THE INDIAN BALLERINAS

Have you seen a ballet? What is a ballet? Ballet is a form of dance. It needs many years of practice and training to become a ballet dancer. Girls who become ballet dancers are called ballerinas. Oklahoma, in fact, has been the home to some of the world’s most famous ballerinas. They are called the “Indian Ballerinas” because they are all Native Americans. The Indian Ballerinas danced their way into the hearts of people around the world.

Maria and Marjorie Tallchief were Osage. Rosella Hightower was Choctaw. Moscelyne Larkin was Shawnee-Peoria. Yvonne Chouteau was Shawnee-Cherokee. Each of these ballerinas worked hard through many hours of rehearsals. Soon, they each became “prima” ballerinas of their dance companies. Becoming a prima ballerina is a title not given to all ballet dancers.

Although the Indian Ballerinas spent many years dancing in cities across Europe and America, they all came home to Oklahoma. Here they taught other students the ballet. They also worked to start many of the dance companies in Oklahoma’s cities, such as the Oklahoma City and Tulsa. They never forgot the beginning years when they danced Native American dances with their families and friends. It was at these Indian celebrations that they learned to love dancing. Yvonne Chouteau once said, “I think dance is the Indian spirit speaking.”

1. Why were the Indian Ballerinas famous?

2. How did the Indian Ballerinas help others interested in dancing?

3. What do you think Yvonne Chouteau meant when she said that “dance is the Indian spirit thinking”?