

BRAIDED CHANNELS: NEGOTIATED SPACES WITHIN THE NEW DEAL
LANDSCAPE OF FORT PECK RESERVATION MONTANA, 1933-1941

by

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Dedicated to my sister, Sandra Anne Wyatt

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Others deserve my humble thanks, although we have never met, the Assiniboine and Sioux of Fort Peck Reservation. As Donald Fixico has pointed out, writing about a culture that is not your own without engaging people in the community is a precarious position at best. Engaging communities takes a respectful amount of time which this thesis did not afford. The reflexive turn encodes the bias of historical lens, and even though I am aware of this, I understand that it is inescapable. I accept any flaws in perspective posited in this thesis. Any errors within this document are my own.

ABSTRACT

Between 1933 and 1941, there was no place an indigenous person living on Fort Peck Reservation, Montana could turn and not see symbols of federal government control carved into the landscape through the execution of an engineer's schematic. While the Assiniboine, Sioux, and Chippewa navigated the complexity of New Deal social programs' effects upon their society, hundreds of white government workers from various agencies amassed on the reservation, building dams, reservoirs, wells, and irrigation works upon the traditional cultural landscape. Within the context of the federal assimilation programs targeting Native peoples in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, control of natural resources is a seldom discussed component in the narrative. This thesis examines the connections between end of allotment, federal water projects, and the ways the Native peoples of Fort Peck persisted through the changes to their traditional cultural landscape.

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INTRODUCTION: THE PERSISTENCE OF THE ASSINIBOINE AND SIOUX THROUGH A NEW DEAL BUILT LANDSCAPE

A braided channel is the way a river flows, cuts channels in deep sediment, and creates a weaving of constantly changing islands. The Missouri River has braided channels throughout its 2,341 mile course from its headwaters in Brower's Spring, Montana to its mouth on the Mississippi. The river is never the same from one season to the next. Fort Peck Reservation's history presents a similar shifting flow of communication, action, expectation, and consequence. The human and environmental factors behind the historical context of irrigation works on the reservation contain components that ebbed and waned over time and changed definition along the continuum.

Between 1933 and 1941, there was no place an indigenous person living on Fort Peck Reservation, Montana could turn and not see symbols of federal government control carved into the landscape through the execution of an engineer's schematic. While the Assiniboine, Sioux, and Chippewa navigated the complexity of New Deal social programs' effects upon their society, hundreds of white government workers from various agencies amassed on the reservation, building dams, reservoirs, wells, and irrigation works upon the traditional cultural landscape. Within the context of the federal assimilation programs targeting Native peoples in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, control of natural resources is a seldom discussed component in the narrative. This thesis examines the connections between end of allotment, federal water projects, and the ways the Native peoples of Fort Peck persisted through the changes to their traditional cultural landscape.

In 1887, the Great Northern Railroad (GNR) cut across the bottomlands of the plains next to the Missouri River along the southern border of Fort Peck Reservation. Thousands of miles of steel, planed wood, and gravel transversed animal migration paths, and roads that American Indian peoples and Euro-Americans alike used to travel between family homes, hunting grounds, and trading centers. Steamboats had been bringing millions of dollars of goods and equipment up the Missouri past Fort Peck to as far as Fort Benton since 1860.¹ The physical traces of Euro-American incursion were increasingly evident. As the nineteenth century turned into the twentieth, the engineered landscape of the New Deal large-scale water projects would become an embedded reminder that American economic and social ideals were slowly transforming the lands Congress and Presidents promised to sovereign Native nations.

The Missouri River's bottomlands long provided Native peoples with winter shelter, summer hunting, and a place for traditional cultural practices. The Great Northern Railroad was completed in 1887, sixteen years after the government created the Fort Peck reservation. The railroad lay between the Native peoples of Fort Peck and the Missouri River. The railroad is simultaneously a visual symbol of cultural asphyxiation, the future, and persistence.²

Railroad lines are omnipresent in the West. They are not just visual markers of wealth; they fill the senses. The smell of the coal fire, the roar of the wheels, a distant whistle announcing its approach and all that comes with it permeates your location. Even

1. Annalies Corbin, *The Material Culture of Steamboat Passengers: Archaeological Evidence From the Missouri River* (New York: Kluwer Academic/Plenum Publishers, 2000), 2-5.

2. The term cultural asphyxiation is used with permission by Rex McCullouch, email message to author, December 7, 2017.

if you are not within sight of the railroad, you know it is there. The tracks only lead in two directions, where you want to go and where you do not want to be. Tracks connect the future and the past to the present and blend the worlds in a constantly transitioning space of shifting identity and place. The train is nowhere and everywhere at once.

Railroads are captors of time. You can set your watch by them. You must set your watch by them, for if you do not, you will miss it. That is not the train's fault. They are dictators of possibility and destroyers of opportunity with every tick of the second hand. You can step within its box and sit with unknown others and ride to your destination. Your destination is the only destination that matters. The railroad served all but preserved each in a resin of individual importance and experience.

Trains do not just appear out of nowhere, you know when they are coming. Trains build expectation. The railroad committed those without a sense of seconds to a life without progress. They represent *corridors* of culture, not just moving goods, but moving the ideas and influences behind those goods through an area.³ John R. Stilgoe explains in *Metropolitan Corridor* that "... the railroad industry reshaped the American built environment and reoriented American thinking."⁴ This thesis draws inspiration upon Stilgoe's concept of how a built environment can reorient thinking, and examines the way in which New Deal irrigation ditches, reservoirs, and dams affected the relationship of American Indians living on Fort Peck reservation to their environment.

3. John R. Stilgoe, *Metropolitan Corridor: Railroads and the American Scene* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1983), x. Stilgoe coined the term metropolitan corridor.

4. *Ibid.*, ix.

For Native people of the Northern Plains, steel lines in the dirt represented the death of the buffalo hunt, the hemming in of their people, and the irreversible intrusion of another country's progress. In the 1930s, the Great Northern Railroad carried cars of machines to the Fort Peck Dam work site on the eastern edge of the reservation. An enormous, smoke belching machine carrying its progeny to build another great machine—hydroelectric power. The peoples of Fort Peck developed adaptive strategies to survive, resituate federal projects to their advantage, and continue living in the ways they wanted within their land transformed by railway and federal water projects.

From Thomas Jefferson's open letter to the Cherokee in 1806 until the late 1940s, the federal government sought to "civilize" American Indians and command their resources.⁵ Beginning with encouragement from Jefferson and later developing into federal assimilation programs, the intent was to slowly absorb Native peoples into white society until their lifeways and claims to land no longer existed.⁶ The US government insisted Native peoples hold Euro-American ideals and practice to quicken the process. Transforming tribes into farmers was part of that process.

The main tenet of Federal Indian policy of the nineteenth century was for Native peoples to adopt European-style farming. Farming solved two issues the US government had with an American Indian presence close to white interests. The government thought adopting European agrarianism would encourage Native peoples to adopt other European

5. "From Thomas Jefferson to Cherokee Nation, 4 May 1808," Founders Online, National Archives, last modified June 13, 2018, <http://founders.archives.gov/documents/Jefferson/99-01-02-7956>.

6. Elmer R. Rusco, *A Fateful Time: The Background and Legislative History of the Indian Reorganization Act* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2000), 94. Secretary of the Interior, Ray Lyman Wilbur, under President John Edgar Hoover, quoted in chapter four, "in a generation there would remain but a few small groups [of Indians] that would be different from the generality of the population. Indian administration virtually would have ceased to exist."

customs, education, and religions, to “kill the Indian, and save the man.”⁷ Sectioning property into individually owned lots for farming would terminate land held in common. If Indians owned their own parcels, that meant they could sell them—to whites.

Farming revolved around individual land ownership, a practice contradictory to many Native lifeways. Most American Indian tribes across the country had used resources from land communally for thousands of years for the procurement of food and supplies, and the profit of trade routes—ownership of land was a concept Europeans introduced. Many American Indian peoples not only found farming against their social norms and economic interests, but equivocated farming with the central ideal of a society that was trying to eliminate them.

Euro-Americans viewed Native lands not divided into parcels for farming as surplus land. With more settlers arriving to the Eastern United States in the nineteenth century, the pressure to have more lands available for their farms and plantations increased. In 1830, President Andrew Jackson signed the Indian Removal Act, removing all remaining sovereign Native nations from the Eastern United States to government chosen lands west of the Mississippi, outside of states’ borders. The reservations Eastern American Indians were removed to may not have been within the borders of states, but other Native groups and settlers were already in the west.

7. Captain Richard H. Pratt, “The Advantages of Mingling Indians With Whites,” in *Official proceedings of the annual meeting: 1892, Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities*. “A great general has said that the only good Indian is a dead one, and that high sanction of his destruction has been an enormous factor in promoting Indian massacres. In a sense, I agree with the sentiment, but only in this: that all the Indian there is in the race should be dead. Kill the Indian in him, and save the man.” 46. Accessed from <https://quod.lib.umich.edu/n/ncosw/ACH8650.1892.001?rgn=main;view=fulltext>

The next fifty years in the west after the removal act proved bloody. As settlers rushed across the Mississippi for land, furs, and gold, and Native nations lost the economic advantages and political leverage that trade networks had brought them, violence erupted across the prairie. Settlers attacked Indian communities and American Indian people attacked settlers. The federal government used the US Army to push Native nations onto reservations.

After the reservation system began in the 1830s, the federal insistence of American Indian to adopt white social, cultural, and economic processes increased. By the 1870s, the government outlawed Native peoples' traditional belief practices and forced Native parents to send their children to assimilation schools to learn white ways. In 1877, Congress passed the Dawes Act, sectioning off-reservation lands into individually held lots intended for Indians to practice farming or cattle grazing.⁸ The act allowed impoverished Indians to sell their lands, reducing the once 2.1 million of acres of reservation lands by 175,000 acres within only twelve years.

Scholars have used the term *land* broadly. Land is an amorphic word. Borders and deeds define a space that belongs to a person or institution describing the width and breadth of ownership, but within the word lies something more profound. Borders are drawn for advantage. Borders are drawn because of the resources lands hold. Timber, fertile soil for crops, minerals, tactical value, and water are all resources that lay beneath

8. The common term used to describe the schools that government officials forced American Indian children to attend is boarding school. The term assimilation school is more correct. The term boarding school implies families had a choice to send their children to the schools, and that their own culture was reinforced. The term boarding school obfuscates the brutality and cultural asphyxiation that Native children suffered.

the concept of land. When examining historical environments and the motives, reactions, and policies that shaped them, it is more exacting to use the term *resources* instead of land when applicable.

There is another resource that Euro-Americans and American Indians shared on their *lands*—spaces of sociocultural value. *Land* holds spaces of worship, burial, birth, and politics. These traditional cultural spaces are a social resource. Churches, cemeteries, hospitals, and courthouses are all sacred or respected spaces with their own rituals known by the societies that use them, each time used, reinforcing their importance. For the Assiniboine and Sioux on the Fort Peck reservation, traditional cultural spaces included places by the Missouri, Milk, and Poplar Rivers used to gather ceremonial and daily resources, spaces for dancing grounds, and places of funerary practice.

When used in the realm of ethnohistory, *land* does not acknowledge the depth and scope of actions taken against Native peoples and their environment for those actions were about so much more than a space within a defined border. On Fort Peck Reservation, when the government attempted to “civilize” the Assiniboine and Sioux through farming and grazing programs, *land* was not the factor, it was the most valuable resource that the west possesses—water. The possessing of water and the dictate of its flow through government water projects affected Assiniboine and Sioux’s traditional cultural spaces.

To understand the water projects' impact on Fort Peck, looking at the beginnings of the people who removed there and the way they interacted with their environment is essential. When the government created reservations, many Native groups were pushed

together on the same reservations regardless of their language, background, and historical differences. This fostered a tenuous social environment that is important to understand to make sense why some tribes made the decisions that they did during the water projects of the 1930s.

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, lack of understanding reservation social situations supported the view that Native groups were “children” that needed the firm, paternalistic hand of the federal government.⁹ The 1887 Dawes Act also accelerated the conceptualization of individual vs. communal resources within Fort Peck communities, and with that concept, all the underpinnings of federal structure to support it. Fort Peck families had to navigate new bureaucratic waters that meant taking on the mantle of understanding and operating within an individual based, instead of community-based, power structure. This put the lid on a pressure cooker of inter-tribal politics.

In 1990, professors of political science, law, and Native American studies reported that “Experience taught them [government workers and business people] that reservation politics could destroy continuity in tribal personnel and policies, making negotiations too expensive and investment too risky.”¹⁰ The word usage adds legitimacy to a frame of mind based on ignorance of sociocultural information. *Experience taught them*, is a problematic phrase.¹¹ The authors used the word *experience* which is a noun with a connotation of fact, implying that their experiences were irreproachable. The

9. Jefferson, *to Cherokee Nation*, 1.

10. James L. Lopach, Margery Hunter Brown, and Richmond L. Clow, *Tribal Government Today: Politics on Montana Reservations* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1990), 102.

11. "observation as the source of knowledge; actual observation; an event which has affected one," from <https://www.etymonline.com/word/experience>

statement reveals a fatalistic mindset and reinforces the notion that working with Native peoples is hopeless.

The authors position “extreme factionalism,” lack of “sufficient self-discipline,” “barrier(s),” and “short-ranged attitudes,” as negative results to federal plans without examining the reasons behind Fort Peck people’s response, or recognizing forms of agency.¹² The authors did not present any acknowledgment that further investigation would be necessary to understand the Native perspective on Fort Peck. The entrenchment of *factionalism* as the reason for every federal program’s failure is too reductive. In the last twenty years, historians have moved beyond the one-dimensional view of reservation politics elsewhere, but there is minimal review of Fort Peck politics regarding New Deal programs. Being mindful of Assiniboine and Sioux sociocultural dynamics is necessary to contextualize the New Deal environment.

During the New Deal, the railroad tracks separated the Assiniboine and Sioux from the subsistence gardens that the engineers took great care in planning, and the agency superintendent and other officials took great care to advocate. The Civil Conservation Corps Indian division built all eight irrigation-fed subsistence gardens on the Missouri River beyond the railroad tracks. People had to cross the tracks to work their plots and to bring the harvest back home. The presence of the railroad reinforced Fort Peck was subsisting while the rest of the world was expanding, and that the Assiniboine and Sioux would have to find a way around it. This thesis examines the ways in which they did.

12. Lopach, *Tribal Government*, 102.

CHAPTER ONE: HISTORY OF THE ASSINIBOINE AND SIOUX, AND THE CREATION OF FORT PECK RESERVATION

The Assiniboine, Early 1600s to Mid-1850s

The Assiniboine are divided into two groups—the Southern and the Northern Assiniboine. The Southern Assiniboine once lived from the Rainy Lakes-Lake region 200 miles west of Lake Superior to the Saskatchewan River of present-day eastern Alberta, Canada. The Assiniboine are one of several groups within a larger family of Siouan language speaking peoples who lived and now live in the Interior Plains of northern North America. The languages the Assiniboine and Sioux speak is in the same family but not mutually intelligible.¹

The Assiniboine of the early 17th century adapted to diverse ecosystems from the Tallgrass Prairie and “boreal forest” areas surrounding the Great Lakes of North America to the eastern edge of the forests of the Rocky Mountains, and in the parklands on the edges of both forests.² The Sioux called the Assiniboine “Ho’-hai ... or “Fish-eaters,” belying their beginnings around the western Great Lakes regions.³ In these forests, the Assiniboine learned the benefits of plants, hunted game, and made birch bark canoes.

