

## ONE

# Wano<sup>n</sup>she: **Soldier**

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War. No other human activity is as pivotal to the course of history, as decisive in its manifestation, as inhumane in its execution, as war. Yet conflict between humans is as least as old as human memory.

To the Umo<sup>n</sup>ho<sup>n</sup>, Omaha Indians, who had originated in the Great Lakes region of the North American continent, but had settled in eastern Nebraska by the eighteenth century, *kikína* (war) meant perpetual conflict with the Dakota Sioux, their formidable enemies to the north. The Omahas considered a *núdo<sup>n</sup>* (warrior) known for his exceptional courage and personal integrity to be *hethúshka* (guarded by thunder). Even today, an Omaha soldier (*wano<sup>n</sup>she*) who has achieved distinction in the American armed services, man or woman, is honored as *hethúshka* and welcomed into the Omaha warrior society.<sup>1</sup>

When Hollis Dorion Stabler, a young Omaha Indian, stepped into the U.S. Marines recruiting center at Sioux City, Iowa, in September 1939, he was following but a contemporary version of a path ridden by his ancestors, though he had yet to prove his worth in battle. Despite his heritage, he might not have been so eager to enlist had he known how soon that worth would be tested. But in 1939, America's Pacific naval fleet still basked in the sun of Hawaii's Pearl Harbor, and twenty-one-year-old Hollis Stabler needed a job.<sup>2</sup>

"Come back when you gain weight," the medic administering his physical examination abruptly commanded the tall, lanky young man. Neither the marine recruiter nor the physician could have known they had just rejected the great-great-great-grandson of Pierre Dorion, a French trader who had founded Sioux City. Historians believe him to have been the first white trader to reside among the Yankton Sioux, or even in South Dakota. In 1804 Dorion had served as interpreter for

Lewis and Clark, and it was the Corps of Discovery's refusal to use him as their interpreter in conferences with the Teton Sioux that led to their failure to open diplomatic relations with the Teton, at that time the most powerful tribe on the Northern Plains. Dorion married a Yankton woman, and together they had born a son, Jean Baptiste Dorion (see Appendix).<sup>3</sup>

As an adult, Baptiste wed an Omaha woman and the two parented a daughter, Rosalie. Rosalie wed Omaha Chief Four Hands, and they had a son, Long Wing.

"Long Wing was an orphan here at the Presbyterian Mission," eighty-four-year-old Hollis recalled in 2002 from an easy chair that dominated a corner of the living room. He motioned in the direction of a memory that hovered just over his shoulder. "This lady, Victoria Woodhull—ever heard of her? Ran for president and all that?—she came through and adopted him, sent him money and gave her name to him: Spafford Woodhull. So that's how we got the name 'Woodhull.' These are not our real names. 'Stabler' is a German name. They just gave it to us."<sup>4</sup>

The Presbyterian Mission School to which Hollis referred—remembered in Francis La Flesche's bittersweet classic, *The Middle Five: Indian School Boys of the Omaha Tribe*—was distinguished as the first Protestant mission and school established in the Louisiana Purchase Territory. Though the school only operated from 1856–68, its influence lasted. Located near what was then the Omaha's upper village, which conservative Omahas derisively called "the village of the 'make-believe' white men," today the mission cemetery is acknowledged as an historic site in Thurston County. But in the late nineteenth century, the school loomed large in the lives of Omaha Indians.<sup>5</sup>

As an adult, Spafford Woodhull had married an Omaha woman, Lucy Harlan, and together in 1885 they had born Eunice Victoria Woodhull, destined to be an exceptionally progressive Omaha woman whose accomplishments have been historically overshadowed by those of another significant Omaha woman, Susan La Flesche Picotte, who in 1889 became the first Native American woman to earn a medical degree. Picotte, in fact, was the only Indian ever appointed as a medical missionary by the Presbyterian Board of Home Missions.<sup>6</sup>

"Now," Hollis remembered, "my mother, Eunice, was proud that she was related to Pierre Dorion. And she remembered her grandmother, Rosalie, the granddaughter of Pierre. Rosalie was one-fourth French. I

don't speak much Omaha. I understand a little bit. I know more French than Omaha.”<sup>7</sup>

“I think when my mother was about eleven years old, and my dad, too, about that age, they gathered up all the Omaha kids and took them to the railroad station in Emerson, Nebraska, just a little ways over here,” Hollis waved across the Omaha Reservation's rolling bluffs, “other side of Winnebago. The railroad track goes through there. That railroad took them to the Genoa Indian School. And they left them and they were gone for about four years—just little kids! And she told us about how they were treated in the boarding school. She said the worst thing was, they were hungry all the time. Didn't have enough to eat, you know. They didn't have the kind of food that they were used to: meat, soup, corn. They didn't feed them like that over there.”<sup>8</sup>

