
...annual report is burdened with overcondensed statements of things done and more things yet to do; with urgencies, programs, and life-and-death necessities, all under the compulsion of speed.

It is all true. But the foundations of Indian life rest in a quiet earth. Indian life is not tense, is not haunted with urgencies, and does not fully accept the view that programs must be achieved, lest otherwise ruin shall swiftly befall.

Indian life is happy. Even the most poverty-stricken and seemingly futureless Indians still are happy. Indians have known how to be happy amid hardships and dangers through many thousand years. They do not expect much, often they expect nothing at all; yet they are able to be happy. Possibly this is the most interesting and important fact about Indians.

The Indian Reorganization (modified Wheeler-Howard) Act was approved June 18, 1934. Its passage made mandatory a complete change in the traditional Federal Indian policy of individual allotment of land—which resulted in the break-up of Indian reservations—and of destroying Indian organization, institutions, and racial heritage to the end that the Indian as an Indian might disappear from the American scene with the utmost speed.

The next result of this policy has been the loss of two-thirds of the 139,000,000 acres owned by Indian tribes in 1887, the year when the General Allotment Act was adopted; and the individualization policy has broken up the land remaining on allotted reservations, has disrupted tribal bonds, has destroyed old incentives to action, and has created a race of petty landlords who in the generous Indian manner have shared their constantly shrinking income with the ever-increasing number of their landless relatives and friends.

The Indian Reorganization Act prohibits future allotments, and the sale of Indian lands except to the tribes; it restores to the tribes the unentered remnants of the so-called surplus lands of the allotted reservations thrown open to white settlement; it authorizes annual appropriations for the purchase of land for landless Indians, provides for the consolidation of Indian lands, and sets up a process which enables Indians voluntarily to return their individual landholdings to the protection of tribal status, thus reversing the disintegration policy.

The act also authorizes a ten-million-dollar revolving loan fund, the use of which is restricted to those tribes which organize and incorporate so as to create community responsibility. It is expected that the organization of Indians in well-knit, functional groups and communities will help materially in the creation of new incentives for individual and collective action. The Indian is not a “rugged individualist”; he functions best as an integrated member of a group, clan, or tribe. Identification of his individuality with clan or tribe is with him a spiritual necessity. If the satisfaction of this compelling sentiment is denied him—as it was for half a century or more—the Indian does not, it has been clearly shown, merge into white group life. Through a modernized form of Indian organization, adapted to the needs of the
various tribes (a form of organization now authorized by law), it is possible to make use of this powerful latent civic force.

The Indian Reorganization Act was passed a few days before the end of the Seventy-third Congress. None of the authorized appropriations, however, became available until May 1935. For land purchases the authorized appropriation was reduced to one-half, or $1,000,000; the revolving credit fund was limited to a quarter of the authorization, or $2,500,000; for organizing expenses the amount was reduced from $250,000 to $175,000.

Congress had ordained in section 18 that each tribe must be given the unusual privilege of deciding at a special election whether it wanted to accept these benefits or reject them. Beginning with August 1934 and ending June 17, 1935, a series of 263 elections resulted in the decision by 73 tribes, with a population of 63,467 persons, to exclude themselves from the benefits and protection of the act, and by 172 tribes, with the population of 132,426 persons, to accept the act.

The participation of the Indians in these referendum elections was astonishingly heavy. In national elections, when a President is chosen and the interest of the voters is aroused through a long, intensive campaign, the average number of ballots cast does not exceed 52 percent of the total number of eligible voters; in referendum elections deciding on such matters as constitutional ratifications, bond issues, etc., when no personalities are injected into the campaign, less than 35 percent of the eligible voters participate. The referendum election on the Indian Reorganization Act did not concern itself with candidates and personalities, yet 62 percent of all adult Indians came to the polls and cast their ballots.

This heavy participation becomes even more significant when it is remembered that at least half the Indian voters could not speak the English language, that reading and writing were unknown to many of them, and that most of them had never voted before. Yet so great was their interest that grandmothers and grandfathers past the allotted span of three score and ten walked many miles to the polling places, there to mark and cast their ballots with celerity and dispatch even though some of them had to be instructed which end of the pencil to use.

Except in a single tribe (Isleta Pueblo), not an Indian voice was raised against the participation of women; everywhere the right of the feminine element to take part in the referendums was conceded without question.

The rejection of the Reorganization Act on 73 reservations, most of them very small (but including the largest reservation, that of the Navajos), was due in the main to energetic campaigns of misrepresentation carried on by special interests which feared that they would lose positions of advantage through the applications of the act. Joining hands in this campaign of misrepresentation were stockmen who feared that the Indians would run their own stock on land hitherto leased to white interests; traders who were afraid of losing their business through the competition of Indian consumers’ cooperatives; merchants and politicians in white communities on the edge of reservations; a few missionaries who resented the extension of the constitutional guarantee of religious liberty and freedom of conscience to Indians (not an element in the Reorganization Act, but enforced as a policy by the present administration); lumber interests which did not want to see Indian tribes exploit their own
forest resources. These interests, working frequently by the historic method of defrauding Indian tribes with the connivance of certain of their own leaders, spread extreme and bizarre falsehoods concerning the effects of the act.