In 1690, Henry Kelsey of the Hudson Bay Company recorded the Assiniboine living in southern present-day Saskatchewan, while twelve years earlier Daniel Greyson Dulhut recorded the Assiniboine living one hundred miles west of Lake Nipigon.

1. The fact their languages are similar but still require interpreters or the creation of a pidgin language for trade is important because these two culturally distinct peoples would be thrust together on the same reservation in 1871.

2. Parklands are intermittent forests in prairies before merging into larger, dense forests.

3. Edwin Thompson Denig, *The Assiniboine*, ed. J.N.B. Hewitt (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 2000), 2.

Assiniboine living in this region who had interactions with Jesuits in the late 1650s and fur traders from the early 1690s were part of the Southern Assiniboine. The Northern Assiniboine lived mostly in the forests of northwestern Alberta and east to the “Nelson River of northern [present day] Manitoba.”⁴ The Northern and Southern Assiniboine would create trade networks and enemies differently throughout the 18th and 19th centuries depending upon surrounding tribes’ access to furs for with foreign traders.⁵

In 1670, the English established the Hudson Bay York Factory in Cree territory. The Cree had been trading partners with the Assiniboine but their relationship had strained with the introduction of the European fur trade. The well-armed Cree used their position to leverage the Assiniboine into joining a trade alliance, forming a concerted economic front when negotiating with English and French traders. But the Assiniboine were not without tactics of their own. They used intermarriage with the Cree to keep peace and their benefit from the fur trade stable.⁶ The Cree-Assiniboine alliance also created a solid front to repel Ojibwe and Dakota aggressions to the east and south. In 1678, the French built a trading post on Lake Nipigon and worked primarily with the Assiniboine, but the Assiniboine kept their agreement with the Cree.⁷

The Assiniboine continued to trade with their neighbors to the south on the Missouri River. The southern Assiniboine had established trade with the Hidatsa and Mandan earth-lodge villages located at the confluence of the Heart and Missouri Rivers

4. David R. Miller, et. al., *The History of the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes, 1800-2000* (Poplar, MT: Fort Peck Community College with Montana Historical Society Press, Helena, MT, 2008), 13-14.

5. Since Fort Peck Reservation began with mostly the Southern Assiniboine, the term Assiniboine in the following text will be assumed as Southern Assiniboine.

6. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 14.

7. Miller, 14.

by the late 1600s. In the 1730s, the Assiniboine traded for items important for daily use, especially the beans, squash and corn the Mandan and Hidatsa grew.⁸ The Assiniboine also valued decorative goods. They bought Mandan “leather works ... painted bison robes” and ornamented “tanned buckskins.”⁹ For a tribe to be able to buy or trade for post-production items indicates a time of prosperity in the early 1700s, at least for some Assiniboine. The semi-stationary Hidatsas and Mandans had made a trade network of supplying nomadic plains hunters with crops they needed to supplement their diets. The fact the Mandans had enough corn to trade meant they were good at growing it in the arid climate, requiring a knowledge of irrigation and dry farming practice. The prosperity of the times did not erase the possibility of raiding by nomadic groups like the Assiniboine. Mandans built fortifications around their settlements with crossed timber posts and “a lining,” as well as a “ditch over fifteen feet deep and from fifteen to eighteen feet wide” on the sides that were not against the bluff side.¹⁰

By the 1730s, the Chippewa and Dakota gaining strength from French traders to the east would become openly aggressive toward the Cree and Assiniboine forcing them to move further west and south.¹¹ Their new environment may have caused the Assiniboine to adapt to new flora and fauna resources, but it also placed them closer to their agricultural suppliers, the Hidatsa and Mandan.

8. John C. Ewers, *Indian life on the Upper Missouri* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1988), 3.

9. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 16.

10. Warren W. Caldwell, “Fortified Villages in the Northern Plains,” *Plains Anthropologist* 9, no. 23 (February 1964): 4.

11. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 15.

The Assiniboine's new living area had much different game and resources than the forests around the Great Lakes. Instead of fishing in lakes, they now used their birch canoes on the Assiniboine, Red, and Qu'Appelle Rivers to fish for sturgeon. Living around present day Winnipeg provided access to rivers but also the "eastern edge of tall grass prairies of the northern plains." The Assiniboine would hunt the larger game—"antelope, mule, whitetail deer and red deer"—and one new large animal, the bison.¹² During the summer, the Assiniboine would hunt bison, and in the spring and fall return to the parklands to hunt deer. Hunting bison during the summer on the prairie was much easier with horses.

The Assiniboine began acquiring horses from the Crow through Hidatsa and Mandan villages on the upper Missouri River in the early 1740s.¹³ At first, the Assiniboine used horses to pull travois and eventually to hunt bison. By the mid-1760s, the Assiniboine had become the middle-men again and amassed large herds of horses that they traded extensively with their Cree neighbors to the north. The trade would not last again because of European interference.

In 1777 Hudson Bay Company built a new trading house on the Saskatchewan River that "destroyed the middle man position of Assiniboine and Western Cree between the company and interior and Missouri River village tribes."¹⁴ The introduction of the Hudson Bay Company's trading house increased tensions between the Assiniboine-Cree alliance and the Gros Ventres to the west and north, and the Blackfoot-Piegans

12. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 15.

13. Miller, 17.

14. Ibid.

confederacy to the west and south. From the late 1770s through the 1790s, battles between Assiniboine-Cree and Gros Ventres, Blackfeet, and Piegan erupted as competition for supplying trade houses increased and availability of furs decreased. The Assiniboine horse trade with the Hidatsa and Mandan was interrupted.¹⁵ Horses were now valued for warfare, not just hunting buffalo, with all tribes. As horses made hunting buffalo, procuring hides for trade, and moving camps easier, it also made warfare between tribes more expedient and devastating to all involved.

After the battles between tribes in the late 1770s, at least 1,200 Assiniboine lodges moved to the upper Missouri River watershed closer to their Hidatsa and Mandan trade network centers.¹⁶ Counting ten persons per lodge, approximates the population of the Assiniboine near the Missouri River at 12,000. In 1781-1782 a smallpox epidemic devastated all tribes in the area. Assiniboine, Cree, Gros Ventre, Mandan, Hidatsa, and Dakota (Sioux) were all affected. The Hidatsa and Mandan's were estimated at losing 11,500 people to the disease. The Assiniboine deaths were not reliably reported during this time period, but there numbers were reported to have completely recovered by 1790.¹⁷ The Hidatsa and Mandans moved from their Heart River living area to the confluence of the Knife and the Missouri Rivers after the epidemic.¹⁸ The Assiniboine soon followed.

The arrival of two new European trading houses on the Souris River complicated Assiniboine life in the early 1790s. The North West Company and Hudson Bay Company

15. Ibid., 18.

16. Denig, *Assiniboine*, 1.

17. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 19.

18. Miller, 19.

both erected posts at the mouth of the Souris River establishing the Mandan and Hidatsa as trade partners. The Assiniboine would not recover their position as middle-men on the northern plains to bargain between tribes, or to strengthen alliances. This situation left the Assiniboine in a weakened economic position at the turn of the 18th century. The Assiniboine, now fully a horse society and reliant upon horses for hunting, raiding, and hauling, adapted and became “skilled raiders of horses.”¹⁹ Using horses to hunt buffalo for sustenance, whether by direct approach method or creating pounding sites, would become increasingly important in the early decades of the 1800s as the fur trade waned and their trade partners the Hidatsa and Mandans suffered unrecoverable losses of population due to imported illnesses leaving them less able to supply the Assiniboine with the crops of corn, beans, and squash that they needed.

In 1803, the Louisiana Purchase changed the world of the tribes in the northern plains. Thomas Jefferson reiterated his focus upon Indians adopting farming in his second inaugural address, “Humanity enjoins us to teach them agriculture and the domestic arts; to encourage them to that industry which alone can enable them to maintain their place in existence, and to prepare them in time for that state of society, which to bodily comforts adds the improvement of mind and morals.”²⁰ Jefferson equated civilization with farming. He saw the “yeoman farmer” as the “most desirable figure for the settlement of the west and the perpetuation of democracy.”²¹ Jefferson’s idea of taming the wilderness

19. Ibid., 20

20. Jason Pierce, *Making the White Man’s West: Whiteness and the Creation of the American West* (University of Colorado Press, 2016), 32.

21. Pierce, 33.

of the west with settler's farms included relieving American Indians of their "surplus lands" and other natural resources like forests.

In 1822, the U.S. government was well on its way to ending the nation-trade relationship with all American Indians when it eliminated the Office of Indian Trade in 1822 and subsequently in 1825 abolished the factory and trade house system.²² The Office of Indian Trade had provided a method of tracking the furs obtained from American Indians and provided a first contact point for negotiations and communications to Washington. After the office was abolished, the need for a collective bargaining body other than the War Department presented itself; the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). The BIA began on March 11, 1824. What this meant for tribes in the Northern Plains was that the United States no longer looked at American Indians as an integral part of the American economy but as dependents who drained American coffers from annuities. A non-contributing group—who was armed—presented a problem to the U.S. government.

The federal government saw opening western lands to Euro-American settlers as a way to not only gain surplus lands and push Natives out, but allow more protestant missionaries into Native communities to convert them to a religion that esteemed farming. The problem with the lands in the northern Great Plains, was that they weren't suited for farming. If the government could not establish farming settlers, they couldn't establish Christianity and the lands would remain lawless.²³

22. *Register of Debates*, House of Representatives, 18th Cong., 2d Sess. Indians Affairs: 2, (1823-1825), 531-32.

23. Pierce, *Whiteness*, 34-35.

In 1824, a new sub-agency was created at the confluence of the Knife and Missouri Rivers. This sub-agency served mostly Assiniboine, Mandan, Hidatsa, Crees, Gros Ventres, and Crow populations in the area.²⁴ As the new sub-agency would be a place for American Indians from all corners of the plains to gather for trade, it was also a place that diseases would be shared and dispersed across the plains.

1830, steamboat traffic began bringing more Euro-Americans into the Missouri river area, further devastating the herds of buffalo upon which the various Nakota and Lakota tribes depended.²⁵ The steamboats also brought smallpox. The “fur trade became a conduit for the passage of disease” across the northern plains.²⁶ The smallpox epidemic spread mostly from steamboats traveling to Fort Benton, the northernmost point of river shipping on the Missouri. Assiniboine and other tribes desperate for supplies and trade, approached the steamboats anyway. In the spring of 1837, this action resulted in a devastating loss of population for Assiniboine, Mandan and Hidatsa. The Mandan lost almost half of their population. In 1838, the Assiniboine made the land around the Milk River mouth into the Missouri River a centralized location for their buffalo hunts. In the same year smallpox swept their lodges, killing as many as a third of their population.²⁷

The loss of life was so great in the Gros Ventre, Sioux, Arikara, Mandan, Blackfeet, Crow and Assiniboine camps that many headmen openly begged forts for supplies and relief throughout present-day Montana, Wyoming and North Dakota.²⁸

24. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 44.

25. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 44.

26. David J. Wishart, *Great Plains Indians* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2016), 70.

27. Denig, *Assiniboine*, 397.

28. For a headman to beg or prostrate himself for the good of his people was an act of honor.

Bands who had been at odds only months before, now camped with each other at Fort Union. The loss of life disrupted family units and kinship organization of bands so that only small familial groups traveled together along rivers like the Missouri and Poplar. Since the smallpox epidemic occurred in the spring, this disrupted the time when the Assiniboine planned where which bands would hunt buffalo that summer. The result was a discordant separation of bands from one another with little understanding of where other bands would be, disrupting the ability to rely upon trade with other bands.

By the early 1840s, the Assiniboine had shifted their main living and hunting areas as far south as into the region north of the mouth of the Yellowstone River on the Missouri River.²⁹ The Assiniboine had made peace agreements with the Crow and Hidatsa after the loss from smallpox which permitted them to range more openly with other enemies to the east and south.³⁰ The Assiniboine frequented the area between the Milk and Yellowstone Rivers north into Canada and focused on trying to find the best trade deals for their buffalo hides, crossing international borders to deal with the British when it served them.³¹ Just as the northern plains tribes could do little to prevent white slaughter of buffalo, so could the Indian Office do little to aid the American Fur Company to prevent the Assiniboine and others dealing with British interests to the north.³²

29. Denig, *Assiniboine*, xxvii.

30. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 42.

31. John E. Sunder, *The Fur Trade on the Upper Missouri, 1840-1865* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965), 44.

32. Sunder, 44-45.

1851 Laramie Treaty procured an agreement, with every northern plains nation present except the Yanktonais, that the United States would be allowed to build roads and forts inside their outlined territories in exchange for protection, and that the nations involved in the treaty would abstain from warfare with each other. The Sioux were the only tribe to have a detailed outline of territory while two separate articles outline land for the “Gros Ventres, Mandans, Arikarras” together, often crossing into the next outlined territory for the Assiniboine.³³ The Assiniboine were frequently mentioned in treaties throughout the early 19th century, but a treaty solely with the Assiniboine was not to come until 1869.

The 1855 treaty with the Blackfeet also mentions the Assiniboine. The treaty charged the Blackfeet to keep peace with a list of tribes including the Assiniboine and Sioux. “abstain from all hostilities whatsoever against each other.” It also outlined the area of the Blackfeet reservation and where they were permitted to hunt with provisions that they would not “establish permanent settlements.”³⁴ Fur trade pressures, declining predictability of resources, disease, and weakened Native trade partners all but made this treaty an impossibility as all tribes in present day Montana, most of them nomadic hunters, had to do whatever they could to feed and protect their people. After the 1850s, one factor caused the disruption to Montana tribes more than any other, the crushing inflow of white settlers.

33. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 45.

34. Treaty with the Blackfeet, 1855, Article 2. Indian Affairs: Laws and Treaties, 2, 736.

The Sioux, Early 1600s to 1850s

In the early 1600s, the Sioux, comprised mostly of Yanktonais, Hunkpapa Lakota, and Sisseton, dwelt in the areas between present day Lake Michigan and the headwaters of the Mississippi, south to what is now Illinois and Iowa. As a hunting society, they also traded further west near the Missouri River with the Hidatsa, Mandan, and Arikara for corn, squash, and beans. The early contact years with the Jesuits and French traders did not give as much detail about the Sioux as the Assiniboine to the north.