“When my mother came back from Genoa, her father, Spafford, Long Wing, was pretty well off. He had land at Macy. Well, he leased it out. At that time there were very few Omahas who could speak English like he did, so he was able to get his money's worth, and all that. She told her dad, ‘I want to go back to school,’ so he sent her to school in Omaha.”<sup>9</sup>

“I told you my grandfather, Spafford Woodhull, spoke English. A lot of the Omahas didn't speak English. He'd tell me about different people, different things. He remembered when the Omahas had their last buffalo hunt. He and a friend, they were about the same age. They made that last buffalo hunt. I remember him telling us about it. One thing I will always remember is him telling about the horses and travois and wagons. They all went together, you know, the people. Grandfather said he and his friend rode horses. They had a job to do, just keeping track of the horses, you know, Taking them out to water and bringing them back. They used to talk about it.”<sup>10</sup>

Modern research places the last traditional Omaha bison hunt during the year 1876. As with the other indigenous Nebraska Indian tribes—the Ponca, Pawnee, and Otoe-Missouria—access to the reduced herds on the western plains had been impeded by settlers and hostile Sioux. With the demise of the buffalo hunt, many Plains Indian ceremonies passed into history also, as demand for their function decreased, and circumstances for the transmission of certain knowledge—how to call the buffalo near, for example, or other specific rituals for buffalo hunt blessings—diminished.<sup>11</sup>

He brought his attention back to his mother. “That’s where Mrs. Picotte came in. ‘Why don’t you go to school in Missouri?’ she asked my mother. So my mother went down there to ‘teaching’ school [Teacher’s College]. She went there, and she was the only Indian in the school. But she met several women that were part Indian. She went to teaching school and she learned to speak better French. She had a voice. She was a contralto. Do you know what a contralto is? She sang contralto with different people. And she came back and she got this job at the agency, working for Mr. Springer, a real estate agent. She knew all about everything. A lot of people said, ‘Why did they ask *her*?’ Why? Because she was educated and she was interesting and she was aggressive, you know. She went right ahead.”<sup>12</sup>

“About Mrs. Picotte, she was a sort of mentor of my mother’s, a person who encouraged my mother to go ahead. At that time, alcohol came on our reservation, and that was a bad thing. It is still a bad thing. It was against the law for the Indians to drink, or to sell liquor to the Indians, so it was illegal. But they bootlegged here anyway. Anytime the Indians had a payday, all those bootleggers from Sioux City all come out here. And that’s where all those bootleggers got the Omahas’ land. Because those Omaha guys would get drunk and draw up lease papers or sign a lease paper to sell their land. I still have my land. I have eighty acres out here, and I also have twenty acres out here that belonged to my grandmother on my mother’s side, Lucy Harlan. And then I’ve got a lot of little pieces. I’m the only one left, otherwise I would have to divide it between my brother and sister.”<sup>13</sup>

After she completed William Woods College, Eunice had returned to the Omaha reservation. In 1912 she married George Stabler. George had attended the Genoa Indian School with Eunice, and afterwards the Carlisle Indian Institute in Pennsylvania and the Sherman Institute in Riverside, California. “He always said that when he was at Riverside, they had an earthquake while he was there,” Hollis relayed. When George returned to the reservation, he and Eunice wed.<sup>14</sup>

“The two young people have had more than ordinary advantages and are intelligent and capable,” the local newspaper reported. “Mrs. Stabler attended the Wm. Woods College at Fulton, Mo., and last year Bellevue College. Since then she has been employed as stenographer for Wm. Springer. Mr. Stabler has just returned from Omaha, where he has taken a course in ‘automobily.’”<sup>15</sup>

“My mother was well educated,” Hollis continued. “She married my dad when he wasn’t hardly educated, no college education. But he was a nice-looking guy, didn’t drink or anything. I think it was because of the clans, she was thinking about the clans, because she belonged to a real good clan. The Omahas have ten clans, five of the Sky People and five of the Earth People. Through my father my clan is the Buffalo clan, an Earth clan. And my mother belonged to the Bird clan, also an Earth clan. If a person married someone from their own clan, well, they’d be marrying a relative, a cousin. They don’t go by that anymore.”<sup>16</sup>

Although Eunice had found employment on the Omaha Reservation, George could not. He enrolled at Hampton Indian Institute in Virginia, and he and Eunice moved east. “He took his training in carpentry, that’s why he was a carpenter. My mother worked in the school office. She had a good friend, Mrs. Darling, a wealthy lady. In fact, she was one of the rich people that sponsored people, and she sponsored my mother. My dad went to school. It was something new for the Indians, because they didn’t know how to go to school. But my mother was there. She poked my dad right on. I was born at Hampton in 1918, and I was baptized at the oldest church in the United States. My mother always said that’s why I was a soldier, because on the day I was born, soldiers marched down Hampton road in front of the hospital, in uniforms, going off to war.”<sup>17</sup>

