

## Kooperationen

### Francis La Flesche and the Umo<sup>ho</sup> in Berlin

In 1894, the Königliches Museum für Völkerkunde (Royal Museum of Ethnology) in Berlin commissioned the Native anthropologist Francis La Flesche to gather a collection from his own culture, the Umo<sup>ho</sup>. Four years later the collection of around 60 objects, including a catalog with hand-colored photos, arrived in Berlin. The collection consists of materials from different aspects of Umo<sup>ho</sup> culture, including ceremonial items, a war bonnet, tools, games and a musical instrument.

However, the collection is more of a reflection of how La Flesche wanted his culture to be represented in a German museum and less that of Umo<sup>ho</sup> life in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. As he mentions in the accompanying catalog, some of the pieces he sent to Berlin were no longer in use at the time and had to be produced for the museum by knowledgeable elders.

The collection is a link between the past and the present and it has become the starting point for a new chapter in the relationship between the Umo<sup>ho</sup> (Umo<sup>ho</sup> Nation) and Berlin. Based on the historic collection, a joint exhibition and research project is currently being developed with the Nebraska Indian Community College (NICC). Founded in 1973, the Nebraska Indian Community College provides post-secondary education on three campuses: on the Umo<sup>ho</sup> and Santee Sioux reservations and in South Sioux City, Nebraska. It is dedicated to providing higher education for all Umo<sup>ho</sup> (Omaha), Isanti (Santee Dakota), and any learners attending classes.

Today, Francis La Flesche is considered to be the first Native ethnologist in North America. For the Ethnological Museum Berlin his collection is unique because it is the earliest self-representation of an Indigenous group or culture from North America. In addition to the objects, Francis La Flesche also gave an extensive catalog to the museum which reflects his personal perspective on the collection, that of a Native ethnologist in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century.

La Flesche gathered the collection at a time of transition in which the political, economic and cultural independence of Native Nations in the US decreased enormously and land loss, racism, and violence dominated the life of Native Americans in the Midwest.

His work was and still is extremely important not just for the museum and academia but also for the Umo<sup>ho</sup> themselves. His publication of the 27<sup>th</sup> Annual Report of the Bureau of Ethnology together with Alice C. Fletcher is the most extensive and complete work about Umo<sup>ho</sup> culture. Even today it serves as an important source for teaching.

But Francis La Flesche was not just an ethnologist. He also wrote a book about his boarding school experience, which is sometimes referred to as the Native Huckleberry Finn story. He also worked as an attorney and spokesperson for Native American Civil Rights. In addition, he created an opera together with the composer Charles Wakefield Cadman.

Besides Francis, other members of the La Flesche family are also of great importance for Native Americans. His sister Susan was the first female Native medical doctor and his other sister, Susette, was known as an author and spokesperson for Native rights. Their father Joseph, chief of the Umo<sup>ho</sup>, negotiated treaties with the US government and led the Umo<sup>ho</sup> onto the reservation in Nebraska and Iowa. It is a great honor to have descendants of the La Flesche family on board for the current exhibition project.

The temporary exhibition in the Humboldt Forum will focus on the collection and life story of Francis La Flesche, vividly illustrating how history and the past still shape

the present and future of the Umo<sup>ho</sup>. The intensive talks with the Umo<sup>ho</sup> have made it clear that the exhibition must go beyond the presentation of the historical collections and address present-day political and social issues. The lives of the Umo<sup>ho</sup> have been shaped by the experiences of racism, violence, and land loss. The collection in Berlin has a special meaning in this context, as it is evidence of resistance against colonialism. For today's Umo<sup>ho</sup> it provides an opportunity to reconnect with their ancestors and to tell their own story to a German audience, their core message being "We are still here." Visitors will gain insight into the worldviews of the Umo<sup>ho</sup> and into the things of their everyday lives, past and present. Umo<sup>ho</sup> worldviews will also be reflected in the architecture and design of the exhibition.

The cooperation with the Nebraska Indian Community College also exemplifies what potential lies within historic collections and in jointly curated exhibitions. For many years the Ethnological Museum has been engaged in collaborative projects with source communities. These projects enable the exchange and sharing of information and knowledge and the rediscovery of the historic meaning and function of objects. By integrating contemporary interpretations and perspectives, the collections can also be recontextualized. These forms of exchange and collaboration will also shape the new Humboldt Forum.

In the catalog accompanying the Berlin collection Francis La Flesche explains:

"The break up of the Omaha's native organization, the overthrow of their religious rites, of the authority of their Chiefs and of tribal order, and the confusion of mind incident of this sudden overwhelming of ideals, pursuits, and all familiar forms of social life, although a story full of pathos and instruction, must be omitted here as it forms no part of my present duty."

Our goal is to tell the missing story behind the collection. We will capture today's voices that tell of the genocide and eviction of Native peoples in the US and the consequences of these events for today. The joint exhibition together with the Nebraska Indian Community College will be the first step to do so.

Text: ILJA LABISCHINSKI, ELISABETH SEYERL