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**Letter from Thomas Curtis to Representative Burdick Enclosing
an Article Regarding the Inundation of the Fort Berthold
Reservation due to Construction of the Garrison Dam, Asking for
Burdick's Views on the Matter, June 22, 1951**

Thomas B. Curtis

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THOMAS B. CURTIS
12TH DISTRICT,
MISSOURI

COMMITTEES:
EXPENDITURES IN THE
EXECUTIVE DEPARTMENTS
SELECT COMMITTEE ON
SMALL BUSINESS

Congress of the United States
House of Representatives
Washington, D. C.

June 22, 1951.

Honorable Usher L. Burdick,
House Office Building,
Washington 25, D. C.

Dear Colleague:

One of my very fine constituents has forwarded the enclosed article to me in regard to the plight of our Northern Indians. I have great respect for your views and I wondered if you would be kind enough to give me your views on this particular matter.

Sincerely,



Thomas B. Curtis.

TBC:mb

Inundation and the Indians

THOMAS ALFRED TRIPP

The present status and future plans for the Fort Berthold Reservation Indian Mission are explained

INDIANS OF FORT BERTHOLD Reservation on the Missouri River in North Dakota have finally agreed to the transfer of their native land to the Federal Government. They took this step with great reluctance and only after a long struggle to prevent it. The area has been their homeland since pre-territorial days and Indians have greater attachment to home and place than almost any other people. But Fort Garrison Dam is being built forty miles down stream.

The dam will impound one of the largest man-made lakes, practically destroying the habitation of the Mandan, Arikara and Gros Ventre Indian tribes. All the good bottom lands, consisting of the tillable acreage of the reservation and offering winter protection and sustenance for livestock will be inundated. Three hundred and fifty family homesites will be under as much as two hundred feet of water within the next thirty months.

These families will be dispersed three ways. A very few will accommodate themselves to the over-crowded resources on the small peninsulas of higher land protruding into the lake area. About twelve per cent have signified their intention of quitting the reservation and going out into "White Man's World." Approximately 85 per cent will be forced to resettle on the Big Lease, a practically uninhabited, and almost uninhabitable, area of the reservation to the west of the present settlements.

The land transferred to the United States for inundation contains 80 per cent of all reservation roads, the entire reservation school system, all churches and all community developments. Construction of new homes, schools, churches, administrative sites and a hospital will therefore be necessary.

The remaining area within reservation boundaries, consisting of upland

grazing territory, is practically roadless and has been of little value to the Indians. With the extreme temperatures during the North Dakota winters, they have used the sheltered bottom land adjacent to the Missouri River.

This on-coming situation constitutes a major tragedy for a whole contingent of proud people who are to be uprooted. The present date for removal from the area is October 1952. All living beings must be out of the "taking area" with all their movable property, never to return again. The crisis for semi-primitive people can only be imagined by comfortable, sophisticated citizens whose homes are secure. Such forced migration is not easy for populations of the most mature cultures. How much more difficult for the children, racially speaking, of the nation!

The fact that the dam and coming inundation are in the interest of the country as a whole does not relieve the feelings and suffering of the Indians. Of course, the benefits in terms of flood-control, electric power, irrigation and soil erosion control will be immense, not only to farms and cities in the lower Missouri and Mississippi river valleys but to the resources of the whole nation. Great quantities of electricity will be generated by the water power at the dam to light the homes and turn the machinery of farms and industries. The results of the Fort Garrison Dam are necessary to the future of the United States in peace or in war. Our rivers must be harnessed for the benefit of the people of this continent. This development has been all too long in coming in a nation of superb engineering skills and wasting resources.

Some group always suffers in every instance of inundation. All dams around the world must necessarily take some of the best bottom land and they invariably result in coerced migrations. People all over the Tennessee Valley region can tell many a sad story of lost homes.

It is notable that no outstanding study has been made of the personal and group tragedies resulting from the necessary hardships involved in obtaining the material and social gains of river development. There is need of such studies to create public understanding of the plight of the victims, to guide the administrators charged with removal problems and resettlement, and to help educators and missionary workers in preparing the minds of a threatened people in the processes of re-establishing mores and security in a new environment.

THIS PROBLEM SUGGESTS THE FIRST of three approaches needed for the home missionary program among Fort Berthold Indians, as follows:

1. *Research.* It is expected that the University of Chicago will cooperate with the Board of Home Missions in a basic survey of the Fort Berthold situation. Dr. Sol Tax, Division of the Social Sciences in the University, has agreed to head the research. The Race Relations Department of the Board of Home Missions is working with Professor Tax on plans for the preliminary study.

An Indian group would appear to be a suitable subject for study of threatened populations. Their simple culture would apparently provide less protection against civilization's engineering and planned resettlement techniques. Their frustration should be great and plainly exposed to the investigator with the capacity of communication with them. Fort Berthold Indians offer hope that communication (i. e., understanding by white man) will be possible. They have had, and are still having, considerable experience in social organization and political action. Years ago they formed themselves into an active, uniting force known as the Three Affiliated Tribes of Fort Berthold Reservation, which has a significant community and political action.

The Town and Country Department of the Board of Home Missions and North Dakota Conference will make use of the above mentioned sociological and anthropological research in future plans for the mission. A seminar of Board, Conference and local leaders will be held at the proper time to ana-

lyze the facts and turn the pertinent data into action in terms of church programs.

2. *Resettlement.* The second step that seems clear is concerned with those Indians to be resettled on the Reservation. Truman B. Douglass, Executive Vice President of the Board of Home Missions, stated our problems and purpose when he said that the mission for the Fort Berthold Indians is a "critically needed ministry to a people who are about to be deprived of their ancestral lands, sent away from their homes, and settled in a new and probably more rigorous environment. Because of the construction of the Garrison Dam, the Indians among whom we have been working in North Dakota are to become our own Displaced Persons. Their fertile farmlands in the river valley are to be inundated, their homes torn down, the sites of their five Congregational Christian churches covered with many feet of water, and their reservation moved—probably to an upland region ill-adapted to the kind of farming to which they are accustomed. *We shall*

go with them on this new migration."

Resettlement will call for special spiritual guidance from the missionaries to help the Indians meet the social and psychological strains of removal and readjustment. The mission housing must be built in a new place, presumably somewhere in the Big Lease. Five church buildings must be moved or constructed anew when the pattern of resettlement becomes known. Perhaps three additional churches will be necessary. Every phase of the work, excepting the relationships to the people, must begin from scratch and be built up all over again. It will be as costly in funds and personnel-time as the first beginnings.

3. *Off-reservation.* For some years Indians have been leaving the reservations everywhere. Fort Berthold has sent its share out into White Man's world. The Indian veterans of the two World Wars gained experiences which led some of them to seek wider horizons. Others, especially the restless and alert, did the same. Today half of the Three Affiliated Tribes are off the reservation,

mostly in the towns and cities of North Dakota.

In leaving the reservation these individuals have followed a pattern pleasing to missionaries working with Indians. Home mission boards which work together in the Home Missions Council have a definite program to remove government wardship from the Indians. Only by such a change of status can they become full citizens and accept their share of community responsibility. But when Indians leave the reservation they go into towns and cities to meet a way of life for which they are poorly prepared. They are located in the slums and are exploited on every side.

This situation calls for a new type of Indian mission. It is now necessary to tackle the problem of the Indians in towns and cities, while still maintaining reservation work. Consideration is being given to the development of an off-reservation mission program in an urban center from which it would be expected to spread to all the town and city Indians of North Dakota.

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