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Letter from Representative Burdick to Sybelle Wright Regarding Native Conditions, February 11, 1949

Usher Burdick

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Indians

February 11, 1919

Mrs. Cybelle H. Wright
Box 36
St. John, North Dakota

Dear Mrs. Wright:

I have carefully read your letter of February 7. I appreciate your letter and it was not a bit too long. I am always glad to get every angle of this case as I was careful in a lawsuit to bring out all facts.

I presume there are a great many facts about your reservation that I do not know, as I am sure you do not know all the facts with respect to these Indians.

There are some points on which we can agree: First, intoxicating liquor is a bad thing for Indians and Whites alike. That some of the Indians do get intoxicated there is absolutely no doubt. That the government has furnished clothing and that the Indians do not take care of it is another fact we can agree upon. But my question to you now is, Whose Fault Is It?

Remember at one time these Indians had land enough. We purchased all the land from the Red River to almost Minot and from Fort Totten to the Canadian line for 5 cents per acre and when the head chiefs would not sign the treaty, we set up stooges among the Indians and had them sign. Worse than that, the claim of these Indians for payment of this 5 cents an acre is still pending before the government.

We took charge of these Indians 80 years ago and they have been our wards ever since. We were supposed to educate them in the ways of the white man and bring them along to a condition of full responsible citizens. That was our job. The Indians didn't ask that, but we forced the wardship onto them.

Some more facts are that now the Indians on an average in your reservation have 5 acres of land each and the rest of the people in your county, counting men, women and children (the same as we count the Indians) have 55 acres each. The Indians' lands are poor lands as you must know from your many years residence there. The Indian Bureau's reports show that in much of these two townships that land that can be profitably cultivated is not more than 2% of the total, while the white man's land, on an average in your county shows that the land that can be cultivated profitably runs to 75%.

Now I ask you, can these Indians be herded up on these two townships of poor land and be expected to sustain themselves?

Another point we agree upon is that we should pay the Indians what they have coming and supply them with enough land upon which they can survive and turn them loose. Then let them sink or swim, but it would be a crime against humanity, to strip them first of their land, and then turn them loose. We have an obligation to them which we accepted 80 years ago.

Attached is a copy of a letter from your own county, which shows that I am not wrong in my statement that those people are not getting enough to eat. I have lived in North Dakota for 67 years and have been through everything that any pioneer went through and I am not talking to hear myself talk.

Your same argument would apply to the thousands of old people in this county who need help. I am for them from the word go. They should not suffer. Maybe they haven't been as provident as you have been. Maybe sickness or some other ill stroke of fortune placed them where they are. That makes no difference now when they actually need help. I can now think back and see many places where I could have accumulated more, if I had made no mistakes. But no one can successfully accuse me of trying to get ahead at the expense of any one else. I have taken things as they came - when other people have been poor I have been poor with them. In 1890 I, like all my neighbors, received old clothes from the county commissioners of Benson County, and was glad to get them and was not ashamed to take them.

When I see people in want I think of the old pioneer days on Graham's Island where I was raised. I think of the early frosts, the dry weather, the poor prices and the plight of the people. As far as I am concerned I will not give up this fight to alleviate the suffering no matter whose fault it once was.

Thanking you for your letter and assure you that I genuinely appreciate it, I am

Sincerely,

Enc.

Usher L. Burdick, M.C.