The Jesuits described the Sioux in the 1640s as being of either “the Sioux of the East” or “the Sioux of the West” and did not recognize individual differences within the tribe.³⁵ The Sioux east of the Mississippi included the Wahpekute, Sisseton, Mdewakanton, and Wahpeton. These four groups are now known as the Dakota. Archeological evidence places the Dakota as most likely grandchildren of the “Oneota culture ... of the upper Mississippi and St. Croix River valleys.” These people had lived for centuries in this woodland subsistence area.³⁶ Like the Assiniboine, their beginnings were in the pine forests of the areas close to the Great Lakes.³⁷ Jean-Baptiste Louis first noted the location of twenty-two Sioux villages near Lake Pepin on a map in 1695, although French fur traders had discussed trading with the Sioux in this area since the 1680s. Pierre-Charles Le Seur noted other villages near the Mille Lacs region in 1699.

35. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 25.

36. Norman K. Risjord, *Dakota: The Story of the Northern Plains*, (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 2012), 18.

37. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 26.

The Sioux “wintered in larger villages,” hunting deer and fishing until the summer bison herds drew them south to the Mississippi River. In the fall, the Dakota traveled to the northern lakes region to gather and dry rice.³⁸

The Sioux of the west were composed of Yanktons, Yanktonais, and Ti’tu’wa and lived “near the Big Stone Lake on the Upper Minnesota River on the border with present day South Dakota.”³⁹ The environment here is much different than the pine forests of the Sioux of the east with tall grasses and rolling plains. These Sioux had closer access to the large game animals such as antelope, white-tail deer, and buffalo.

By the 1730s, the French fur trade began to affect the Dakota and western Sioux. Chippewas grew powerful with French guns and supplies and slowly pushed the eastern Dakota farther into western spaces. The buffalo herds had also shifted west, across the Mississippi. Before the western Sioux moved out onto the plains to follow the buffalo, they adapted and learned from the Chippewa, their enemies, to hunt white-tail deer instead of buffalo in large, woodland hunting parties.⁴⁰ The Sisseton and Wahpeton followed and refocused their living spaces to around the current St. Peter, Minnesota area. By the late 1700s, only the Mdewakantons and Wahpekutes still lived primarily in the woodlands. The other groups of Sioux quickly embraced the plains lifestyle in the 1750s.⁴¹

The Wahpekutes slowly shifted even further south to the Coteau de Prairies area with the Sisseton because of Chippewa, Sac, and Fox aggressions over seasonal

38. Ibid., 27.

39. Ibid.

40. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 28.

41. Ibid., 28-29.

woodland hunting grounds for white-tail deer. The Yankton and Yanktonais were separated by a north-south geographical distinction. The Yanktons inhabited the present day northwestern region of Iowa west to the Coteau de Prairie region. The Yanktonais resided in “eastern North Dakota west of Big Stone Lake and Lake Traverse, and the Red River to the north” to the “Sheyenne and upper James Rivers.”⁴² By 1750, the Yanktonais had driven out the Omahan and Iowa from this area in a “long and bitter war.”⁴³

1774, the Yankton already had a significant number of horses and dogs.⁴⁴ Most likely procured through their trade with the Mandan and Hidatsa. The Sioux, it is unclear exactly which band, would sporadically attack the powerful Arikara “stockaded villages” on the Missouri, stealing horses, guns, and furs. This warplay was “counterbalanced” with times of peace and offerings of trade by these same Sioux.⁴⁵ The Sioux practiced counting-coup with the Arikara more than killing, possibly because the Arikara numbered over 20,000 people in their earth-lodge villages, and the Sioux depended upon their squash, beans, and corn. Since the Assiniboine were trading with the same earth-lodge villages in the 1750s, it would be interesting for later research to investigate how the Mandan, Arikara, and Hidatsa villages juggled trading with the Yankton and Assiniboine who were becoming increasingly hostile toward each other.

The western Sioux, the Lakota, moved into the east bank of the Missouri River, at the Big Bend, in the 1760s. They would never live farther east and instead capitalize on

42. Ibid.

43. Royal B. Hassrick, *The Sioux: Life and Customs of a Warrior Society*, (Norman: University of Oklahoma, 1964), 65.

44. Miller, 29.

45. Hassrick, *The Sioux*, 66.

the buffalo herds along the river. These were mostly Oglala bands but soon their neighboring Saones and Minneconjous Sioux bands would join them. The Saones and Minneconjous would inhabit the Cheyenne River area near Arikara villages.⁴⁶ The winter count of American Horse, an Oglala records the Lakota discovery of the Black Hills.⁴⁷ The Lakota acquired horses later than their Yankton relatives, not amassing horses until the 1790s.⁴⁸ The Lakota primarily traded for horses with the Arikara.

The 1781 smallpox epidemic which had affected the Assiniboine decimated the Arikara, killing three-quarters of their population.⁴⁹ When the Arikara villages failed, the Lakota turned their eyes to the horse trade with the Mandans and Hidatsa. Other trade partners existed. In the 1790s, the Yankton, Dakota, Lakota, and Yanktonai came each spring to the St. James River for trading. These large trade gatherings sometimes involved as many as 1,200 lodges, or 12,000 people with approximately ten people per lodge. French traders also attended the gathering and came from as far away as the Falls of St. Anthony area on the Mississippi.⁵⁰ Through the end of the eighteenth century at trade gatherings like these, the Lakota traded the horses they acquired from the Hidatsa and Mandan to Yanktons and Yanktonais, Sisseton and Wahpeton, and Dakota.⁵¹

At the beginning of the nineteenth century, the Yanktonais “separated into two groups: Lower Yanktonais [Hunkpapa] and Upper Yanktonais [Wazikute, Kiyuska,

46. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 31.

47. Ibid.

48. Although Hassrick states the Sioux acquired the horse in the mid-1700s on page seventy, Miller et. al., have provided more information that the number of horses were not in any significant number before the 1790s.

49. Miller, 31.

50. Risjord, *Dakota*, 30.

51. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 32.

Pabaska (or more commonly known as the Cutheads)] .”⁵² Lewis and Clark recorded in 1804, “Sioux divisions on both side of the Missouri: 300 warrior Brulé along the Teton and White rivers, 150 Oglalas inhabiting both sides of the Missouri south of the Cheyenne River, and 200 warrior Miniconjous on both sides of the Missouri above the Cheyenne.”⁵³ In 1822-23, the Sioux and taken the lands of the Crow “west of the Black Hills” south the North Platte.⁵⁴ In 1824, the new sub-agency at Big Bend on the Missouri River attracted the Lower Yanktonais to the area.⁵⁵ Not only were the Sioux using the resources and lands on the Missouri, they had adapted from a woodland subsistence people to a complete plains hunting oriented people within one generation.

By 1830, the Lakota had moved to the western banks of the Missouri.⁵⁶ The Red River Métis had depleted the population of buffalo further east at St. Peters Agency Minnesota that the Yanktonai had depended upon, and soon they followed the Lakota in their steady relocation up the Missouri River watershed.⁵⁷ By 1840, their new resource area along the Missouri River was reinforced with a dramatic influx of miners traveling through the Platte River on the Oregon Trail headed for California gold.⁵⁸ With the numbers of whites increasing and battles happening with increasing frequency with their southern neighbors, the Sioux stayed north of the confrontation line but not for long.

In 1849, the buffalo herds were poor and a harsh winter suffered the Yankton and Santee Sioux into starvation. The American Fur Company, fearing bloody raids for their

52. Miller, 42.

53. Hassrick, *The Sioux*, 68.

54. Hassrick, 68.

55. Miller, 44.

56. Miller, 33.

57. *Ibid.*, 43.

58. *Ibid.*, 45.

supplies, quickly secured annuities for the bands. To ensure peace, Indian sub-agent William S. Hatton of Tennessee worked to bring liquor trade to a halt on the Upper Missouri.⁵⁹ Even with the annuity payments and slowing of the liquor trade, the American Fur Company feared “The Sioux were likely to return to the warpath in the spring.”⁶⁰ In June 1850, the steamboat the *El Paso* reached the mouth of the Milk River, the northernmost point on the Upper Missouri reached.⁶¹ The “peaceful bands” that followed the boat along the river were most likely Assiniboine, as they had claimed the area around the mouth of the Milk River in the fifteen years before. The steamboat was carrying cholera, losing half of its passengers. The crew would have in the position of diplomacy and eager trade with any Assiniboine encountered.

In 1851, the Laramie Treaty affected all the northern plains tribes, their resource areas, and pan-tribal politics. The Laramie Treaty was one that many members of these tribes did not think important in the same ways Americans did. Iron Shell’s (a Miniconjous-Brulés Sioux) winter count of 1851 recorded the year the Laramie Treaty as “Big Issue,” but recorded the gifts that the American agents gave the Sioux, not the dictates of the treaty. The Sioux recorded what was important to them. The delineation of tribal boundaries was not as important as the gifts they received. For the Sioux, increasing status through wealth was important. The borders of tribes would have been ephemeral to a traveling hunting culture. Who would police the plains? If U.S. agents

59. Sunder, *The Fur Trade on the Upper Missouri*, 112.

60. Sunder, 121.

61. *Ibid.*, 125.

observed some bands in another band's territory, who would intervene? Americans still did not have the numbers out west.⁶²

The Laramie Treaty also was a striking deceit of the U.S. government that the Sioux and other plains tribes would not forget. Once the treaty reached Washington, the \$50,000 annuity agreed to be paid to each tribe for the next fifty years Congress reduced to \$10,000 a year and only for ten years. The Cheyenne, Sioux, and Arapaho may have agreed to the changes in the annuity, but they could always employ another tactic to make up for their losses—raiding.⁶³

In 1858, inter-tribal tensions escalated. The Yankton ceded over 11 million acres to the U.S. government without involving the surrounding tribes. The treaty incensed the northern plains tribes from the Red River to the Milk River, to the Yellowstone and Platte, and sparked battles between them. By 1860, the Upper Yanktonai Cutheads, Sisseton and Wahpeton moved into the Fort Peck Area.⁶⁴ These bands of Sioux had moved to the Poplar River area because of conflicts at the Lake Traverse area to the east, influx of traveling miners on the Platte, and depletion of predictable buffalo herd runs.⁶⁵

In ten years, the entire region of present day Montana would become embroiled in conflict and suffering ending in the federal governments creation of reservations. The buffalo that brought the Assiniboine and Sioux to the Missouri River area would wane, annuities would be incomplete and inconsistent, disease would disrupt tribe politics and kinship organization, and white settlers would continue to pressure Indian lands to shrink.

62. Hassrick, *The Sioux*, 11.

63. Hassrick, 142-43.

64. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 35.

65. *Ibid.*

Socio-cultural and Environmental Lifeways of the Assiniboine and Sioux Before Fort Peck

To understand the social and political dynamics of the Assiniboine and Sioux bands during the water projects of the 1930s, it is important to understand the dynamic of the Assiniboine and Sioux before the projects began, before they were thrust together upon a reservation. In 1933, when relief programs began, Assiniboine and Sioux who had survived the starvation, disease, treaty retractions, and warfare of the late nineteenth century were part of communities at Fort Peck. These elders transmitted the oral history, traditions, and winter counts to their descendants.⁶⁶ Understanding these traditions lead to better insight of the response to the federal government water projects upon their traditional cultural spaces. When examining the process of a group's attempted environmental domination over another culturally disparate group, response cannot be assumed to be the same as the former would construct. The ancestral memory shared with younger generations does not guarantee all would agree in the ways memories would measure response, but would be an influence. The information accumulated about Assiniboine and Sioux life before the reservation emit echoes in the happenings on Fort Peck Reservation in the 1930s.

In 1869, over 100 Assiniboine women offered to marry into a decimated Gros Ventre tribe at the Milk River agency after a small-pox outbreak to ensure peace and strengthen both tribes. The children of this alliance were alive at Fort Peck in the 1930s.

66. The WPA met with elders of the Assiniboine and Sioux and recorded in part these oral histories and traditions. *Land of Nakoda, How the Summer Season Came* was published in 2001 as a continuance of recording elder knowledge.

Members of the Fort Peck tribes also remembered the Massacre of Miniconjou Sioux at Wounded Knee and the experience of the Ghost Dance that preceded it. The history of their family's experiences and how they persisted through them were told and in the minds of those who now saw Civil Conservation Corps Indian Division, Bureau of Reclamation, and Bureau of Indian Affairs personnel converge upon their reservation to "save" the Assiniboine and Sioux "for their own good," but for the good of the U.S. government's interests. American Indians in all tribes had learned quickly how to navigate the intrusion of Europeans upon their resources and political systems. The Assiniboine and Sioux drew upon their history, tradition, and cultural values to do the same in the 1930s.

The Assiniboine and Sioux kinship structure was the backbone to their political system. Assiniboine and Sioux children considered their father's brothers as fathers, and their mother's sisters as mothers. The brothers of the mother were uncles and the sisters of the father were aunts. Assiniboine children's cousins were considered as brothers and sisters. In 1934, the tribes at Fort Peck continued this tradition, at least in some fashion. Dolly Akers, Assistant Indian Coordinator, wrote to Mr. Samuel Gerson, Director of Social Services for the Montana Relief Commission on February 14, 1935. She was "anxious to write to you concerning Indian relationship." Akers explains how "there is an old Indian custom" of adoptive kinship. If someone in the tribe is "help[ed] in a time of need," or is an orphan, people could establish an adoptive relationship. "Henceforth you are my sister or whatnot." Akers also makes it plain that a white person wouldn't understand these connections and not be able to differentiate blood relative relationships

from adoptive ones.⁶⁷ The Assiniboine, and Sioux, kinship beliefs were long, and firmly held traditions that affected not only personal relationships but politics and the responsibility of persons in the band to the band.

Those relationships took physical form when tipis were arranged at meets by family, and therefore, band status. “They pitched their tipis in a circle, each band in its proper place ... once a year the Sioux gathered to re-establish their bond of kinship and unity.”⁶⁸ The observation of the Sioux tipi formation in 1650 was observed again in the 1870s. Little Day, a Brulé Sioux, described tipis “set up according to family prestige in a circle” and that “site and order were prescribed by the four Wakincuzas.” A Wakincuzas was a “pipe owner ... men of recognized authority.”⁶⁹

A woman who accepted a man as her mate would move with him to his family’s lodge. The man was not allowed to speak directly to her parents, but only through one of her uncles or brothers. In this way, the woman was recognized as having control over the communication with her birth family. Kinship bound groups of lodges together, and each lodge had a speaker at the council. Bands had chiefs, but no one chief could dictate the actions of others and each lodge acted autonomously. A chief and warrior’s status was judged by their generosity, bravery, hunting prowess, and wisdom.⁷⁰ For the Sioux, war chiefs were in charge during moves to hunt bison and during war. Like the Assiniboine,

67. Dolly Cusker, Assistant Indian Coordinator, to Samuel Gerson, Director of Social Service, Montana Relief Commission, 14 February 1935, box 1, folder F, Dolly Akers Collection, 1930-1941, Montana Historical Society Research Center (hereafter cited MHSRC).

68. Howard L. Harrod, *Renewing the World: Plains Indian Religion and Morality* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1987), 65.

69. Harrod, *Renewing*, 13.

70. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 21-22.

during times of peace the chief could not command another chief or lodge to act, but during times of war a war chief's word was to be followed unconditionally.⁷¹

Women were revered as much as men by the Sioux, Old Woman Horn was respected in Iron Shell's winter count of 1872. The most important event of the year, her death, was recorded on buffalo hide in a pictorial recording as *Old Woman Horn Fell From a Bank and Died*.⁷² The 1868 recorded the death of another woman in *Fish's Wife Died*. In the same battle, the Crow "killed fifteen Sans Arcs Sioux" in addition to Long Fish, and yet the title of the winter count, what others would come to call that year for all time forward was titled as Fish's Wife Died.

