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"A Tentative Proposal for the Rehabilitation of the Fort Berthold Indians," February 4, 1949

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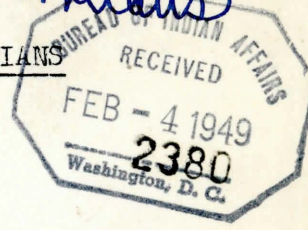
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Fort Berthold Indians

A TENTATIVE PROPOSAL FOR REHABILITATION OF THE FORT BERTHOLD INDIANS



FOR DISCUSSION PURPOSES ONLY

Having attended several meetings where the Indian question has been discussed at considerable length, and having taken part in three panel discussions on what could be done to better the living conditions of the Indian, I was surprised at the agreement of all persons taking part in this discussion that the Indian was not being properly treated and that something would have to be done to better his living conditions and to give him a better opportunity to earn his own living. No one at any of these meetings, however, proposed any concrete plan for his rehabilitation. There was a great deal of discussion as to how the white man had treated the Indian, how they had taken the lands away from him, and that today the Indian was penned up on a reservation without any means of making a decent livelihood.

The fact that there was no solution proposed is probably due to the fact that there is no pat solution to this problem, and that it can be worked out over a long period of time. But even, if the problem is complex, there should be a beginning. Therefore, I am proposing a brief outline of a plan for the rehabilitation of the Indians on the Fort Berthold Reservation. On this reservation there are about fifteen or sixteen hundred Indians who soon will have to move from their present location to higher land because the places in which they are now living will soon be flooded by the waters behind the great Garrison Dam. I do not propose this as a perfect plan, but only as a plan for discussion in order that others who might be more familiar with this problem and have had more experience in rehabilitation work, can work out a better plan. I do not believe that it is necessary to set up any additional agencies to solve the Indian problem. There are now operating in the state of North Dakota about eight different agencies that would have something to do with the rehabilitation of the Indians.

DEPARTMENTS CONCERNED

First, there is the Indian Bureau itself, charged now with the administration of Indian affairs.

Second, the Farmers Home Administration, concerned with loans and rehabilitation.

Third, the County Extension Service, concerned with most problems of agriculture.

Fourth, the Soil Conservation Service, concerned with conserving the soil.

Fifth, the Unemployment Service; this agency could render help.

Sixth, the Public Welfare Board, concerned with public assistance and welfare services.

Seventh, the Public Health Department, concerned with the general health of the people.

Eighth, the Department of Public Instruction, concerned with the education of all children in North Dakota.

Since North Dakota is primarily agricultural, we will first take up the theory of the rehabilitation and re-establishment of the Indian farmer. Now, before we begin this, we realize that there will have to be enabling legislation enacted by Congress, that the above named agencies do not at the present time have authority or the necessary appropriations to enter into such a plan. But after a plan has been worked out, then the necessary legislation could be introduced in Congress and necessary appropriations made. We realize that there will have to be some redrawing of the laws defining the scope of several of these agencies and elimination of duplicated services, etc., but this is not an insurmountable obstacle, and if a plan is made that is feasible, we believe that Congress would be willing to enact the necessary legislation.

PLAN FOR REHABILITATION

It is first necessary that the title to all lands in the Fort Berthold reservation be cleared up so that the lands can be sold to individual Indian

families. That means clearing up the old estates and rearranging the title in such a manner that the land can be settled by individual Indian families on family type farms. We believe that this can be done without doing violence to the individual titleholder who now owns his land within the reservation under a fee simple title.

PROCEDURE AFTER THE LAND TITLES HAVE BEEN CLEARED

Then the Extension Service and the Soil Conservation Service, with the help of any other agency, should lay out the lands of this reservation in probably three types; first, lands that would be suitable for a family-type farm for a family using a balanced system of farming, that is, raising both grain and livestock. Other lands would be divided into ranches for purely ranching purposes; and the third type of land would probably be a common pasture for the use of farmers who have an amount of stock in excess of that which they can keep on a family type farm or for those owners of stock who are not actually engaged in farming.

These farms should be laid out with due regard to the location of future roads, so as to make them accessible to highways and school facilities. Surveys, of course, would have to be made as to the type of soil and what it is suitable for; the availability of water; and whether or not the land can be cultivated without soil erosion. Here is an ideal chance for the various government agencies to render the utmost in service in laying out an ideal tract of land for farming purposes. In laying out these farms, the probabilities are that no great attention would be paid to quarter sections or sections of land, since a farm would be laid out in such a manner as to offer the individual family farmer land that would be suitable for his purpose and would be altogether in a single unit.

GETTING THE FARMERS

We believe it is true that on this reservation, as elsewhere in the state of North Dakota, we have good Indian farmers, poor farmers, families who would like to

farm and have a possibility of being good farmers, and families that might like to get on a farm for the mere reasons of obtaining better living conditions. This is true throughout the state of North Dakota and would be no exception upon the reservation.

