

Yvonne Chouteau, Rosella Hightower, Moscelyne Larkin, and sisters Maria and Marjorie Tallchief all rose to prominence as ballerinas in the mid-1900s. They also all happened to be Native Americans from the state of Oklahoma, born in the 1920s. Chouteau was Shawnee, the Tallchief sisters were Osage, Hightower was Choctaw and Larkin was Peoria and Shawnee.

The Tallchief family moved to California when Maria and Marjorie were young so that the girls could train in ballet with renowned teachers Ernest Belcher, Bronislava Nijinska and David Lichine. Both sisters married choreographers named George. In Maria's case, her marriage to the renowned George Balanchine lasted only a few years, though their artistic relationship continued. Both sisters danced with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in the 1940s, but over the years Marjorie moved on to the Grand Ballet du Marquis de Cuevas, Ruth Page's Chicago Opera Ballet, and the Harkness Ballet, where she danced as a prima ballerina from 1964 to 66. Maria stayed with the Ballet Russe and her then-husband, dancing lead roles in Balanchine's Orpheus, Swan Lake, The Nutcracker and The Firebird, which started her career as a prima ballerina. In 1954, a tour with the company made her the highest paid prima ballerina of the time. When Balanchine left for what is now known as the New York Ballet, she went with him. After 20 years on the stage, she moved to Chicago to act as director for Chicago's Lyric Opera Ballet in the 1970s and Chicago City Ballet in the '80s.

Meanwhile, Marjorie became the first Native American to become premiere danseuse étoile, the highest rank a dancer can achieve in the Paris Opera. Performing both classical and contemporary pieces, she was considered one of the most versatile ballerinas of her day. Marjorie also served as director of several companies in her career, including the Civic Ballet Academy in Dallas, the City Ballet in Chicago, and the Harid Conservatory in Florida.

Yvonne Chouteau also got her start with the Ballet Russe, and was one of the youngest dancers ever accepted into a professional company when she joined them at age 14. She worked with famed choreographers like Balanchine, Nijinska, Agnes de Mille and others, performing in works like Giselle, The Nutcracker and Romeo and Juliet. She also became the youngest person inducted into the Oklahoma Hall of Fame when she was just 18. In her early 30s, she returned to Oklahoma to take up an artistic residency at the University of Oklahoma. In 1963, she and her husband, a fellow former Ballet Russe dancer, founded the Oklahoma City Civic Ballet, now known as the Oklahoma City Ballet.

Moscelyne Larkin's mother was a Russian dancer who trained her until her teen years, when she moved to New York to study with professional teachers. Like Yvonne, Moscelyne danced professionally from her mid-teens, joining the Original Ballet Russe as a soloist when she was 15. After touring internationally with the Original Ballet Russe, the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo and other companies for more than 19 years, the prima ballerina and her husband, who was also a dancer, retired from the stage in 1954 and moved to Tulsa. There, the couple founded the Tulsa Civic Ballet and School, later known as Tulsa Ballet. She also taught at the University of Tulsa, taught dance classes specifically for Native American children and introduced dance into Tulsa public schools.

The eldest of the dancers, Rosella Hightower may have helped pave the way for others. She was the first to dance with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo in 1938, a company all five women would dance for in the coming years. After years of dancing in New York City-based companies, including the Ballet Theatre, Original Ballet Russe and American Ballet Theatre, she moved to France in 1962, where she founded the Center for Classical Dance in Canne. Now known as the École supérieure de danse de Cannes Rosella Hightower, the school is still considered an important training hub for aspiring dancers. Rosella wanted a multidisciplinary approach for students, incorporating contemporary dance, jazz, and other forms as well as rigorous ballet instruction. She let the school for 40 years until her retirement in 2001.

In 1984, she also founded the biennial Cannes Dance Festival, which continues to this day, and was one of the original organisers of the annual Prix de Lausanne international competition for young dancers in Switzerland.

Rosella served as director of two companies in France, Marseilles Opera Ballet from 1969–72, and the Ballet de Nancy from 1975-78. In 1981, she became the first American director of the Ballet of Paris Opera. In 1975, her contributions were recognised when she received France's highest honor, the Chevalier de la Légion d'Honneur.

While each of the women has been recognised with various individual honors, they are also commemorated as a group. A ballet called *The Four Moons* was created for the Oklahoma Indian Ballerina Festival in 1967, with four solos that each evoke the different tribal backgrounds of the dancers, with a single Osage solo honoring the Tallchief sisters. The work is set to music by Louis Ballard, a Quapaw-Cherokee composer and fellow Oklahoman. A mural called *Flight of Spirit* depicts the five women in the Oklahoma State Capitol Rotunda in Oklahoma City, painted by Chickasaw artist Mike Larsen, and sculptures of the dancers grace the grounds of the Tulsa Historical Society.