The closer bonds of acknowledgement in this bi-lateral system ensured a closer tie to kin inside the lodge and especially when the lodges dispersed after hunting buffalo. This close kinship connection reinforced that lodges do what was best for the band, and not just their own lodge. Fathers, mothers, uncles, aunts, and children worked together to meet the needs of their lodges.⁷³

Women placed children in cradleboards and kept them close at every moment. While the children were in cradleboards, women could engage in the labor-intensive activities of cleaning, tanning, and preparing hides. Historians should not underappreciate the Assiniboine and Sioux reliance upon buffalo. They used the hides for their homes, clothing, to carry and prepare food, and for trade for items they could not make themselves. Assiniboine tipis used a three- pole system. It took twelve buffalo hides for

71. Miller, 37.

72. Hassrick, *The Sioux*, 351.

73. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 21-22.

each tipi⁷⁴. Hides would wear and need to be replaced each or every other year. For a 1,200-lodge group of Assiniboine, if each Assiniboine lodge needed to replace only two hides a year, that would mean over 2,400 buffalo would need to be harvested each season for the maintenance of homes alone.⁷⁵ Men would have only five months, from the end of calving season in May until the snows of September, to acquire thousands of buffalo for basic maintenance, sustenance, and trade for the tribe. Women following the hunting party to process the buffalo would have to work quickly to render the dozens of buffalo killed at one time at pounding sites.

An adult buffalo weighed over 1,000 pounds and could produce as much as 500 pounds of meat. Assiniboine used almost all parts of the animal. Fat, bone, meat, sinew, fur, and horn all had their purposes. The joint effort required to process each buffalo was enormous and demanded a highly cooperative and coordinated social structure to support the endeavor. Each task required skill, and that skill required instruction and practice. Female children accompanied their mothers in their work and learned the precious knowledge of how to work with others to refine the animal into valuable resources.

Assiniboine and Sioux life revolved around the buffalo, not only for resources but for reinforcing the gender roles in their society.⁷⁶ Women commanded the processing of the buffalo but they also owned everything the animals built. They owned the tipi and all

74. Reginald Laubin and Gladys Laubin (Tatanka Wanjila na Wiyaka Wastewin), *The Indian Tipi, Its History, Construction, and Use, With a History of the Tipi by Stanley Vestal* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1977), 245-46.

75. The number considers that they would have some hides that still functioned, and the Assiniboine before whites came into the area, only killed what they could use or trade.

76. I want to be clear that gender roles were not strict and many operated outside their gender as resources, beliefs, and status permitted. Native life on the Northern Plains had to be flexible because each person in a lodge contributed to its success or failure.

resources inside it. Europeans recorded incorrectly that Assiniboine women were the “beasts of burden.” Europeans did not understand the cultural underpinnings of the society. Women were responsible for raising and lowering the tipi, packing the travois to carry it from one site to another. Before the horse, women carried tipis on a travois, and sometimes had dogs to help. European men recorded their misunderstanding that Assiniboine women were slaves to their husbands, but women owned all they carried. Belongings were constantly under their owner’s care. If she wished to set her tipi up in a different spot because her husband disappointed her, she could do so, and her husband would be forced to find another place to sleep. She had almost complete autonomy over her belongings and her surroundings.

Men hunted the buffalo but women oversaw the production of a buffalo’s resources into profitable or usable goods. An Assiniboine and Sioux man could not marry unless he proved himself in hunting and in war. Since Assiniboine women were responsible for processing buffalo, and their skills were learned over time, an Assiniboine woman’s departure to her husband’s lodge was a shift in resources from her family, so matches had to be beneficial. Good hunters not only provided food and precious resources for lodges, but wealth in trade. Hunting buffalo was dangerous. The direct approach method and pounding method both held their own risks. If a man wanted to marry a woman, he had to procure enough buffalo not only to feed his own lodge, but to give as gifts to woman’s family. The Assiniboine woman had a choice to accept or refuse his gifts. If a man gained prominence as a good hunter and warrior, he was able to have more wives, a significant sign of status and wealth. The reciprocal was true. If a man

proved to be lazy, or failed repeatedly at the hunt or war, a woman could disown him. An Assiniboine or Sioux man could not become an *akicitas*, a member of the band's interior security group, without proving himself in battle and hunting.⁷⁷

Because the buffalo was such an integral part of Assiniboine society, where buffalo crossed rivers and pounding sites were also considered sacred sites. In the 1930s at Fort Peck Reservation, federal projects affected a buffalo crossing site on the Milk River, the sacred Sleeping Buffalo Rock, and a pounding site. Details of these sites will be discussed in Chapter Three. New Deal projects affected other traditional cultural spaces.

Plants, animals, the elements, rivers, and other areas of their world were part of the extended kinship system of the Northern Plains peoples including the Assiniboine and Sioux.⁷⁸ Within each plant, species of animal, and other earthly substance inhabited a spirit, or essence, of *wakan*.⁷⁹ They recognized their dependence upon “the sacred resources of their life,” and interacted with them in ways beyond ideas of sustenance and wealth accumulation.⁸⁰

Every activity that involved the harvesting of plant or animal had its own methods rooted in cosmology. Assiniboine and Sioux family members not only taught the *how* behind harvesting, but the *why* and what actions meant in the greater sphere of living and responsibility to the lodge. Therefore, traditional cultural spaces are to be considered

77. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 22.

78. Harrod, *Renewing*, 91.

79. *Wakan* is an abstract concept encompassing any force that would have been considered mysterious or powerful in the physical world. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 22.

80. Harrod, *Renewing*, 89-91.

respectfully as places of significance, and more than as an area where a menial task was performed. Along the Milk, Poplar, and Missouri Rivers, of present day Fort Peck Reservation, mothers and aunts had taken their daughters and sisters to gather the needs of life, interact with *wakan*, and passed down these teachings over decades. These harvest grounds were fertile in generational memory and oral tradition.



Figure 1, Karl Bodmer illustration one. Karl Bodmer created this aquatint in 1839 during his voyage up the Missouri River where he recorded images of Northern Plains Indians' life. *Magic Pile Erected by Assiniboine Indians, 1839* depicts how the Assiniboine used the bones of the buffalo in sacred marking practices on the plains. Indiana Historical Society, Item ID: BODMER_FF29-a_017.

Women collected chokecherry, service berry and prairie turnips.⁸¹ The Assiniboine and Yankton Sioux both valued prairie turnips as part of their staple diet, not just a food sought during periods of famine. In John Tanner's account of living in the Northern Plains in the early decades of the nineteenth century, he observed the prairie turnip "was much eaten by the Crees and Assiniboin[e]s."⁸² Another European in the area, Frémont, called the prairie turnip the "chief vegetable food" of the Yankton Sioux.⁸³ Prairie turnips were dried and pounded into flour with dried serviceberries as a staple. Turnips could be dried and last for years if kept dry. Turnips were so valuable that the Northern Plains women seeded them and would return a year later to harvest the roots. Since many tribes valued this resource, women's knowledge of where she had seeded the crop would have been instrumental in reducing the amount of time of harvest during an already busy harvest season for three major resources.

June was an especially busy time for the Assiniboine and Sioux. June was the time of the Sun Dance, and the Sun Dance coincided with the extremely short harvest season of the prairie turnip, the time when service berries were finally ripe, and the buffalo hunt.⁸⁴ Three major resources for the Assiniboine and Sioux were at their apex during the summer solstice. The cosmology of their belief system reinforced the sacredness of these resources.

81. Cornell University is currently promoting the service berry, known in Canada as the Saskatoon berry, as a nutrient rich alternative to blueberries. The berry has higher sugar, calcium, protein, iron, potassium, magnesium and phosphorus than blueberries <http://smallfarms.cornell.edu/tag/juneberries>. The peoples of the Northern Plains, through experience, harvested strategically. They focused upon the plants and animals with the highest nutritional value compared to the effort expended harvesting them.

82. Barry Kaye and D.W. Moodie, "The Psoralea Food Resource of the Northern Plains," *Plains Anthropologist* 23, no. 82 (November 1978): 332.

83. *Ibid.*

84. Harrod, *Renewing*, 119.

Cottonwood trees were another resource prominent along the Milk, Poplar, and Missouri Rivers that the Assiniboine valued. Women cut down cottonwood saplings for the poles of their tipis. “Lodgepole pine was the preferred tree” for tipis, but lodgepole pine is not available in northeastern Montana. Men painted the hides before women erected the tipi. The scenes were usually of battles, or some renown of the man who led the lodge.⁸⁵ Funerary piers were also constructed out of cottonwood and the dead upon them at the river’s edge. In 1833, Karl Bodmer, a Swiss artist, traveled up the Missouri River and illustrated a scene of Assiniboine scaffold burial.⁸⁶ Assiniboine and Sioux alike used the cottonwood in the sacred Sun Dance.⁸⁷ A holy man would go to the river banks and select a large cottonwood for the center pole of the ceremony.⁸⁸

The philosophy of the Assiniboine was a philosophy born of necessity. The Assiniboine occupied the interior of the Northern Plains of what would become southern Canada and the northern United States. The fur trade reached their neighbors to the east and south before it reached them, therefore, their neighbors gained access to guns first. This situation led to the Assiniboine becoming skilled at negotiation and forming alliances early on, as with the Cree.

In the early 1850s, Denig describes the Assiniboine attitude about murder, whether of one’s own people or others. Always it tends to be described as something “not born of the want of securing things” but as self-preservation. An example being the

85. <http://plainshumanities.unl.edu/encyclopedia/doc/egp.arc.048>

86. Karl Bodmer, *Assiniboin baumgräber - tombeaux des Assiniboins dans des arbres - tombs of the Assiniboin Indians on trees*, 1833, Library of Congress.

87. E. Adamson Hoebel, “The Sun Dance of the Hekandika Shoshone,” *American Anthropologist* 37 (1935): 581. <http://aktalakota.stjo.org/site/News2?page=NewsArticle&id=8668>,

88. Hoebel, 571.



Figure 2, Karl Bodmer illustration two. Karl Bodmer, *Assiniboin baumgräber - tombeaux des Assiniboins dans des arbres - tombs of the Assiniboin Indians on trees*, 1833, Library of Congress.

Assiniboine killing the white trader in Crow country to limit the trading of weapons to the Crow which they would use to kill the Assiniboine.⁸⁹ If to the south they have Dakota, to the West they have Blackfeet, and the Southwest they have Crow, it would behoove a tribe to learn the ways of a skilled intermediary. The Assiniboine did battle, but usually when there was no other recourse and when they had powerful allies. The Assiniboine became skilled at one other practice, raiding. When they could not get horses through trade, they took them. Raids were not intended to be violent affairs. Raids were a way of *counting-coup*. If a neighbor slacked looking after their herds or crops and the Assiniboine took resources, it was meant as a taunt for their neighbors to be more diligent.

The Sioux's philosophy also incorporated counting-coup, and the "four virtues: bravery, generosity, fortitude, and wisdom," but the Sioux philosophy was different than the Assiniboine when concerning battle. The Sioux opted for battle more than negotiation by the end of the eighteenth and into the twentieth century. They were closer to other tribes that were also well armed and being pushed into Sioux territory by European powers. However, when considering battles Sioux were engaged in (not necessarily started), there are four factors and responses that provided for the misinterpretation as the Sioux being a blood-thirsty horde.

Firstly, the Sioux communicated clearly and quickly when rejecting a proposition or demand by the US government or other tribes. This direct approach did not give the impression that further negotiation was possible. Secondly, the Sioux did not waiver from

89. Denig, Assiniboine, 54, 58, 60.

their decisions. Once made, retraction rarely occurred except because of losing in battle. Thirdly, the Sioux kept their word when stating they would defend their interests with violence. Lastly, once battle ensued, there were few exceptions of mercy. The Sioux understood they would be held accountable for their actions, and expected everyone else to live by the same law. Sioux bands became increasingly aggressive and violent from the 1850s, and through the 1880s.

One reason for the conflagration of war philosophy was influenced William S. Harney's change in military tactics in the early 1850s. Harney commanded Military Department Number Five, and oversaw dragoons in the Northern Plains through the late 1850s. Before this time, the US Cavalry had focused on soldier to warrior engagements. "not yet practiced by the army in the West," Harney implemented attacking "the village, with the warriors' families, homes and supplies," and recognized the Sioux's Achilles heel was seeing their families and homes destroyed. Harney's new approach would influence US military norms of engagement on the Northern Plains through the 1890s.⁹⁰ Harney had changed the rule of war and the Sioux responded in kind.⁹¹

The nineteenth and twentieth century belief the Sioux were a "warlike society," insinuating that their aggressiveness arose through a "natural" mindset, is ethnocentric and derogatory. Since there are over ten bands in the Sioux family, and each band acted

90. Paul Norman Beck, *The First Sioux War: The Grattan Fight and Blue Water Creek, 1854-1856*, (Lanham, MA: University of America Press, 2004), 90.

91. The much-maligned Dakota headman, Inkpuduta, did not commit his own atrocities against whites until after 1857. Indian and white violence had been reciprocated since Europeans introduced themselves to the plains, but plains violence did not become exacerbated until the shift in US Cavalry rules of engagement to include attacking villages whether or not warriors were present. The US military censured Harney several times during the 1850s because of the unwarranted violence he exacted upon Native peoples.

autonomously, it was up to each individual band to decide war upon a group or not. Consensus once reached, could not be reversed as war chiefs held exclusivity over movements and actions afterward.

In the Northern Plains, where the climate was harsh and resources scarce, balance was paramount to ensure the health and well-being of the tribes. If there was a drought and the buffalo few, battles were born more of response to hunger than a ‘natural’ inclination to fight. The Sioux, however, were good at winning. Their strategies in battle became respected among other tribes, but it was not born out of some “savage” bloodlust. Indian Agent Taliaferro admitted the same in 1827, Yanktonai country is extensive and would afford ample subsistence for their population were it not for the annual encroachments by half-breeds and freed men from the English...⁹² The Sioux “mold[ed] their environment to their preconceived ideas of how life should be lived, and in this they were amazingly successful.”⁹³

When the Sioux and Assiniboine bands who wanted peace moved to Fort Peck Reservation in 1871, the tribes had similarities in culture and language, but they reinforced a fierce determination for cultural pluralism in choosing separate spaces at the onset.⁹⁴

92. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 43.

93. Hassrick, *The Sioux*, 69.

94. Cultural pluralism is the practice of disparate or discrete ethnicities living closely together while practicing, without harm to the other, the norms of their society, i.e. tolerance. Further reading, Cris E. Toffolo, *Emancipating Cultural Pluralism*, (Buffalo, NY: SUNY Press, 2012).