Just as Hollis had remembered, the Hampton Indian School had initiated a “model families program” into their Indian education curriculum in the 1880s, through which many an Omaha couple and their children had passed by the first decade of the twentieth century. The planners intended that the Indian families who completed their program would “take civilization home to be the center of civilization among the tribes.”<sup>18</sup>

As for Hollis’s claim to have been baptized in the oldest church in the United States, he may not have been far off. A photograph from the collection of the Denver Public Library, created between 1880 and 1900, shows a Reverend Gravatt and a group of Native American men, teenagers, and boys in front of St. John’s Church in Hampton, Virginia. The inscription on the reverse states, “One of the oldest churches, with Indian boys and Rev. Gravatt.”<sup>19</sup>

Through his mother’s line, Hollis Stabler identified himself as having 1/32 French blood, but his paternal heritage had been purely Om-

aha. His father, George Stabler, was the son of *Hí<sup>n</sup>zíz<sup>n</sup>ga*, Sampson Stabler. Sampson had been born to *Mo<sup>n</sup>égahi*, Jordan Stabler. Jordan and Sampson, father and son, were born to the Black Shoulder Buffalo clan of the Omaha, who were responsible for the buffalo hunt. This clan considered themselves to be the first Omahas. As headman of his clan, Jordan had been signatory to the 1854 treaty signed in Washington DC, which had ceded Omaha land west of the Missouri to accommodate demand created by passage of the Homestead Act.<sup>20</sup>

As a youth, Hollis's father, George Stabler, attended the Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania. There, he had shared a dormitory room with Jim Thorpe for two years. Thorpe would later come to be widely regarded as the greatest athlete of the twentieth century. "My dad played baseball. He played with Jim Thorpe. Dad played centerfielder, then second baseman. Yeah, he made semi-pros," Hollis remembered proudly. "The semi-pros worked, they got paid, too. They do it all the time nowadays, but that was a big thing then."<sup>21</sup>

"When they came back from the East, we moved to Walthill, on the Omaha reservation. Dad couldn't get a job." George and Eunice moved to Rosalie and built a small house on Spafford Woodhull's land near the railroad tracks. Hollis continued,

★ They didn't have to pay rent, because it was my grandfather's land. They had a lot of garden stuff. But my mother didn't want to live on the reservation. When I was young, you could take the train to Sioux City for fifty cents, and fifty cents back. My dad went up there and he got a job at the Hanford Creamery. Where the post office now is, that creamery was located just about right there. And he played baseball in the summertime. In those days, baseball was a big thing. He played ball in the summertime, and worked in the wintertime. My mother said one time he went up there and didn't get back for about a week, and we only had one chicken left, and she said we finally had to kill it. So, he moved our family to Sioux City. That was in 1920.<sup>22</sup>

In Sioux City, 7th Street was kind of a main thoroughfare. It had a streetcar running down it. People sold merchandise on the outside in those days, with tables outside with shades over them. We lived on the west side of Sioux Street, between 5th and 6th Streets. Up there was Webster School, on 4th Street, and that's where I started school. It was a big, tall, brick building, with a tower. And in that tower you walked

around, kind of at the top of the library. And we'd go up there and we'd have to listen to people read. The playground was brick. My mother said we were the only American Indian students in the school. She said I played with all the boys around there. She said, "Why don't you say something to them?" I said, "I don't have much to say." She wanted me to talk, and I wouldn't talk very much. Anyway, I was the only Indian in my class. But there was a little black girl in there—I don't remember her name. Us boys used to lay the girls' chairs on their sides and go around and jump over them. It wasn't because she was black, it was because she was a girl.<sup>23</sup>

Across the street, on the east side of the street, was a little store. A lady had that store. We'd buy candy and stuff like that. One thing I remember about buying candy in those days was the little sack. It had little colored stripes up and down it. You never see them no more. In those days, one penny could buy a lot of candy. Anyway, that's all she did was sell a little candy and gum and all like that. Spearmint gum was a big thing.<sup>24</sup>

But she and my mother were good friends and we went over there. She always had liver and onions, and my mother would go in there and eat with her, and I'd go, too. Wherever I went, I was always with my mother. One time the lady was over there cooking, and she was drinking wine and she almost fell into the stove. Then my mother said, "Ida, let me finish that cooking." I remember that just as plain as anything.<sup>25</sup>

In those days not many people had a car or buggy. We walked or rode the trolley on 7th Street. If you stayed on the trolley long enough going west you ran into Riverside Park, and if you rode the trolley east you passed through downtown on 4th Street. My dad liked to walk or hike. I think we walked *all over* the west-side hills along the river bank. We had no canteen, but used a milk bottle wrapped in a damp gunny sack. He carried a pocket knife with one broken blade and he would cut green willows and make us whistles. He always had a paper sack so we could carry back wild grapes and plums and onions.<sup>26</sup>

We were always looking for red willow for my grandfather, Long Wing, Spafford. He used to shave it, and smoke it in his pipe right along with his tobacco. I still have one of his long-stemmed pipes, his calumet. Sometimes he came to visit us. He usually took us for a ride on the trolley to the sand dunes, where there was a small store and a picnic table. He would buy us cream sodas and oyster crackers.

