

Maria Tall Chief

Maria Tall Chief (later changed to Tallchief) was born in Oklahoma in 1925. Her father was Osage Native American and her mother of Scotch-Irish descent. It had been an unrealized dream of her mom to study dance and music, so Maria and her sister Marjorie were enrolled early in dance and piano lessons. Maria was only three years old when she began dance classes. It wasn't long before Maria and Marjorie were performing at local rodeos.

When she was eight, Maria's family moved to California with the hope finding an opportunity for the girls in show business. Her mother asked a pharmacist for a recommendation for a dance teacher and was referred to Ernest Belcher, who was Marge Champion's father. Maria soon moved on to more noted classical teachers of dance, but was also continuing to study piano and saw herself as having a career as a classical pianist. However, she continued with dance and at 17 went to New York looking for a way into the classical world of dance.

Tallchief was soon offered a place with the Ballet Russe de Monte Carlo where she performed for five years. It was there that she met George Balanchine. She eventually married Balanchine and returned to New York. Balanchine had just founded the New York City Ballet and Maria became its first prima ballerina. She was the first American woman and the first Native American to be recognized world wide as a prima ballerina. She was the first American invited to dance with the Bolshoi. At one point, early in her career, she had been urged to "Russianize" her name in the same way as British Alice Marks (Alicia Markova), but she refused, saying she was American. It was Maria Tallchief, Native American ballerina who was chosen by Rudolph Nureyev to dance with him for his American debut.

For more information: google *Maria Tallchief* or *New York City Ballet* or *Balanchine*