



# Maria Tallchief

## HIDDEN HERO OF HISTORY

**Listen to the story:** <https://jonincharacter.com/maria-tallchief/>

**Maria Tallchief** was America's first **Prima Ballerina**.

Maria Tallchief was born in Fairfax, Oklahoma as a member of the **Osage Nation**. She grew up on the Osage reservation and began dancing at the age of three.

Ms. Tallchief's mother couldn't afford dance lessons for herself when she was younger, so she wanted to make sure Maria and her sister, Marjorie, would be able to take lessons. Their first lessons took place in the basement of a hotel.

They also took piano lessons and, for a while, Ms. Tallchief considered becoming a concert pianist, but her talent as a dancer was recognized at an early age. So, her family moved from Fairfax to Los Angeles, California. There, she went to high school and continued her study of piano and ballet. She trained under Madame Nijinska, a famous ballerina and choreographer who opened her own studio.

After graduating from high school, Ms. Tallchief moved to New York at the age of 17 to pursue ballet full time. While in Los Angeles, she auditioned for the director of a very popular ballet company, **Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo**. Nothing came of it then, but when she moved to New York City, she continued to pursue opportunities to be in the company. Based on her talent, she was accepted as an apprentice and this kicked off her career in dance.

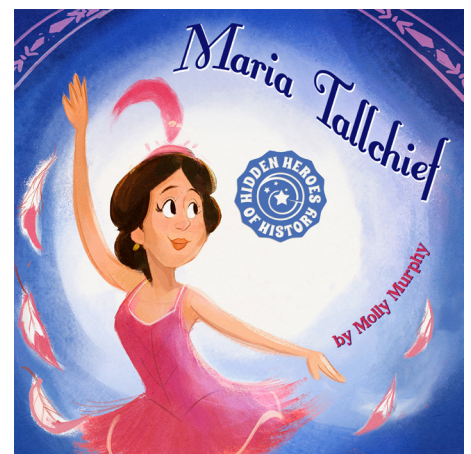
Access to a passport led to one of the first big breaks of Ms. Tallchief's career. At the time, most ballet dancers were from Russia and other European countries. Because the company had an upcoming tour in Canada, they needed dancers with passports in order to travel and perform.

**This brings up a few of the most challenging aspects of Ms. Tallchief's career in dance:**

Many leaders in the dance world believed that there were no good dancers from America. And many people also believed that in order for her to find success, she needed to change her last name from Tallchief to something that sounded more European.

She experienced this kind of prejudice before when she was younger—many children made fun of her Tallchief name and Native American heritage.

**But Ms. Tallchief persevered.**





She became America's first Prima Ballerina, and she did it without giving into the pressure of changing her last name or distancing herself from her heritage. She kept the name Tallchief throughout her entire life as a dancer, stating: "Tallchief was my name, and I was proud of it."

### **Ms. Tallchief is one of the leading figures in ballet.**

She rose through the ranks of the Ballet Russe, moving from apprentice to one of the lead dancers. **George Balanchine**, an extremely important figure in American ballet and founder of the New York City Ballet, came to work on a new piece with the company. He took notice of Ms. Tallchief and her unique style of dance, and knew she'd be a perfect match for his work.

Mr. Balanchine's choreography required exceptional grace, strength, passion, and speed, all qualities that described Ms. Tallchief as a dancer. . . Together, they changed the world of ballet, putting American ballet on the map and popularizing many ballets that are cherished to this day.

One such example is a favorite holiday classic and annual tradition for many families—**The Nutcracker Ballet**.

In 1954, Ms. Tallchief performed as the Sugar Plum Fairy in Mr. Balanchine's newly reworked version of The Nutcracker, which at the time was a fairly unknown ballet. Ms. Tallchief's performance as the Sugar Plum Fairy transformed the work into an annual classic!

It was around this same time that Ms. Tallchief became a Prima Ballerina, an extremely coveted and important role in the ballet world.

She truly deserved the title. For example, in the early days of the New York City Ballet, she danced one of the most technically challenging roles anyone had ever seen, performing flawlessly in a piece called "**The Firebird**"

### **Ms. Tallchief was the highest paid ballerina of her time.**

She paved the way for dancers who didn't seem to fit the mold or expectations of what a dancer should be. She even paved the way for American ballet and all-American dancers during a time when most were overlooked.

Ms. Tallchief always remembered her roots, remaining closely tied to her Osage history and speaking out against **stereotypes** and **misconceptions** about Native Americans.

She continued to champion ballet and dancers after she retired. When she moved to Chicago, she started new dance companies and schools, and popularized the art form in a city that didn't yet value ballet.

### **Maria Tallchief was a leading lady through and through!**

## Glossary

**Prima Ballerina** – a principal dancer in a classical ballet company. These ballerinas are the ones who are featured most often, have the most experience, and are the highest paid in the company.

**Osage Nation** –The Osage Native Americans lived in the Great plains in the Americas. Their name means “people of the middle waters.” They lived in what is now Arkansas, Kansas, Missouri and Oklahoma. Today, many Osage people live on the Osage reservation in northern Oklahoma.

**Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo** – A ballet company that introduced audiences to ballet in cities and towns across the country, in many places where people had never seen classical dance.

**George Balanchine** - Called the Father of American Ballet, George Balanchine helped form the highly acclaimed New York City Ballet. He was best known as a choreographer, or someone who arranges dances (*from Britannica Kids*).

**The Nutcracker Ballet** - The Nutcracker is a classical ballet based on E.T.A. Hoffmann’s 1816 fairy tale The Nutcracker and the Mouse King. It tells the story of a little girl who goes to the Land of Sweets on Christmas Eve.

**The Firebird** – a ballet with technically-challenging choreography based on a Russian fairy tale.

**Stereotype** - an often unfair and untrue belief that many people have about all people or things with a particular characteristic (*Merriam-Webster Learner’s Dictionary*).

**Misconception** – a wrong or mistaken idea (*Merriam-Webster Learner’s Dictionary*).

## Give it Some Thought

Maria Tallchief refused to change her last name because she was proud of her heritage. What is one thing that you would not change about yourself? Why?

What personal qualities helped Maria Tallchief achieve her success?

Why do you think Maria Tallchief’s success changed opinions about American ballerinas?

## Use Your Imagination

*“A ballerina takes steps given to her and makes them her own. Each individual brings something different to the same role.”* Maria Tallchief

Maria Tallchief practiced long hours and took steps to transform her movements into the characters she performed on stage. She told stories through dance that captivated audiences’ hearts.

Using Maria Tallchief’s amazing accomplishments as your inspiration, dare to dream about who you’d like to become one day or what you’d like to accomplish.

What steps will you take to achieve your dream? (Use the “I Dare to Dream” worksheet to write them down.)