Sometimes he would sing good old American songs, Omaha songs! The name of the soda pop was called Nee-Hi. When we were ready to go back everyone would help push the trolley around on a turntable. Once or twice during the summer our Sunday school class would have a picnic, usually at Riverside Park, and we would all ride in an open trolley there, no sides, singing and laughing and making all kinds of noise. . . . They were good ol' days.<sup>27</sup>

Anyway, down the street at the corner was the Winnebago family, Raymonds, their name was. The well-known Winnebago artist Chuck Raymond was from that family. And on the southeast corner, Italians lived there. Eveningtime, they would sit outside at a big table. You know, they were real noisy people. They had a son that sang. My mother knew those songs, and so she went over there and she'd be out on the porch in the backyard—we had chairs out there—and she'd sing with that son. He'd be singing Italian and my mother would sing with him! I often wonder who that Italian family was.<sup>28</sup>

Everybody said her clan was the singers, and she was a good singer. My mother knew all those old songs and my dad did, too. He played the flute. He made them and he played them. He made drums, too. He was a good musician and he sang in the real Indian way. You know, not English, the Indian way, Indian songs. He'd smoke a cigarette and go out and sing. He took his cane or stick and he'd sing. But that's something a lot of people did then. Later, when we lived in Lawton, Oklahoma, this old blind Comanche, Chief Atakne, he'd sing church songs, and he'd tap a cane on the floor, like a drum, keeping time.<sup>29</sup>

Back in Sioux City, next door to us was a family. Now I don't know if they were Germans or Norwegians or what, but I couldn't understand what that lady said for nothing. I don't know; she spoke English, but I couldn't understand. I think they were German. In those days World War I was just over, and they used to tease boys and girls about being German blood.<sup>30</sup>

My mother and I had, what do you call it? Good rapport. Because I was the oldest one, a lot of times when she wanted to do something, the two little ones, Bob and Marcella, stayed with my dad, and she and I would go. She was pretty religious. Did you ever hear of Billy Sunday, the famous preacher? I saw him a couple of times. In fact, I was there when my mother talked to him in Sioux City. They put a big tent out there and he used to preach—we'd always go.<sup>31</sup>

We went to the first movie in Sioux City together. It was *The Covered Wagon*. Then we went to see Janet McDonald. She sang an Indian song, I can't think of the name—Minnetonka and all, you know. Of course, we couldn't hear, there was no noise. But later we went to see the first "talkie." It was *The Trial of Mary Dugan*, and it talked. When we came out, we were shaking all over with excitement. My mother would talk about that. She must have been young. She would get a sack lunch and we'd walk and talk. Well, she'd sing and talk, like that.<sup>32</sup>

But I do remember one thing. We went to a church called The Helping Hand Mission. Boy, I tell you, we caught, not the measles, but smallpox. All of us did, and they quarantined us. I remember that they had a red sign on the front door. I can't remember exactly what it said on it, but it said [something like] "Smallpox. Keep Out." And Indians are pretty susceptible to it, you know. My dad was out when they did that, and he couldn't get back in. But he still had to go to work.<sup>33</sup>

I didn't have smallpox bad, but my sister and brother had it between their hands and feet. Oh, they had it bad! But I didn't have it bad. My mother didn't get it either. But there was that lady that used to come to visit us, Sister Hanson, they called her. They didn't call her nurse. She was a . . . well, she looked like a big woman and she had either a blue or white uniform on and a cape. The cape was lined red. She didn't wear an overcoat, only a cape. And she had a big hat, a round hat and kind of flat on top; Some kind of health authority. They don't have that anymore, I don't think. But we sweated it out the whole winter. We were really tired. We couldn't go outside or nothing, and the kids were so sick all the time, Bob and Marcella.

Hollis fell silent.<sup>34</sup>

★ That Christmas, my dad came there and knocked on the window. He had a box, about so big. We opened the window and he came in with a box of Eskimo Pies. Do you know what Eskimo Pies are? With ice cream in them? We ate that whole box, we ate all that ice cream! We couldn't keep it because we didn't have an ice box in those days. We'd put stuff outside in the snow. My dad paid for the ice cream by unloading a boxcar of coal by himself. We were about the same size, about five foot eleven or six feet. He was six foot, I was about a quarter inch from making six foot and I never did get that big. He weighed about 160 pounds, so he wasn't a big man, just regular size. It's like we