The Beginnings of Fort Peck Reservation

1866-1869, the Assiniboine and Sioux at the Milk River Agency

The Durfee and Peck Company established Fort Peck trading post in 1866 “on the north bank of the Missouri River about three miles upstream from the mouth of the Milk River.”⁹⁵ The site had already been hosting meeting between Indian Agents, Assiniboine, and Hunkpapa Sioux, and was a well-known camp for wintering along the Missouri because it was near a large buffalo river crossing. During events of the late 1860s, Fort Peck would become the permanent agency for many bands of the Sioux and Assiniboine.

In 1866, commissioners formed treaties with the Arikara, Hidatsa, and Mandan tribes at Fort Berthold, and with the Assiniboine, Crow, and Gros Ventre tribes at Fort Union to secure overland routes to the gold fields in western Montana.⁹⁶ The Senate did not ratify either of these treaties, but proved their commitment to procuring overland routes through Indian Country to allow white access to resource areas. During this time, one of Congress’s most pressing issues was to obtain secure overland routes to gold fields, and used financial resources to clothe and feed military companies to protect routes and forts. Further research would be required to see if Congress eventually paid the above tribes for the parcels along routes they wished to sell, or if the military patrolled these routes without agreement.

95. Miller, 70.

96. Ibid., 52-53.

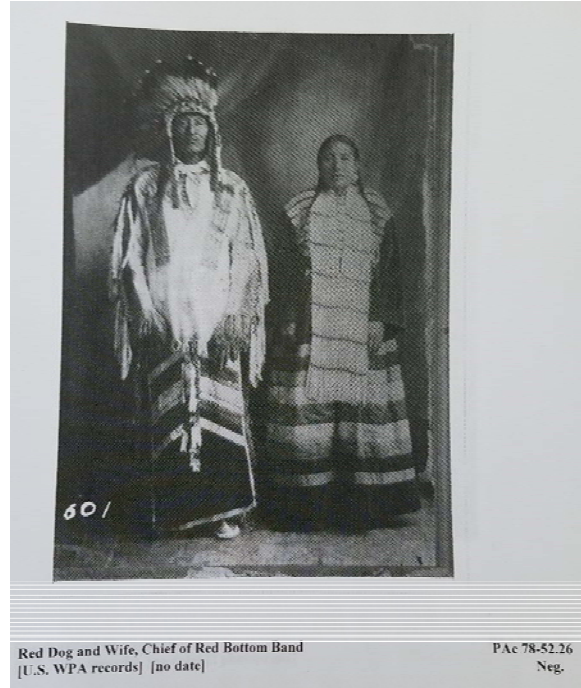


Figure 3, Red Dog and Wife. Red Dog and Wife, Chief of Red Bottom Band, U.S. WPA Records, n.d.,
MHSRC, PAC 78-52.26 Neg.

Soon, the railroad would eclipse wagon routes through Montana territory. The gold rushes of 1864 through 1867 in Montana and Idaho territory would encourage railroad companies to survey, and Lakota and Blackfeet to resist incursion into their country. In a letter dated January 15, 1867 and introduced by the Secretary of War Edwin m. Stanton, General Ulysses S. Grant, proposed to Congress:

I propose the coming year, (with your consent, and with that of the Secretary of the Interior, in whose control these Indians are supposed to be,) to restrict the Sioux north of the Platte, west of the Missouri River, and east of the new road to Montana, which starts from Laramie to Virginia City by way of Forts Reno, Philip Kearney, C.F. Smith &c. All Sioux found outside of these limits without a written pass from some military commander defining clearly their object, should be dealt with summarily.

In this first passage of the letter, Grant not only makes his point clear to restrict the movements of the Sioux using the construction of the railroads, but faults the Secretary of the Interior, Orville S. Browning, for not controlling the Indians. Grant also implies taking away Browning's authority, and by proxy the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Lewis V. Bogy's, to recognize military, not Indian Agency passes, outside the limits.

Grant goes on to state:

As long as these Indians can hunt buffalo and antelope within the described limits, we will have the depredations of last summer, and, worse yet, the exaggerations of danger raised by our own people, often for very base purposes. It is our duty, and it shall be my study, to make the progress of construction of the great Pacific railways that lie in this belt of country as safe as possible ... but they are so long that to guard them perfectly is an impossibility, unless we can restrict the Indians as herein stated.

Grant positions that protection of the railroad and subduing Indians are joint ventures while recognizing "our own people" to be part of the problem of Indian aggression. The letter equates lack of military protection with inevitable failure of the railroad. Grant includes the Secretary of the Interior's role so "that we may know that we do not violate some one of the solemn treaties made with these Indians, who are very captious, and claim to the very letter the execution on our part of those treaties, the obligation of which they seem to comprehend perfectly."

Grant dismisses the Indians' insistence that the federal government adhere to treaties, a government drafted document, as petty squabbling. "Aside from the great value of this road to the country benefited by it, it has the strongest claims upon the military service, as it will be one of its most efficient aids in the control of the Indians in the vast

regions through which it passes.” Grant equates the control of Indians with the construction of railroads. He means to use a business enterprise as the tool of the US Army. Grant had already used the railroad as a lynchpin during the Civil War. With this proposition, he understood that not only would he be protecting the railroad from attacks, he would be supplying his army with every foot of steel laid across the West. The protected railroad would connect the wealth of raw materials to the coffers of the giants of industry in the East, and it would also make controlling and suppressing Indians a reality through a well-supplied army. Grant attended and was honored at the ceremony driving the final, golden spike of the Northern Pacific Railroad at Gold Creek, Montana Territory in 1883.

It is perhaps coincidental, or not, that the letters immediately before Grant’s in the Senate record of 1866-1867 concerned a “massacre” of troops at Fort Philip Kearney.⁹⁷ Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Lewis V. Bogy’s letter repudiated the massacre in the letter before Grants. Bogy had read letters from witnesses and presented to Congress that many details of the conflict reported in papers to be either in conflict, inflated, or impossible. Bogy also determined,

... I find it difficult to account for the tragedy upon any other theory than that heretofore advanced by this office, to wit: that the Indians, almost in a state of starvation, having made repeated attempts at a conference, that they might make peace and obtain supplies for their families, and the rescinding of the order prohibiting them from obtaining arms and ammunition, were rendered desperate, and resorted to the stratagem which proved too successful.⁹⁸

97. Executive Documents of the Senate of the United States, 39th Cong., 2d Sess., 1866-1867, 11-12.

98. Exec. Doc., 39th Cong., 2d Sess., 11.

As the Fort Peck tribes would soon experience, the Great Northern Railroad that passed along its southern border, completed in 1887 in Helena, Montana Territory, would serve as route and rein. The rail route brought annuities to them faster and without the delays and losses of steamboats, but the railroad reined in the entire east to west line of the southernmost part of the reservation with rights of way. Assiniboine and Sioux were still able to access the Missouri River, but not after crossing the permanent, physical mark of American commercial and military power first. In 1867, Grants letter to Congress and the hysteria following the attack on Fort Kearney by starving Indians foreshadowed what was coming to Fort Peck.

However, in 1868 treaty with the Sioux and Arapaho, demonstrated the Sioux ability to press for their needs. The Sioux knew they had the numbers. Sioux bands were experiencing losses from disease and declining numbers of Bison, but many US forts were in poor shape and mismanaged.⁹⁹ The federal government promised to give up forts along the Bozeman Trail. Red Cloud had negotiated the Sioux's hunting grounds be given back.¹⁰⁰ He was not the leader of all the Sioux, but his successes bolstered the Sioux in other places. While some Sioux bands for peace at the Milk Agency, some continued their defiance and bloodshed against white settlers, other tribes and the US Army.

99. Beck, *The First Sioux War*, 85-86. In 1855, Captain Alfred Sully reported Fort Pierre "uninhabitable." Still recovering from the physical and monetary losses of the Civil War, hardships continued for western forts. Gold discoveries in Grasshopper Creek in 1862, Alder Gulch in 1863, and Last Chance Creek in 1864, attracted men more to mining than serving in the army. Thousands of war-hardened veterans of the Civil War came to Montana in the 1860s. A higher percentage of immigrating men had experience with war and guns than previous immigrants.

100. Vine Deloria, Jr. and Clifford M. Lytle, *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of Native American Sovereignty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 13-16.

In 1868, the Milk River Agency was built about one hundred miles upriver from Fort Peck at the “Great Bend” of the Milk River. Blackfeet and Gros Ventres occupied the area with the Assiniboine. Alonzo S. Reed was the first superintendent. In 1869, General Alfred Sully, who was involved with the destruction of over 500 Sioux lodges killing women and children in 1863, became the first superintendent of Indian Affairs for the territory of Montana.¹⁰¹ Sully’s appointment would not have gone unnoticed by the Assiniboine, Sioux and other tribes in present day Montana. Washington was sending a message to tribes in Montana that the welfare of their tribes rested in the hands of a man who was no stranger to extreme violence to ensure the interests of the United States were protected at any cost.

In 1869, after three decades of increasing Euro-American travel through Indian lands, steamboat operations, small pox epidemics, the great rush for gold, the U.S. Cavalry led decimation of buffalo upon which Plains Indians almost entirely depended, coalesced into the reality that Northern Plains tribes could not escape Euro-American settlement and jurisdiction over their territories. The pressures of white “manifest destiny” pushed the Gros Ventre, Assiniboine, Yankton, Blackfeet, and other tribes of Montana to Fort Browning and Fort Berthold within the Milk Agency for protection and supplies. Many bands still engaged in warfare and resisted westward expansion, but many bands wanted peaceful reconciliation to have somewhere to continue their way of life. In

101. Montana would not officially become a US territory until 1864, but proceedings were already underway.

1869, the Assiniboine finally came under the classification of an “agency Indian” at the Milk River Agency.¹⁰²

In 1871, when Yankton Chief Standing Buffalo and Assiniboine Chief Redstone agreed for their peoples to live together at the Milk River agency, terms Indian Agent Andrew J. Simmons agreed to, it was not only for closer proximity to annuity distributions, but also to be closer to the buffalo herds that existed in greater numbers along the Milk River. The Assiniboines and Upper Yanktonai Cutheads, led by Medicine Bear, had been hunting partners and allies since the late 1860s.¹⁰³ This reconciliation between two bands that had previously battled each other for resource areas would not last.

1871-1888, Settling In, Railroads, and Starvation: The Milk River Agency Transforms into Fort Peck

In 1871, Congress abolished the treaty system. Treaties would still be honored, but moving forward, Congressional statutes would be the way the government would respond to their interests in Indian Country. “Indians ... were now effectively precluded from playing any meaningful role in the development of federal Indian Policy.”¹⁰⁴ Fort Peck was started on the heels of this shift in Federal Indian policy. It is interesting to note that future tribal historians would not think this shift important enough to mention in the *History of the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux Tribes of the Fort Peck Indian Reservation, Montana 1800-2000*. For the Fort Peck tribes, treaties were documents

102. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 55.

103. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 56, 65, 67.

104. Deloria, *Nations Within*, 152-154.

between sovereign nations. Treaties reinforced their position as a sovereign nation above the will of Congress to pass laws. Treaties are what mattered.

Fort Peck is home to members of the Canoe Paddler and Red Bottom bands of the Assiniboine, and members of the Yanktonais, Sisseton, Wahpeton, Teton, and Hunkpapa bands of the Sioux.¹⁰⁵ The Assiniboine word for Canoe Paddler, Wadopana, is a historical word reflecting the relationship to their environment living in the Great Lakes region of present day Minnesota. The Yankton “village on the end,” Sisseton “fishing village,” Wahpeton “leaf village,” Teton “dwellers of the prairie,” and Hunkpapa “those who camp by the door,” are all descriptive terms of people based upon where they lived or what they were known for doing. The tribes’ names are reflective of actions within their environments. The Assiniboine and Sioux belong to the Mississippi Valley division of the Siouan language, but each tribe has a dialect which makes them mutually unintelligible, i.e. gathered in a group they would need translators or need to create a jargon language to understand one another. Between 1868 and 1871, these culturally and linguistically discrete groups would come together at the Milk River Agency and then the Fort Peck Agency for federal aid and better access to buffalo. The joining of different peoples under one proverbial roof would be filled with tension and dissension, but also peaceful reconciliations.

At the beginning of Fort Peck Agency in 1871, when still located on the Milk River and known under the Milk Agency, Medicine Bear undermined the peace that

105. Members of these bands also live on other reservations. The fact that members of bands are represented on other reservations is important to note so as not to give the impression that Fort Peck is their only home or connection.

Standing Buffalo and Red Stone had brokered in 1868. The event is an example where three of the four Sioux virtues were in conflict, and the intricacies of social hierarchy and politics made apparent. The event is also an example of how decisions made affected political lines between bands through time in both cultures on Fort Peck into the 1930s.

Medicine Bear of the Yankton Cutheads decided he wanted to raid the Upper Assiniboine and the Gros Ventres on the other side of the reservation. Standing Buffalo declined, citing his recent peace with the Lower Assiniboine on the Milk. Medicine Bear and members of his band called Standing Buffalo a coward.¹⁰⁶ In one moment, the virtue of bravery, fortitude, and wisdom came into conflict. Standing Bear had no option to defend the concept of honor among his warrior society and agree to go. He also stated he would lead the charge and die. He gave away all his possessions, and armed with only his coup stick charged into battle and was soon killed.¹⁰⁷

Standing Buffalo could not deny going to avoid being seen as a coward, but he also knew that he could not go against his word to the Lower Assiniboine and harm anyone. Lying was also an act of cowardice. He also knew that dying in battle was an act of fortitude. The act of giving all he had away was an act of generosity. Standing Buffalo, by completing all three virtues fulfilled the last, wisdom.

Standing Buffalo's people were infuriated. They "drove out" the members of the raid, including Medicine Bear, because they had wanted to remain peaceful and agreed to follow the wishes of their slain leader. Medicine Bear suffered many losses in the following years, and eventually, capitulated to residing at Fort Peck Reservation. The

106. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 60.

107. Miller, 60.

followers of his band settled in the Fort Kipp area. The followers of Chief Redstone resided at Wolf Point, at the opposite end of the reservation. In the 1930s, tribal council minutes still reflected these divisions.

