Burlington & Quincy railroad line that continues to pass alongside the town on its north-south run through the reservation (Figure 3).

In 1983, the “Happy Gals & Guys 4-H Club of Rosalie” researched the history of their town and produced a booklet that stands as much for the “official” story of Rosalie as anything I have been able to find. Here, neither Rosalie La Flesche Farley, nor native people in general, are much mentioned; the brochure instead focuses on the social history of whites—mostly a large contingent of German settlers—who arrived at the turn of the twentieth century. Most were Wesleyan Methodists, with some Catholics and Lutherans sprinkled in, and one Jewish merchant. The booklet



Figure 3. Rosalie Grain Elevator as a stopping point on the Chicago, Burlington, & Quincy Railroad line. Photograph by Lana Miller.

details their schools, churches, types of entertainment, and civic events. In 1917, Rosalie High School produced its first graduating class that consisted of five girls. The school's last class graduated in 1982 and contained five boys. The peak year of enrollment in the high school occurred in 1942, in which twenty-four students graduated.

The "heyday" of the town was in the 1940s, following the 1930s Depression when storms of red dust from Oklahoma came almost daily, and when a "26-inch wagon box of ear corn wouldn't buy a sack of flour."¹³ By the 1940s, market days were Wednesdays and Saturdays, and a host of commercial entities thrived—an implement dealership, lumberyards, hardware stores, pool halls, a shoe repair, blacksmith, cream station, grocery store, bakery, butcher shop, restaurant, two banks, a hotel, and movie theater. An opera house had earlier operated until 1922, when it was turned into a feed store. Rodeos, fairs, and a harvest parade took place in the summer months. Entertainment focused on competition of one sort or another, such as greased-pig contests and goat-tie contests, and for the ladies—slipper-kicking contests.

The 4-H booklet concludes:

Rosalie is a small town now. 1983 sees a handful of businesses: two bars, a grocery, a TV shop, a hardware, two elevators, and Post Office. Many changes have taken place since 1909. Houses are still being built and businesses do go on. A small town is full of people who like being in a small town. That's true of Rosalie.¹⁴

The tone of this passage appeals to me, registering student confidences in the comforts and joys of small-town living. Though now only a gas station and post office remain, the dilapidated storefronts are in ghostly ruins, and the main street is deserted (Figure 4). The twenty-four or so blocks constituting the residential part of the town—in which many of the people are elderly—are filled with trailers, shacks, mud, and broken fences (Figure 5).

The story of Rosalie resonates with the much larger “obituary” of the rural Great Plains often relayed by journalists these days—collapsed home-



Figure 4. Rosalie’s Central Business District today. Photograph by Lana Miller.



Figure 5. “Tiny red cottage with big tree,” Rosalie, Nebraska. Photograph by Lana Miller.

steads, abandoned ranches, dying towns, and brain drains. According to a recent *New York Times* story,¹⁵ just to take one example, more than 60 percent of the counties in the Great Plains lost population between 1990 and 2000. As an outsider to the town I hesitate to rush to any particular conclusion about the future of Rosalie. Timothy Egan argues in the *Times* story, in any case, that as the “European failure” on the Great Plains accelerates, American Indians, accounting for significant population gain in the area, are “coming home.” Nebraska, for example, witnessed a 20 percent increase in its Indian population in the last decade. According to Egan, “there are [now] more Indians and buffalo on the Plains than any time since the 1870s.”¹⁶

Postscript

Much of the local news about the Omaha these days focuses on a new multi-million dollar Interactive Museum, to be called “New Moon Returning,” that the tribe is building on a bluff overlooking the Missouri River. Land ownership, of course, remains a crucial issue for the Omaha, with Congress now pressured to keep what little remains of Omaha land in Omaha hands via new inheritance laws.¹⁷ And the Omaha have had some legal successes in the past several decades, tenaciously fighting for the return of a small portion of the total acreage claimed by the tribe as the “Blackbird Bend,” for example.¹⁸

Not surprisingly, considering what is at stake, factionalism on the reservation has not abated. At Tribal Headquarters in Macy I picked up a flyer about the upcoming elections that denounced the current Omaha leadership in no uncertain terms.¹⁹ The writer criticized the leadership for being concerned with only their personal self interests. What struck me was how closely the language in the flyer resembled statements made about Rosalie La Flesche Farley, both in her own day and today.²⁰ By contrast, Rosalie’s self-representations emphasized her purposeful self-education, her shrewd though often self-deprecating business style, and concern for the future of the Omaha. She also described the many personal struggles she endured trying to make the best of a deteriorating, insecure situation.