After these farm tracts have been laid out, then we would commence the process of taking application from Indian families who want to farm. I believe that these applications should first be passed to the tribal council because in most cases the tribal council is personally acquainted with the habits and character of every family on the reservation, and know whether or not there would be a likelihood of this particular family succeeding in farming. If the application is passed by the tribal council, then it should be sent to the Farmers Home Administration for further processing.

DUTIES OF FARMERS HOME ADMINISTRATION

The Farmers Home Administration now has a set-up in every county in the state of North Dakota, and they have the know-how and personnel to make loans to rehabilitate and to set farmers up in operation. The application then would come before the Farmers Home Administration Committee. It is suggested that in the counties having any great amount of Indian land, two Indians be added to the committee. The application would furnish information showing the experience of this particular family in farming, the kind of machinery or stock or other property that they have, the number in the family, and all the necessary information to allow the committee to assign a particular type of farm to this Indian family. This would not necessarily mean that the committee would say to this family, "You must live in this community", but only that their situation entitles them to choose this or that particular type of farm. If the application is passed by the Farmers Home Committee, then buildings suitable for that type of farming would be erected upon this tract of land, and this particular family would be given a loan sufficient to purchase the land, if necessary, and obtain the needed farm machinery suitable for this family and the necessary livestock to

properly start this farm. These loans would not have to be in a great amount, as it would not be expected that this family would be set up with a full and complete line of modern power machinery, but only with such necessary power machinery as the family is capable of handling. And we believe that it must necessarily be power machinery because we do not believe that any family can compete in modern agriculture with horses and an old sulky plow.

These loans, of course, would be closely supervised. All withdrawals from the fund would be supervised by the Farmers Home Administration and all checks countersigned, the same with the Indian family as was done with the white family when he was rehabilitated under the Tenant Purchase Act. This supervision might be more closely applied with some families than with others. The decision in such matters would be left to the Farmers Home Committee of the county.

COUNTY EXTENSION SERVICE AND SOIL CONSERVATION SERVICE PART IN THE PROGRAM

Once the farmer was established on the farm, it would be the duty of the Extension Service to furnish the Indian family with all of the services now rendered to other families in the state of North Dakota, and the same would be true of the Soil Conservation Service. In many instances if not in all, it probably would be best to form Soil Conservation districts and assist these families in the manner in which they break up the prairie, the kind of the land that should be broken up, and all other soil conservation practices now used in the state of North Dakota and available to white families in the soil districts.

DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC INSTRUCTION

No doubt school districts would have to be set up in this community, and we believe that the Indian family should have the same type of school services that the white children have. In other words, we do not believe that there should be segregation of the Indian any more than there should be segregation of the German born population, Italian born, or any other nationalities. America has been known as the "Great Melting Pot", and we have been welded into a United Nation because

of the fact that all of the people who have migrated to this country receive the same rights; they have the right to attend the same school, the same church, and the same political meetings. We believe firmly that the Indian not only has this right, but it is our duty to see that he has these opportunities. The formation of school districts along good roads that would be built in this reservation would give the Indian family a chance to participate directly in the education of his children, and we believe that these schools should be operated in the same manner as the public schools that our state is now operating; that is, under the supervision of the Department of Public Instruction and the County Superintendent of Schools.

THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH

The Department of Health would operate in this reservation the same as it does in the other counties of the state, and the same health services should be given to the Indian family that are now being given to the white man. The services might be expanded so that the Indian families would be sure to have the necessary health services needed by them.

THE PUBLIC WELFARE BOARD

The Public Welfare Board would continue to operate upon the reservation as it does now and would render all of the services to the Indian families that it now renders and can render to white families. This would include, of course, the old age assistance program, the aid to dependent children, aid to the blind, general assistance, and the crippled children's services and other services to children.

Now as to general assistance, there is a great deal of question as to what should be done. We do not feel that the county can assume the burden of such assistance, and believe Congress, until we have a fair chance to re-establish and rehabilitate the Indian family, should assume a major portion of the cost of the general assistance program. If the federal government should not assume the major costs of this program until the other part of our program has been carried

out and the Indian families self-supporting, the general assistance program might cost the State of North Dakota as much as a half million dollars a year. We do believe that if we can enact a program somewhat along the line outlined, the general assistance load would drop; nevertheless, it would be a considerable time before a complete rehabilitation program could be set up and in operation for all of the Indians in the state.

THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S SHARE

The federal government would necessarily have to bear the primary costs of establishing this program; that is, the actual removal of the Indian families from their present location to the new location, should be assumed by the federal government. It is also possible that the federal government should assume the burden of purchasing the land and improvements for the Indians and that the Farmers Home Administration loan be made only for setting up actual farm operations. These are the many questions that would have to be worked out in detail, and can only be briefly outlined here. The federal government should assume the task of building new roads in the reservation. These roads should be built only after the land has been properly surveyed and laid out into family type units, and with the idea of furnishing access to the schools and markets. We know transportation of pupils in the western part of North Dakota is a difficult thing in the winter time, but if main highways could be laid out to the reservation and the farm buildings located along these one or two main highways, transportation over a distance of five to fifteen miles would not be difficult. This form of transportation over paved highways in irrigation districts of the west has worked out very successfully. In many districts the school bus travels from ten to fifteen miles along one main paved highway to the central school, and all of the farms in this particular irrigation district are located along this main line of traffic. Something might be gathered from the way they do things in these irrigated districts.