To be associated with a band, is to be associated with all its decision making, good or bad. If one felt dissatisfied with a leader, one had the right to leave, take all property and relocate under the leadership of another headman. For an Assiniboine to associate with Red Bottom, or a Sisseton to associate with Medicine Bear, is to accept the deeds of their forbearers.¹⁰⁸

In 1872, because of continuing warfare and raids among bands near the Milk River agency, Indian Agent Simmons urged the Assiniboine and Sioux moved to Fort Peck.¹⁰⁹ In 1873, the US military abandoned Fort Browning, which had officiated some Milk Agency business.¹¹⁰ Lakota conflicts against surveyors and US Army spun out of control in the early 1870s.¹¹¹ Sitting Bull had been planning on disrupting the construction of the Northern Pacific Railroad since 1871. In 1872, as Assiniboine and Sioux bands were settling in to Fort Peck, Black Moon, a Hunkpapa warrior and his *akicitas* forcibly prevented Sitting Bull from attacking survey parties. Agent Simmons urged Black Moon to convince Sioux bands not to attack survey parties in the Yellowstone River area. Black Moon was successful but reiterated to Simmons that many bands wanted to stop the railroad because they knew it would disrupt buffalo hunts.¹¹²

108. Miller, 22, 59.

109. Ibid., 58, 60.

110. House Documents, 44th Cong. 1st Sess., 1875-76, 809.

111. Miller, 76, 77.

112. Ibid., 71.

The winter of 1873-74 was one of many periods of starvation for the Fort Peck Assiniboine and Sioux bands. The agency had to purchase an emergency shipment of 50,000 to 60,000 pounds of dried bison meat and pemmican.¹¹³ Traditionally, American Indian women prepared pemmican. Pemmican is a semi-hard composite of dried and pounded berries like chokeberries or serviceberries, mixed with buffalo lard, and dried and pounded buffalo meat. Pemmican was the granola bar of the late eighteenth and nineteenth century Northern Plains, and meant mostly as a staple during the winter to assuage hunger. If the buffalo hunt was poor, pemmican stores would not be adequate to get the Northern Plains tribes through the winter. Assiniboine women's production of pemmican reinforced their importance to the tribe as caretakers. Bad winters, starvation, lack of ammunition, and insufficient annuities plagued Fort Peck's people through 1888.¹¹⁴ In the winter of 1883-1884, over 300 Assiniboine starved to death at Wolf Point.¹¹⁵

In 1875, the Indian Commissioners report to the Department of the Interior numbered the Yanktonai Sioux at 2,726, Santee and Sisseton Sioux at 1,000, Tetons at 400, and Assiniboine at 1,998 persons. Unlike other reservations, the report did not list the numbers of females and males. The report listed 1,500 horses jointly on the reservation and ten mules, but no number of cattle were listed.¹¹⁶ To receive rations, each band had to submit to a count. In 1875, not all bands agreed to be counted because they "couldn't eat tickets," so the numbers of each tribe listed were most likely higher.

113. *Ibid.*, 81.

114. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 81

115. http://www.fortpecktribes.org/tribal_history.html

116. House Documents, 44th Cong. 1st Sess., 1875-76, 614, 630.

Indian Agent William W. Alderson submitted the second annual report from Fort Peck to the Indian Commissioner Edward P. Smith on October 20, 1875. He detailed the Indian police, the “progress” of the Sioux and Assiniboine, schools, farming and other observations of the reservation. Amongst them was the strong adherence of the bands to their Native religion and customs, ability to form groups to keep peace and assuage the need for raiding, and their desire to hunt game.¹¹⁷

Agent Alderson made important observations and stated his beliefs about the future of the tribes. He believed the Fort Peck bands were capable of forming and running their own government and soon would not need military intervention. He noted some tribes were capable of *civilization* and made the effort. The Assiniboine at the mouth of Wolf Creek (Wolf Point) “fifty miles east of Fort Peck,” started agricultural practice in earnest, raising hay and vegetables, and building a 20 by 60 feet root cellar.¹¹⁸ In this way, they could care for themselves through the winter and their ponies. Most importantly he stated:

Much more could and would have been accomplished at Wolf Creek settlement but for the small and inadequate appropriation made for the Indians of this agency and the restricted amount allowed for the pay of employe[s]; the entire appropriation for the support and civilization of the Indians of this agency for the present fiscal year being but one-third of the amount made for them three years ago. The embarrassing position in which I am placed in this regard may be measurably realized when I state that, after paying for annuities, the number of employe[e]s allowed, and the necessary expenses of running the agency during the year, the remainder would scarcely be sufficient to subsist the Indians o this agency three months.¹¹⁹

117. Ibid., 810-13.

118. House Documents, 44th Cong. 1st Sess., 1875-76, 810-11.

119. Ibid.

Alderson's report reflects the reversal of promises made in treaty with the Assiniboine and Sioux in 1868. Alderson also reported "hinderances to their civilization." The tribes held firm to their religions and practices of the "sun-dance, the war or scalp dance, and the medicine-dance, and their cruel rites of torture for the dead," confirming that in 1875, traditional cultural spaces were very much alive. But those spaces would soon begin to dwindle.¹²⁰

In 1875, Congress made an addendum to the 1862 Homestead Act under the *Provisions for the benefit of Indians*: If "a head of a family, or who as arrived at the age of twenty-one years, and who has abandoned, or may hereafter abandon, his tribal relations ..." they may apply for 160 acres of land with the application titled, "Indian homestead—act of March 3, 1875."¹²¹ As a precursor to the 1887 Dawes Act, the United States attempted to woo Indians off reservations lands and onto public lands. In the Montana territory, which was mostly nonirrigable land that did not support agriculture, stock-raising was the viable alternative. 160 acres was not land enough to range cattle. Further research would be required to investigate how many, if any, Fort Peck tribes' members renounced their tribal status for these lots. The addendum points to where the Congress was headed in how to break up reservations.

In 1878, the Fort Peck agency moved to Poplar to avoid the Missouri floods.¹²² The Assiniboine and Sioux bands of current day Fort Peck completed relocating to the agency in 1878. On the reservation both tribes made separate spaces for themselves, and

120. Ibid.

121. House Documents, 44th Cong. 1st Sess., 1875-76, 57.

122. www.fortpecktribe.org/tribal_history.html

not just because of different attitudes toward whites and federal government. The superintendent reported both agencies of Wolf Point and Poplar and their locations. The “Yanktonais, Santee, Teton, and Ogallala bands of Sioux” at Poplar, with the Assiniboine at Wolf Point.¹²³ Creating separate spaces was an act of self-identification. The federal government of the 1880s had finally recognized the independence of bands, but Washington still saw all Indians as Indians. No tribe or band wanted their identities to be lost in government bureaucracy. A way to enforce their independence was to create separate spaces.

Each agency town had its own court system for court proceedings in their own language. Language is a hallmark of identity, but also a hallmark of power. “The language in which treaties are written affects how widely and deeply treaty obligations are understood, and hence, followed.”¹²⁴ The Indian court system was in the same structure, and governed by the same federal government that had produced treaties the Assiniboine and Sioux signed. After over 100 years of treaty negotiations and backlash, the tribes of Fort Peck understood how important language was to the continued perpetuity of their sovereignty.

Even though the tribes of Fort Peck are centralized in one location, each group stood fast in their efforts to be seen by the federal government as separate, sovereign peoples. Both tribes would not accept court proceedings in the language of the other because language symbolizes the power from which culture originated it. “The Sioux,

123. Annual Report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs 1882, 108.

124. John King Gamble and Charlotte Ku, “Choice of Language in Bilateral Treaties: Fifty Years of Changing State Practice,” *Indiana International and Comparative Law Review* 3, no. 2 (1933): 233.

with their kin-based and decentralized social and political order, have found it difficult to consensually institutionalize political centralization, political secularization, and the differentiation of polity and kinship, some of the political innovations introduced and upheld by BIA.”¹²⁵ Having the courts divided by language and culture recognized each tribes thoughts of self-governance. Within a decade, the Dawes Act would test the tribes’ self-governing abilities as the federal government enacted the wholesale reduction of “surplus” lands.

Reining It In, Assiniboine and Sioux Bands Craft Their Fort Peck Environment

In 1882, members of the tribe sought ways to take advantage of federal programs for cattle grazing that would allow them to assert their self-determination and retain one valuable symbol of their traditions—the horse. In the Annual Report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs stated that the Indians’ ponies weren’t able to pull plows, and that a disease had taken almost eighty percent of their herd.¹²⁶ In December 1886, the Sioux reiterated, and the government agents at the proceedings recognized, the importance of ponies to their lives. Agent Cowen acknowledged that among the “wants” the Sioux may have with the annuities were ponies.¹²⁷ Along with ponies, the federal representatives appealed to the Sioux to start cattle ranching, an activity that would allow them to not only use ponies, but increase those herds as the cattle herds increased.

125. Duane Champagne, *American Indian Societies: Strategies and Conditions of Political and Cultural Survival*, (Cambridge, MA: Cultural Survival, Inc., 1989), 96.

126. Annual Report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs 1882, 9-100.

127. Cong. Set, House of Representatives, 15th Sess., 1887-88, 27.

Over 150 tribespeople met in the schoolhouse at Fort Peck. All Yankton Sioux headmen were present including Medicine Bear, Deer Tail, and Yellow Eagle. Agents and government representatives included Judge Wright, Major Larabee, Dr. Daniels, and Agent Cowen. A similar council was held at Fort Peck at Wolf Point, but the minutes of the Assiniboine council were not recorded.¹²⁸

It can be said positively that the Fort Peck Indians can never become self-supporting where they now are through the cultivation of the soil alone; but there can be no doubt that with proper encouragement they would soon reach the that position as stock-growers. Stock-herding is suited to their tastes; they are willing to work, and realize the necessity of doing for themselves; and it is but right and just that their efforts should be encouraged and directed in a way that will be most likely to advance their civilization and happiness. Furthermore, it is absolutely certain that unless they have cattle given them and become stock-raisers the Government will be obliged to support them for all time, or allow them to starve.”¹²⁹

The Assiniboine and Sioux both expressed wishes to accumulate cattle herds, but underneath the words of encouragement from government agents flowed a warning—the Sioux and Assiniboine didn’t have much choice. After Deer Tail asked openly what would become of his people after the annuities stopped in ten years, Judge Wright explained after annuity payments stopped, the tribe should have enough cattle to make themselves self-sufficient.¹³⁰ Everyone at the council, Indian and white, had acknowledged that farming wasn’t an option because of the “frequent failure of crops, owing to the aridity of the soil, renders farming not only unprofitable but uncertain as a means of support.”¹³¹

128. *Ibid.*, 25.

129. Cong. Set, 15th Sess., 1887-88, 6.

130. *Ibid.*, 28.

131. *Ibid.*, 6

The council recorded \$165,000 annuity for ten years for all people at Fort Peck Agency, but the cost of providing cattle would come from this annuity, as well as

goods, clothing, subsistence, agricultural and mechanical implements; in providing employe[e]s; in the education of Indian children; in procuring medicine and medical attendance; in the care and support of the aged, sick and infirm, and the helpless orphans of said Indians, in the erection of such new agency and school buildings, mills, blacksmith, carpenter, and wagon shops as may be necessary; in assisting the Indians to build houses and inclose[sic] their farms, and in any other respect to promote their civilization, comfort, and improvement.¹³²

The annuity would not cover the expenses of all they had listed for over 3,000 Indian inhabitants. The federal government was charging the Indians of Fort Peck for the government agency buildings and employees for their reservation instead of paying for it out of a federal budget. The practice of charging Fort Peck Indians for what, by legal definition, should have been trust functions continued into the 1900s when the government charged Fort Peck for the irrigation and other water systems built. As well as charging Indians for the cattle “given” to them, any person who accepted cattle would have to give back a certain number of steers each year to be sold at government auction. Many of the purchasers were whites who were able to buy cattle for pennies on the dollar. At the beginning of the 1900s, the federal government agencies decided that irrigation programs would help to support the stock-raising enterprise, for the benefit of Indians, but mostly for the benefit of whites who had purchased “surplus” Indian lands under the Dawes Act.¹³³

132. *Ibid.*, 5.

133. Garrit Voggesser, “Of Woods, Wilderness, and Water: Negotiating Natural Resources on the Blackfeet, Flathead, and Fort Peck Reservations, 1885-1945,” (PhD diss., University of Oklahoma, 2005), 4-5.

The Dawes Act and the Beginning of Allotment at Fort Peck

On February 8, 1887, Congress passed the Dawes Act, commonly known as the Allotment Act. Senator Henry Dawes of Massachusetts sponsored the act. Dawes had recently toured the reservations in California, and had reported his dismay at the poor quality of life. Since the late 1700s, members of federal government had seen allotment, the owning of individual property, as a way to not only “civilize” but Christianize Indians.¹³⁴ The Dawes Act was simultaneously an act of intended humanitarianism and an act of greed for “the exploitation” of Indian resources by whites.¹³⁵ Reservations would be surveyed and divided into lots. Each individual would be able to choose where the lots were located within four years, but if not, would be assigned lots. Some Indian agents were surprised when individuals chose lots on the poorest of poor land, but these individuals chose the lots because they were close to family.

Eastern legislators still held the position that farming would save the Indian, even though they knew that farming was untenable in the west. Senate records from 1875 provide information that legislators did understand that farming was not a possibility for most of western reservations without irrigation, and that stock-raising was the only viable agricultural practice.

The Dawes Act would provide 160 acres to the head of a family, eighty acres for each person over eighteen, each orphan under eighteen, and forty acres to “each other single person under eighteen.” A twenty-five-year guarantee to this land, held in trust by

134. D.S. Otis, *The Dawes Act and the Allotment of Indian Lands*, ed. Francis Paul Prucha (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1973), 4.

135. Otis, 5.

the United States Bureau of Indian Affairs, would prevent sale. After twenty-five years, the land would no longer be held in trust and an individual could sell or transfer deed of their property to someone else. What *patent in fee* land also meant, was that for the twenty-five-year period, the lands could not be taxed or used as collateral for loans.

The Dawes Act intensified the tensions surrounding blood quantum on reservations. Indians were “defined for the first time” by how much Indian blood they had to prove they were eligible for allotments.¹³⁶ The Dawes Act encouraged what has been termed *factionalism*, or internal strife between two or more political groups inside a tribe.¹³⁷ Since Sioux and Assiniboine band politics were based within strict codes of kinship, the Dawes Act forced American Indians to classify themselves by a federal, paternalistic definition that codified who was allowed the benefits of land ownership. The blood quantum requirement was outside the cultural boundaries underpinning the concept regarding kinship. As Dolly Aker’s letter from 1934 explains, the Assiniboine and Sioux practiced adoptive kinship. If a member of a tribe or band, showed one of the four virtues to another member of a tribe or band that was outside the kinship structure, the person receiving the act of bravery, wisdom, fortitude, or generosity could adopt the person and regard them as mother, father, aunt, uncle, brother or sister if they felt that relationship existed. The kinship title bestowed was reciprocal. Now, the two people were bound by those definitions and the responsibility that went along with them. Calling someone an

136. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 500.

137. Historians have used the term *factionalism* broadly when referencing historical Native political systems inside tribes. When writing about internal strife in state or federal governments, the term is rarely used, and the term *politics* is used. I consider the term *factionalism* to be reductionist and a continuation of the paternalistic nature of how Native politics is viewed.

aunt or uncle was not simply a moniker, it created bonds and deeper relationships across kinship, political, and federal definitions. Everyone in the community outside the relationship recognized the bonds as well.

In 1887, another event was shaping the environment of Fort Peck that threatened Native spaces. The St. Paul, Minneapolis & Manitoba Railway, changing name to the Great Northern Railway soon after, was being constructed “east and west, through this reservation.”¹³⁸ An agent at Fort Peck viewed the coming of the railroad as “a greater tendency to civilize these Indians than any other one thing...”¹³⁹ Between the Dawes Act, assimilationist concepts of blood-quantum, and the coming of railroad culture, Fort Peck tribes had assaults from many sides upon their way of life.