In my research I found Rosalie’s business shrewdness, unwillingness to be intimidated, and self-education very appealing in the context of colonial relations and encroaching white settlement. She did manage to stay put on Omaha land and resist further encroachment by land speculators.²¹ And yet, such personal qualities do not appear as “properly” Indian but thoroughly Anglicized in their individualism. Complaints that she acted in her own best interests rather than for those of the group rely on a discourse of “proper” Indianness wherein one’s actions are measured by the extent to which they preserve tribal commonalities, welfare, and identity—a special standard against which whites were not and are not typically measured. My point here is that at the very least, the town named

after her serves as an important reminder that colonialism on the Great Plains happened, is happening, and it presents few options for those caught in its snare.

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Notes

1. See Norma Kidd Green, *Iron Eye's Family: The Children of Joseph La Flesche* (Lincoln: Johnsen Publishing Company, 1969).
2. Judith A. Boughter, *Betraying the Omaha Nation 1790-1916* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1998), details the highly complex history of Omaha land dispossession and the La Flesches various and conflicted roles in it. Also see David J. Wishart, *An Unspeakable Sadness: The Dispossession of the Nebraska Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1994).
3. Karen M. Morin, "Postcolonialism and Native American Geographies: The Letters of Rosalie La Flesche Farley, 1896-1899," *Cultural Geographies* 9 (2002): 158-80, discusses fully the concept of postcolonialism and how it might be applied to the U.S. case.
4. Boughter, *Betraying the Omaha Nation*, and Wishart, *An Unspeakable Sadness*.
5. Boughter, *Betraying the Omaha Nation*, 139.
6. Including Dennis Hastings, tribal historian and anthropologist of the Omaha Tribe of Nebraska in Macy, Nebraska, telephone interview with author 12 December 2001 and 25 January 2001; and Kenneth Lyons of the realty department of the Omaha Tribe of Nebraska in Macy, Nebraska, interview with author 26 December 2001.
7. Vivian Hartwig, Thurston County assessor, telephone interview with author 27 December 2001. When I told her that I would like to figure out who, exactly, owns and leases the various parcels of land on the reservation, her response was, "So would I."
8. Rick Clifford, realty specialist with the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Aberdeen, South Dakota, telephone interview with author 8 March 2002.
9. Omaha retain sovereign status over it as well as mineral or water rights—if there were any. They would, theoretically at least, also have an easier time reacquiring original trust land than other land.
10. Booklet published by the Omaha Tribe of Nebraska's public relations department, "Omaha Tribe of Nebraska: The Present ... The Past . . .," 1995: 3.
11. In "Postcolonialism and Native American Geographies" I discuss the complicated legal and other disputes in which Rosalie became embroiled, including accusations that she and her husband were retaining more than their share of the profits from the grazing operation they managed on the common pasture. White land speculators wanted this pasture, bringing a conspiracy suit against her (although it was her counter-conspiracy suit that finally won the day in the Nebraska Supreme Court). Rosalie's relative prosperity amidst the declining situation of most Omaha helped turn many Omaha against her, and it did not help that her brother worked for the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington, D.C. This gave her a degree of "insider" information to which other Omaha did not have access and which she used for her own personal gain.
12. Hastings interview, 25 January 2001.

13. Booklet published by the Happy Gals & Guys 4-H Club of Rosalie, "This is Your Life, Rosalie," n.d., ca. 1983.
14. Happy Gals & Guys, "This is Your Life, Rosalie."
15. Timothy Egan, "As Others Abandon Plains, Indians and Bison Come Back," *The New York Times* 27 May 2001.
16. Egan, "As Others Abandon Plains."
17. New inheritance laws are outlined in a brochure published by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Western Regional Office, Phoenix, Arizona, "Notice to Indian Land Owners," n.d., ca. 2000.
18. For an overview of legal disputes involving Omaha land, see Mark R. Scherer, *Imperfect Victories: The Legal Tenacities of the Omaha Tribe, 1945-1995* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999).
19. Flyer by Timothy F. Woodhull, Member of the Omaha Tribe, December 2001. He writes, "Soon, Omaha's [sic] will hear the same old speeches and promises of how certain individuals are going to do this and that for us for the next 3 years. And after people get elected into office, then they forget all these good words they said and start taking care of themselves, their families, ... [they] recklessly spend our precious money, and end up placing the future of our tribe at high risk and danger."
20. Tribal historian Dennis Hastings, interview with author 25 January 2001, asks why I bother studying Rosalie: "she didn't help the Omaha, was only concerned with herself ... those La Flesches ... they didn't help us."
21. Again, for a full narration of her story, see Morin, "Postcolonialism and Native American Geographies."