SUMMARY

We can only hit the high spots of this plan as there are many fields that remain to be explored before a definite program could be laid before Congress. We believe, from the information that we have had from our congressmen in the several meetings which it has been our privilege to attend, that Congress is anxious to do something about the Indian problem, and on several occasions when certain Senators and Representatives have attended our Public Welfare Association meetings, they have asked, "What is your plan? Submit a plan to us and we shall be glad to act upon it, as we are getting tired of this Indian question continually coming up each and every year and no apparent solution being found for the problem." The Indian problem in the state of North Dakota is getting worse each year. We all know the problem last year in connection with the Indians on the Fort Totten and Turtle Mountain Reservations; these problems will be repeated again this winter unless something is done. We do not believe the state of North Dakota can continually go on and ignore the problem of the Indian. It is squarely before us in connection with the Fort Berthold Reservation and some solution must be reached within the next two years. We believe that it is time that all of the agencies concerned in the state of North Dakota get together for a two or three day conference, and work out these problems one by one. Then when Congress meets next January, we should have a well defined plan to lay before it. Once this plan has been decided upon, we should all get together and advocate the passage of laws to carry it out.

We know that there are a great many flaws in this plan, and we submit it to the various groups for discussion only, and hope that someone may come up with a model plan that could be used for the future welfare of the Indian of North Dakota.

We fully realize that after all possible families have been relocated or rehabilitated, there will remain families who are not suitable for location on farms and who do not desire to become farmers, and that some other plan will have

to be made to establish them on a self-sustaining basis. We believe that such a plan as outlined above could be used with certain changes for those families who want to engage in small businesses, such as might prosper on the reservation; or, if these families were capable, there should be no reason why they should not be relocated and rehabilitated in places outside the reservation. But after all of this has been done, as in any other community where mass rehabilitation has been attempted, there will remain types of families who do not seem to fit into any known scheme of rehabilitation, and the chances are that those families will have to be taken care of from public aid. The Employment Service, of course, would be of great benefit in times of seasonal employment; their work in the past has been very good and it would continue in close cooperation with all the other agencies.

In any plan of relocation and rehabilitation, serious study should be given to the Fort Totten and Turtle Mountain Reservations, for these reservations are at present overcrowded. The best white families in the state of North Dakota placed upon these reservations in the same numbers as the Indians could not possibly make a living there. Something drastic will have to be done to relieve this situation. The Indian population is increasing and the time has now arrived when we can no longer confine this population to this restricted area and expect them to maintain themselves.

As long as the people of North Dakota continue to ignore this question, the worse it will get. We believe that the great majority of the people in the state of North Dakota do not believe in segregation of one people from another; yet we are practicing segregation in its worst form right here in the state of North Dakota. Will the people of this state accept the principle of non-segregation and assist in relocating and rehabilitating the Indian outside of these reservations? This is the question that must be answered within the next few years. If we do not assist the Indian in relocation and rehabilitation outside of the reservation, then surely we will have to enlarge the reservation or will have to

divert a great portion of our welfare funds for the maintenance of Indian families that cannot possibly sustain themselves upon these reservations.

We fully realize that we cannot change the living habits of the Indian families overnight. We fully realize that they have a cultural background of their own, and this background cannot be destroyed with one sweep of the hand. We do believe that there are sufficient Indian families now upon the reservation that would be willing to take advantage of this plan. Even if this plan is not feasible in all of its parts, we realize that something must be done and we must get a start at once. And we call your attention to the following quote from the Harper report, dated December 1, 1946 and contained in the report and recommendations to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, prepared under the direction of the District Office No. 2, U. S. Indian Service, Billings, Montana: "It is believed that the total wiping out of the existing Agency at Elbowoods, the farm stations, hospital, and schools offer the unprecedented opportunity to rebuild administration on the reconstituted reservation along new lines, with the dead hand of the past completely removed. It should be possible, in the new administration, to exclude those onerous features of Indian administration which have now come to be associated in the minds of the Indians with the 'Agency system'. Many Indians, as is commonly known, have resented and protested against real or alleged discriminations inherent in specialized administrative services. The opportunity undoubtedly would exist in the new administration of the reservation to affect an extensive, if not complete, collaboration with local political subdivisions of the State, and with the State of North Dakota itself. Especially would this opportunity exist in providing the Indians with educational, health, agricultural extension, and social welfare services."

Now is the time for all agencies concerned to get together and plan, with the Indian himself, this new rehabilitation program that will make the Indian in

actuality what he really is today: a citizen of the United States with equal rights, privileges, and obligations with others.

Respectfully submitted,

Burton Wilcox
Burton Wilcox, President
North Dakota Public Welfare Board