In December 1886 the boundary lines of Fort Peck Reservation were redrawn, and Congress ratified the new bounds of the reservation in 1888. In the same act, the Fort Peck tribes were promised a \$165,000 per year annuity for ten years.¹⁴⁰ 271 Assiniboine and Sioux members signed the act. The annuity matched the 1875 annuity. The starvation, emergency ration purchases, and misery over the last decade at Fort Peck did not sway Congress to increase annuities to a level that could sustain the Assiniboine and Sioux bands.

Since Fort Peck began, there were many Indian agents. Some had good intentions and seemingly served the population the best that they could with inadequate supplies and little response from Washington. Other agents were negligent in their duties and

138. Otis, *Allotment of Indian Lands*, 32-33.

139. *Ibid.*

140. 50th Cong., 1st Sess., CH. 213, 114-16.

dismissed on grounds of malfeasance. Indian agent Alonzo Reed served less than a year after being dismissed for “trafficking of alcohol, stealing agency property, especially cattle.”¹⁴¹ Some Indian agents withheld annuities to punish Indians for being noncompliant in “civilizing.”¹⁴² Some agents didn’t keep detailed records, or records at all, for successors to evaluate.

The frequent turnover of Indian agents caused many problems. Firstly, Native communities took time to learn how to adapt to new agents. A new face on the same government figurehead every year to two years reinforced the perception that Washington didn’t care about American Indians’ situation, and that each person would be exactly like the last. Indian agents also needed time to learn how to do their jobs. Indian politics on the reservation, and connected to other reservations, were complicated. As neighboring reservations went through the same quick shift from agent to agent, Indian agents had no one local to lean on for advice or assistance. When you were an Indian agent, you were on your own. It was up to the individual what they did when no one in Washington was watching. The Native populations didn’t have a choice.

141. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 57.

142. Miller, 87.

CHAPTER TWO: BORDERS, BOOMS, AND BUSTS

The Arid West and the Yeoman Farmer

In 1902, Congress passed the Reclamation Act. The United States Reclamation Service (USRS) was housed within the United States Geological Survey (USGS).¹ The task of the USRS was to take the surplus arid lands of the western states and transform them into an irrigated paradise for the yeoman farmer. Since before Europeans contacted tribes, water was precious in the west. Tribes of the Upper Missouri like the Arikara, Hidatsa, and Mandan used irrigation for crops. With the push of white settlers and miners into the Montana territory in the late 1860s, disputes and abuses over water rights began in earnest. The USRS became the vehicle through which “the delivery and storage systems built ... were for the benefit on non-Indians.”²

The 1887 Allotment Act had allowed the sale of surplus Native land not allotted to individual tribespeople. The USRS took advantage of the act and wrested power from the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) over Indian resources that captured USRC attention. In 1904, Congress gave the USRS exclusive authority to take any surplus lands on reservations and “reclaim, utilize and dispose” of them.³ In 1906, BIA money for construction projects was also “transferred to Reclamation accounts.” The USRC now

1. The US Reclamation Service (USRC) was renamed the US Bureau of Reclamations (USBR) in 1923. In 1907, the USRC (USBR) was moved under the Department of the Interior (DOI). This move created a head to head conflict between two DOI offices, the USBR and the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) during the New Deal.

2. David H. Getches, “Conflicts in Perspective,” in *Indian Water in the New West*, eds. Thomas R. McGuire, William B. Lord, and Mary G. Wallace (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1993), 13.

3. Donald J. Pisani, “Irrigation, Water Rights, and the Betrayal of Indian Allotment,” *Environmental Law Review* 10, no. 3 (Autumn 1986): 161.

had control over BIA construction funds and sales from the Native land that the USRC wished to liquidate. The USRS used the money in a revolving account to pay for Indian labor and construction costs on reservation water projects.⁴ Fort Peck was one of the reservations in Montana where USRS water projects occurred. These water projects were intended mostly for the benefit of white settlers. The depth and intricacy of the water scheme didn't stop with the redirected BIA funds.

The USRS implemented a policy that individual owners of irrigated land would pay for the projects with liens on their property. White property was to gain no interest for twenty-five years. People wishing to farm depended upon irrigation to make it work so they had to agree to these terms to make their allotted, or recently acquired surplus lands successful. When the liens became due, many white land owners could not pay and defaulted on loans. The 1887 Dawes Act was supposed to disallow liens on allotted land, but those protections were against speculators and private interests, not federal projects. The lien scheme was another way the USRS circumvented the BIA. Another fault of economic planning accelerated the failure of the USRS, subsidizing white farmers.

White farmers bought surplus land for pennies on the dollar. The USGS would survey surplus land and deem it non-irrigable. The USRS would take the USGS report and liquidate the land to white settlers for as little as \$4 an acre. After the Reclamation irrigation projects, that land could in turn be sold for as much as \$100 an acre.⁵ This part of the USRS plan was “transparent.”⁶ The only people to profit from flipping non-

4. Pisani, *Irrigation*, 161.

5. *Ibid.*, 167.

6. *Ibid.*, 168.

irrigable land were white land speculators who could afford to buy up surplus land and wait for the USRS irrigation works to reach their isolated properties.

Because of defaulted loans, the USRS lost money for their revolving credit fund for irrigation and reservoir works.⁷ They remained in control of these BIA accounts, and water projects, and dictated many of the routes of water through and around reservations through 1924.⁸ The loss of funds through USRS/USBR mismanagement drove the Senate to action and funds for irrigation and construction work were returned to the BIA in 1927.

White settlers diverting water upriver from Indian Country complicated the water issue. 1905, the Milk River running through Fort Belknap “completely dried up before it reached Indian pasture and farmland” because of white settlers diverting water for farming and mining.⁹ Even if BIA annuities paid for seed, machines, and cattle to encourage the “civilized” Indian farmer, the water they depended upon could disappear at any time because of diversions upstream. The Milk River continues passed Fort Belknap and forms the western boundary of Fort Peck. Though streams ran into the Milk after the boundaries of Fort Belknap, white farmers centralized around rivers and water certainly would have been diverted from Fort Peck, just as it was from their cousins upriver.

Western Montana also had some of the richest and most powerful men lobbying for Indian water, mining company owners in the city of Butte. An extraordinary amount of water was required for mining. Any laws concerning water rights would affect their business ventures. Individuals practicing hydraulic mining also took a vast amount of

7. Pisani, *Irrigation*, 167.

8. *Ibid.*, 170.

9. *Ibid.*, 163.

water from Montana streams and rivers. In German Gulch, Montana twenty-five miles of streambed was diverted to practice hydraulic mining between 1870 and 1887, until Chinese immigrant miners abandoned the claims for lack of ore.¹⁰ Court determinations of the rights to Indian water affected many business interests throughout the state.

Indians found some support in the Congress. Senator Joseph Robinson from Arkansas was an outspoken opponent of USRS actions diverting Indian water from 1913 through 1937. He supported that states guaranteed trust rights for Indian water.¹¹ One Montana Senator, Henry Myers, served in the Senate from 1911 to 1923 and was a vocal supporter of USRC projects. In 1914, Myers defended the USRS fund appropriation of Native surplus land funds because he stated the government couldn't procure the funds elsewhere. "If you halt this work you do the greatest possible injustice to the Indian, because the Indian has got to get his money back out of the sale of land to the white man; and if the white man does not get water on his land, he can not make his payments. Therefore, if you halt this work, the Indian will be the chief sufferer."¹²

In 1908, the fight over rights to Indian water culminated in *Winters v. United States*. Now referred to as the Winters Doctrine, the statute determined the rights of American Indians and waters that coursed through their lands. The Fort Belknap tribes sued Henry Winters and other for diverting water away from their reservation. If the federal government intended Indians to civilize by farming, they had to have water to do

10. GSM Services, Inc., *Montana Cultural Resource Inventory, Site No. 24SB212* (Helena: State Historic Preservation Office, 1983), 6.

11. Pisani, *Irrigation*, 166-7.

12. Pisani, 168.

so. The government's determination to assimilate Indians through agriculture was at odds with the needs of white settlers. Justice McKenna delivered the Supreme Court decision,

...it would be extreme to believe that within a year Congress destroyed the reservation and took from the Indians the consideration of their grant, leaving them a barren waste, took from them the means of continuing their old habits, yet did not leave them the power to change to new ones.¹³

The Winters Doctrine went largely ignored until the 1960s. The National Water Commission in 1973 stated

...the United States was pursuing a policy of encouraging the settlement of the West and the creation of family-sized farms on its arid lands. In retrospect, it can be seen that this policy was pursued with little or no regard for Indian water rights and the *Winters* doctrine.¹⁴

The Fort Belknap tribes of Montana had won a Supreme Court case that championed all Indians' rights to water, but the decision did not sway the USRC and white settlers to change their activities while subsequent court cases were filed and fought for decades. Fort Belknap is located about 100 miles east of Fort Peck. Many Assiniboine bands and Sioux lived on the reservation with close familial and political connections to Fort Peck.

In 1908, the BIA began Fort Peck allotments, and in the same year the USRS began an irrigation plan for Fort Peck that also included irrigated allotments.¹⁵ The USRS created six divisions of irrigation districts on the reservation, Frazier-Wolf irrigation district, Little Porcupine Creek irrigation, Big Porcupine Creek, Poplar River, and Big

13. <https://caselaw.findlaw.com/us-supreme-court/207/564.html>

14 Getches, *Conflicts in Perspective*, 13.

15 Garrit Voggesser, "Fort Peck Project: Indian Projects," (Washington: Bureau of Reclamation, 2001), 7.

Muddy.¹⁶ All of these districts were located along the Missouri, Poplar, and above-named creek systems

¹⁶ Voggesser, "Fort Peck Project," 3.



Figure 4, water usage in mining. This photograph shows the vast amounts of water miners used at placer mines up and down rivers throughout the western United States. Hydraulic Mining for Gold, Alaska, ca.1910-1923, Photograph courtesy Library of Congress.

that flowed through and around the reservation. Each district would have pumping stations, reservoirs, canals, and diversion dams taking the water into reservation lands, but the USRS also built reservoirs off the reservation upriver or on a tributary, like at Medicine Lake off the Missouri, that held water that should have been allowed to flow onto reservation land. Big Porcupine Creek went dry in the summer, sometimes because of drought, but sometimes because upriver diversions. “Off shore” reservoirs like Medicine Lake gave access to white settlers. The USRS tried to remedy this problem by building more reservoirs upriver on reservation land.

Congressional and the Indian Service still insisted that American Indians could elevate their meager subsistence with irrigated aided agriculture. This was, in essence, a renegotiation of the 1887 Allotment Act, but with higher stakes. Congress gave the USRS the power to mortgage Fort Peck tribes’ land for irrigation projects. Each Fort Peck family was to receive “320 acres of grazing or agricultural land, 40 acres of irrigable land, and 20 acres of timber land ... alive when [USRS] allotment began.”¹⁷ Unallotted lands opened soon after in 1913, and whites purchased “200 Indian allotments” of 320 acres each.¹⁸ The BIA sold the lands, for the USRS for from \$1,900 to \$4,050 per 320 acre allotment, roughly between \$5 and \$12 per acre.¹⁹ But whether white or Native, irrigation came at a price. The settlers, and any Assiniboine or Sioux who accepted reappraised land allotments through the USRS, had to pay back the cost of irrigating their

17. Voggeser, “Fort Peck Project,” 23.

18. *Ibid.*

19. *Ibid.*

land. The USRS charged each owner of land a certain amount for each *possible* acre of land whether or not the irrigation was ever used.

The BIA would sell surplus land then transfer the funds into the USRS accounts, the USRS would sell planned irrigated land to white settlers then charge them a per irrigable acre fee, payable at the end of twenty-five years without interest. The USRS sped up the repayment schedule because the USRS coffers were dry. Many owners defaulted, unable to make enough of a living to support themselves and save to repay the USRS. The USRS then would not be able to recoup the money to pay back the Fort Peck Reservation for the surplus lands sold. This left Fort Peck unable to pay for all of their reservation's needs. The brunt of the defaults did not become completely apparent until the mid-1920s.

In 1918, the USRS began charging for irrigation water whether or not it was delivered depending upon how close allotted lands and homesteads were to irrigation ditches. \$1 per acre foot of water was charged, and .75 per acre for each additional acre of water.²⁰ The fees increased through the 1920s. Between 1908 and 1922, only 22,794 Fort Peck acres were irrigated.²¹ The cost was over \$900,000, \$39 per acre, approximately six times what each acre was purchased for during the 1913 opening of allotments.²² Congress failed to enforce the payments to be made to Fort Peck for the cost of defaulted loans at least through the late 1920s until the USRS projects were cancelled in 1927.

20. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 259.

21. Voggesser, "Fort Peck Project," 19.

22. *Ibid.*, 20.

On May 24, 1935, Charles Fahy, Acting Solicitor for the Department of the Interior, wrote to the Secretary of the Interior, Harold B. Ickes concerning the 1908-1912 “reappraisal” of allotments. Dolly Akers, a Fort Peck Assiniboine and Montana State legislator from 1932 to 1934 and a Fort Peck Tribal Executive Board member, retained a copy in her records with a copy stamp, but also possessed the carbon of the letter.²³ This indicates a close relationship between solicitor Fahy and Dolly Akers.

The letter details the \$79,223.81 loss to the Fort Peck tribes for reappraisals made of allotments “on or before May 31, 1934.” Fahy notified Ickes that “Representatives of the Fort Peck Indians have submitted a petition asking that the members of the tribe be reimbursed by the United States for the losses.” Fahy related that the solicitor in 1912 held the opinion that “if this tribe ever raises the issue and is given authority to sue, it will recover an amount equal to the aggregate reductions made on entered lands through reappraisal.” At the end of the letter advising Ickes of the department’s situation, Fahy states, “Whether that act deprived the Indians of rights so that they may succeed in litigation or so that Congress should make appropriation –to reimburse them for losses the Department is not called upon to decide.”²⁴ This stalemate response is typical of the interactions between the BIA and Fort Peck Tribes through the 1930s. It is no wonder that in the 1930s when the BIA began irrigation projects on Fort Peck, the tribes were skeptical of the outcome.

23. Charles Fahey, Acting Solicitor, Department of the Interior, to Department of the Interior Secretary, Harold Ickes. 24 May 1935. Box 1, folder F, Ft. Peck Programming 1935-1951. Dolly Akers Collection 1930-1941, Montana Historical Society Research Center. The file extends into 1951 even though the collection box date ends at 1941. This is correct. The Dolly Akers collection remains unprocessed as of June 2017.

24. Fahy to Ickes letter, 24 May 1935.

The Department of the Interior was worried about the possibility of repaying Fort Peck for losses during the 1908 allotment, and understood that the Fort Peck Executive Board had been keeping detailed records of their own. No other letter was found in this collection that indicates Dolly Akers communicated with the superintendent of Fort Peck first about these losses. BIA processes dictated that any tribal matters be brought first to the attention of the agency superintendent. The superintendent would forward the concerns on to Indian Service regional offices in Billings, then Billings would forward to Washington, and then, if necessary, DOI offices.

Attempts to contact the Commissioner of the BIA directly were routinely redirected to the superintendent. Akers's communications in the 1930-1951 file concerning other circumstances contain hundreds of attempts at communication with Washington BIA offices proceeding through the bureaucratic BIA hierarchy, sometimes with maddening repetition of requests over the course of decades. The Fahy letter's example of direct communication between Akers and the solicitor implies Fort Peck was serious about their petition. The failure of the USRS/USBR to recoup and repay Fort Peck subsidies in 1927 would have been dire by 1935.