Among the myths spread by adverse interests on various reservations were such as these: Acceptance of the act would cause Indian owners of allotments to lose their land, which would then be distributed among those Indians who had disposed of their allotments; all farm crops would be impounded in warehouses and thereafter would be equally distributed among the population; the Indians would be segregated behind wire fences charged with electricity; all the livestock would be taken from certain tribes; unallotted reservations would be thrown open to white entry; Indian dances and other religious ceremonies would be suppressed; Indians would not be allowed to go to Christian churches; certain Southwestern reservations would be turned over to Mexico, etc.

Considering the long history of broken treaties, pledges, and promises, the fact that 172 tribes with an Indian population of 132,000 accepted the word of the Government that the fundamental reorganization of their lives would not harm them is evidence of a new, more satisfactory relationship between the Indians and the Indian Service. The referendum elections served a most valuable purpose. They were palpable proof to the Indians that the Government really was ready to give them a voice in the management of their own affairs, and that the period of arbitrary autocratic rule over the tribes by the Indian Service had come to an end. This evidence of good faith was reinforced by the request that the tribes begin immediately to formulate the constitutions and charters authorized by the act. Reservation committees and groups set to work at the unaccustomed task of drafting constitutions and of making plans and programs for the economic rehabilitation of the tribes. Charters and constitutions under the Reorganization Act, when once adopted, cannot be revoked or changed by administrative action. Personal government of the tribes by the Secretary of the Interior and the Indian Commissioner is brought to an end.

In the revivifying of the Indian spirit, the wide-opened benefits of Indian emergency conservation and of other relief work played an important part. It must be remembered that on many reservations the kind of depression which struck the Nation in 1929 had been a chronic condition for a long time, becoming acute when land sales dropped off and the revenue from farm and grazing lands leased to whites dropped almost to the vanishing point. Opportunities for wage work had been all but nonexistent on most reservations, and the psychology of the chronically unemployed had prevailed for so long that it was feared that most of the Indians had become unemployable.

This fear proved to be groundless. Indians young and old not merely accepted emergency relief work, but almost fought for the chance to labor. And they labored effectively. Through their effort the physical plant, the land, the water, the forests, have had many millions of dollars added to their use value in the last 2 years. Incalculable benefits have been derived from the improvement of 20 million acres of range, through the development of springs and wells and the construction of thousands of stock-water dams, through roads and truck trails, through the construction of thousands of miles of fences and telephone lines. There is not one reservation which, as a result of the emergency and relief work, is not a better place to live on, an easier place in which to gain a living from the soil.
A clear gain to the Indians—and to many white communities in the Indian country—accrued out of the grants from Public Works funds for new Indian community-school buildings, hospitals, and sanatoria, many of them built entirely by Indian labor. Yet the pressing need for structures of this kind has not been half filled. Nor is the Indian irrigation program, financed from emergency grants, more than one-third completed.

The benefit derived by the Indians from the emergency and relief work has many aspects. Thousands of the Indian workers have, for perhaps the first time in their lives, learned what it means to have sufficient nourishment of the right kind regularly. Other thousands have been able to acquire minimal household goods, clothing, livestock, and farm implements. Thousands of savings accounts have been started at the various agencies out of earnings of $2.10 per day for 20 days in the month during part of the year.

There have been entries on the debit side also. The number of bootleggers on the fringe of many reservations has multiplied; law enforcement has become more and more difficult. Automobile dealers with second-hand wrecks for sale have encouraged the younger Indians to obligate their potential earnings for years ahead; some traders have encouraged credit buying on far too lavish a scale.

But more important than these shortcomings due to the innate generosity of a race unfamiliar with wise consumption habits is the problem that arises from the introduction of a wage economy on reservations which will supply almost no permanent opportunity for wage work. After the depression is over and the emergency grants cease, what will happen to the now-working Indians?

To prepare for this inevitable crisis additional funds must be obtained for rehabilitation projects, such as land purchase, housing, the construction of barns and root cellars, the development of domestic water and sanitary facilities, the subjugation of land, the financing of purchases of seeds, implements, and livestock, the stimulation and development of Indian arts and crafts, and the organization and financing of sawmills, fisheries, and other industrial enterprises. This amended program would mean a playing down of the wage motive, a playing up of production for use. If the necessary grants for this program be made, the Indians on many reservations should be able to pass gradually from relief work to subsistence farming, craft, and other supplemental industrial work of their own.