During the grips of the Great Depression, and as a newly elected official, Akers would have been aware of the financial strains of her reservation, exacerbated by her first-hand witness to the poor living conditions of her constituents when she worked for the Montana Relief Commission after the first phase of the New Deal began in 1934. As the Fahy letter points out, the 1920s for Fort Peck was one of marginal improvement and not the boom times many in the rest of the country enjoyed. The rest of the nation

benefited from a raise in land prices, but Fort Peck lands were being undersold and gains limited.

The mid-1920s brought another form of discord to the reservation, internal politicking. Fort Peck members accused members with agency jobs of engaging in “preferential hiring” practices for agency and USBR irrigation construction jobs. Fred C. Morgan advised the BIA that there was a “great deal of unrest.”²⁵

Fort Peck had accrued \$265,597.88 in the US trust account, but because of a loss from stock-grazing fees individual tribal members did not have adequate cash to pay for daily living expenses and food. Wolf-Point sub-agency employee Simon B. Kirk had to appeal to the BIA for a per capita \$75 payment per tribal member in 1921. The BIA approved \$40. In 1922, Kirk realized the stock-grazing fees weren’t keeping up with the “cost of living,” and implemented a per acre charge. Grazing leases increased by 300 percent for those families engaged in cattle raising.²⁶

But only a small number of tribal members profited from stock-raising because many members were still waiting for the USRS to reappraise their allotments so that they could lease their land.²⁷ Many of these backlogged allotment cases were due to the intricacies of heirship.²⁸ The backlog of reappraisals could be another the reason why Voggesser’s research shows such a low use of the irrigation projects at Fort Peck in the 1920s as well as little rain and inadequate water storage in reservoirs he presents.²⁹

25. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 252.

26. Miller, 253.

27. *Ibid.*, 254.

28. *Ibid.*, 257.

29. Voggesser, *Fort Peck Projects*, 14.

In 1922, the Land Division paid a visit to Poplar found “thirty leases were delinquent.”³⁰ Some people were too old, too young, or didn’t have enough help to manage their remote allotments. Some people were reluctant to improve their lands with irrigation because they feared whites would take it away.³¹ Leasing became an option to tribal members who held allotments. Homesteaders not accustomed to the arid land of Northeastern Montana still found making a living enough to repay debt difficult. Droughts, flash floods, and grasshoppers were frequent. Native allotment owners focused on producing tons of blue-point hay to feed their cattle and horses through the winter.³² The Assiniboine and Sioux over the last century had learned the ebb and flow of government interest in their tribe’s welfare, and took strides to take care of themselves and their families without relying upon the government for intervention. They planned for the season, and did not make long-term plans because of the lack of assurance that government programs would be there past the next session of Congress.

Fort Peck, as a whole, had not embraced USRS irrigation projects for their own reasons and individual situations. One reason was a lack of faith in agency employees. Tribal members reported numerous offenses of mismanagement in the 1920s. Supervisor Morgan investigated Simon B. Kirk for wrong doings but could not obtain reliable information that could be substantiated. Miller et. al suggest that since Kirk was a Sisseton Sioux in an agency position at the predominately Assiniboine Wolf-Point agency, the Native residents just wanted him out.³³ This report, if correct, does reinforce

30. Miller, 254.

31. Pisani, *Irrigation*, 171.

32. Voggesser, *Fort Peck Projects*, 17.

33. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 253.

the notion that the Assiniboine and Sioux wanted separate cultural spaces for themselves—Assiniboine in the west, and Sioux in the east.

Assimilation schools on the reservation were as turbulent as tribal relationships during the 1920s. In the late 1880s and 90s, boarding schools at Fort Peck were unsuccessful because the superintendents had to choose between feeding starving people, or paying teachers. In the 1920s, boarding schools functioned under suspicion of teacher's cruelty and the principals' harassment of girls in the school. District Supervisor James H. McGregor reported the abuses to Kirk, but they went ignored, possibly, because the schools weren't the Assiniboine and Sioux's idea anyway. In 1922, thirty-five girls ran away from the Assimilation school in Poplar.³⁴

Fort Peck communities made strides in subsistence in the 1910s and 1920s, albeit not the magnificent endeavor in large scale farming the BIA had hoped for. More families were able to provide gardens for themselves, have small flocks of chicken, and cattle enough to feed themselves. Farm Bureau Clubs started, and the agency provided more plows and tractors. More families farmed between "twenty and one hundred acres."³⁵ There was a period during World War I when eligible men at Fort Peck enlisted and created a shortage of labor, but after the war they returned and began stock-raising, hay farming, and working labor jobs for the Reclamation Bureau again. The Reclamation Bureau jobs of the 1920s provided much needed income for Fort Peck families.

The financial boom at Fort Peck was more like a ripple, slowly emanating from more populated areas like Wolf Point, Poplar, and Frazier. Yet, the experiences of the

34. Miller, 254.

35. Ibid., 255-56.

1920s steered many Fort Peck families toward embracing cattle culture that they practiced on their own terms. They chose to participate in government programs on a small scale, and raised enough cattle to provide for their families, instead of engaging in large-scale outfits. They knew that the rains, spring floods, and grasshoppers were too unpredictable to support large-scale ranching and farming with little to no contingency resources. Also, they distrusted the larger cattle grazing projects. The risk was too great because the Congress was too fickle to support long-term projects of benefit on the reservation consistently term over term. The collapse in 1927 of USBR funding, the stalemate in Congress to recoup funds for Fort Peck, and intermittent droughts without sufficient USBR reservoirs, proved For Peck tribes right.

The 1920s unfolded an increasing political branching of determination and debate across the reservation. Allotment in 1887 and 1908 had brought with it an enormous amount of paperwork, new BIA and USRS relationships and regulations, and a new conceptualization about land and resources. An insidious and detrimental component of allotment was the way it began to shift Native thought from communally held to individually held resources. Once concepts of individual land ownership inserted itself into the Fort Peck community, all the trappings of the support mechanisms for individual ownership began to affect familial driven political trunks of Fort Peck communities.

Most of the differences of upon rested within three main issues, 1) perceived control of the Tribal Business Council of the BIA, and 2) how the General Council functioned, and 3) where were the borders between the privileges of citizenship for Native peoples and the trust responsibilities of wardship of the United States? These three

issues found root within the context of the dissolution of the Tribal Business committee and the emergence of a secondary political party on the reservation—the Indian Protective Association (IPA).

The IPA was a political movement that began across several reservations in Montana in the early 1920s. Many of these reservations were also experiencing the pressures of allotment and BOR projects simultaneously, just as Fort Peck was. Meade Steele, a leader for the Fort Peck IPA advocated dissolution of the Tribal Business Council and for the General Council to administer the TBCs functions. Steele and others advocated this resolution primarily because of the belief that the TBC was “under Indian Bureau domination.”³⁶

The TBC held elections annually, just as the General Council did. Meade Steele was the secretary of the TBC when they drafted the constitution. Superintendent P.H. Moller suggested in a letter to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs that Steele and the IPA consisted of disgruntled tribe members that did not represent the whole of the reservation.³⁷ Though the IPA did not gain much political ground at Fort Peck in the 1920s, other council members held some of their views. In 1927, the General Council voted to abolish the TBC and place all business matters under the General Council.

In 1927, the Fort Peck Tribes expanded their self-determination regarding the way they interacted with Washington and agency staff. The structure and function of the General Council, TBC, and constitution had to be debated because federal government frameworks forced them to do so. If the federal government had not been present on the

36. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 266.

37. *Ibid.*

reservation and communication requiring certain standards and hierarchies, Assiniboine and Sioux tribes would not have had to debate the methodologies and actions of the General Council.

In 1927, after years of abiding by federal government stipulations on General Council and tribal government functions, Fort Peck members crafted and adopted a constitution that would not be altered again until the early 1950s. In October, the General Council met and elected twelve, one-term representatives, and eight delegates to discuss business matters and the creation of a constitution.

On November 16, 1927, the General Council met at the “gymnasium of the boarding school in Poplar” to discuss the constitution submitted by the Tribal Executive Council.³⁸ In discussion about by-laws, the council members debated the control of the superintendent to permit General Council meetings and the process of selecting council members. Before, the 1927 constitution, the Tribal Council had to ask permission of the superintendent for the council to hold meetings.³⁹ The ability to be able to call their own councils was paramount. The general council also insisted from Charles Eggers, the newly appointed superintendent in 1927, recognize both Assiniboine and Sioux tribes would choose their own members as delegates to Washington. Eggers agreed, showing at least an understanding that his predecessor had not shared that the Assiniboine and Sioux were separate, sovereign peoples that required being addressed as such for their own independent interests.⁴⁰ The constitution permitted all decision making and the ability to

38. Miller, 289.

39. Ibid., 252.

40. Ibid., 289.

“transact tribal business in the General Council.”⁴¹ From 1927 forward, the General Council of the Fort Peck Reservation Montana would be comprised of two other political bodies—the Fort Peck Assiniboine Council and the Fort Peck Sioux Council.

While some 1920s Fort Peck reservation members slowly built up their homes and resources with federal program assistance and leasing money, they continued to embrace traditional cultural spaces and practices. Moller reported in 1925 that people went to dances, celebrations, and religious congresses during the summer, often when the hay needed tending. While expressing his frustration with Native peoples practicing their cultural lifeways as an interruption to agriculture and the “eroded value of property,” he did not share a sentiment to halt their gatherings.⁴² The Assiniboine and Sioux bands of Fort Peck continued to use the portion of federal programs that they wanted and when they wanted, and persisted in preserving cultural expressions. Modernization did not mean giving up who you were. This form of selective acculturation persisted through the Great Depression.

The Great Depression brought many of the incremental gains Fort Peck had made to a halt. The ripple of increased resources in cattle, leasing money, and irrigation that had spread along the Milk, Missouri, and Poplar river families of the agency slowly slipped into the dark waters of the Great Depression. Since Fort Peck was already a poor area with few resources and tenuous opportunities, the impacts of the Great Depression took longer to be felt. The bank failures of the twenties and droughts of the early thirties

41. *Ibid.*, 440.

42. *Ibid.*, 270.

blew away many of the hopes Fort Peck residents had for their resources into the dustbowl winds.

CHAPTER THREE: HORSES, CAMPS, AND CULTURAL NEGOTIATIONS DURING THE NEW DEAL

Public works were not a perfect solution to the problems of poverty on the reservation, but they did alleviate some of the acute hardship and imparted a mechanism for some people to take a portion of control for their future into their hands. The Assiniboine and Sioux bands would assert their interest in these projects. They negotiated terms for work and to allow their families to stay with them in Poplar bunkhouses and in remote project camps, and used their horses on projects. They inserted themselves into an engineering master plan that was intended to be federally coordinated and executed. John G. Hunter, the superintendent of Fort Peck, and the project managers saw the value in the contributions of the men and women on the reservation, accepted their requests and often lobbied for the Native populations' interests. The planners in Washington may have developed the large-scale water projects for the reservation, but those on the ground on the reservation worked that plan to their benefit as much as was possible.

Fort Peck Physical and Social Borderlands

Fort Peck Reservation lays north of the Missouri River with the Milk River bordering its west side and Muddy Creek marking its eastern border. The Poplar River bisects the reservation in the east and Wolf Creek in the west. The rivers established physical regions of the reservation, while the Assiniboine and Sioux established social divisions on the reservation since the late 1880s. Highway 13 that runs north-south in the middle of the reservation existed as a physical symbol of separation. The Assiniboine settled the western half of the reservation around Wolf Point, while the Sioux claimed

Poplar and the eastern side. As the New Deal years continued, these cultural divides effervesced in political maneuverings as disputes about reservation resources increased. With the Indian Agency headquartered on the Sioux side at Poplar, the Assiniboine continued to insist upon their interests being represented.¹

Factionalism is not easily defined nor predicted as a causality for Native action and reaction on reservations.² Where both tribes on the reservation attempted to protect their collective interests, there were instances of cross-cultural assistance that defies the standard excuse of factionalism as the culprit for federal resistance on reservations. Charles Elder, Chairman of the Sioux Tribal Council, wrote directly to Harold Ickes, Secretary of the Interior to ask that Dolly Akers not be fired from her job at the agency. He submitted the petition on behalf of the Yankton Sioux instead of “waiting for the west end of the reservation to act.” Elder points out that she is Assiniboine and that usually her people support her “90%” of the time, and that their petition to have her removed was the fault of two “mixed-blood” women in Wolf Point.³ Elder describes a situation where someone’s own band was attempting to remove them and that they, the Sioux, wanted her to remain. Elder was trying to protect Dolly from the actions of her own people. Pointing

1. Scott Daniel Warren, “Landscape and Place Identity in a Great Plains Reservation Community: A Historical Geography of Poplar, Montana” (master’s thesis, Montana State University, 2008), 78.

2. Graham D. Taylor, *The New Deal and American Indian Tribalism: The Administration of the Indian Reorganization Act, 1934-45* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980), see page 45 and 49 on Taylor’s insistence that blood-quantum based factionalism created “deep and lasting divisions,” but his contradiction to this argument when reviewing voting practices data on page 58. Factionalism existed, but due to more than a superficial basis upon full-blood v. mixed blood.

3. Charles Eder, Chairman of Tribal Council, to Department of the Interior Secretary Harold Ickes, 16 March 1939 letter, 16 March 1939 letter, box 1, folder 2, Dolly Akers Collection, Montana Historical Society Research Center.

to “mixed-bloods” is an example that factionalism sometimes stopped when whites became part of the argument.

Discussion about *factionalism* should not be reduced into an ‘us’ or ‘them’ perspective based upon tribe vs. tribe. Many Assiniboine and Sioux married each other, making bonds and powerful connections within and outside the reservation. American Indians had been marrying for profit and benefit since eligible fur traders arrived. Marrying was a way to secure resources and a practice that continued in the 1930s. Assiniboine Dolly Smith Cusker Akers, a Tribal Executive Board member from 1934 until the late 1950s, married a Sioux man, George Cusker, who had large-scale cattle grazing interests outside Poplar. Many difficulties in her later political career did not stem from her tribal affiliation but what role her families resource interests played in her voting and lobbying decisions.

The peoples of Fort Peck also fostered family, political, and financial ties to other reservations, traversing the abstract concept of a reservation border. Assiniboine and Sioux leaders welcomed Blackfeet ranchers and farmers to Fort Peck Farming and Livestock Association convention in 1923. Dolly Akers continued a close relationship with Crow Reservation Superintendent Robert Yellowtail in the early to mid-1930s as she assisted him in setting up Federal Emergency Relief Agency offices and procedures. Indians were interested in what other Indians were doing, and navigated the political waters cross-nationally from reservation to reservation, and family to family. In the early days of the New Deal, past allotment patterns and access to resources from irrigation projects made these relationships more intense under federal scrutiny.

Scott Daniel Warren in his thesis explains, “In 1934 the BIA authorized the purchase of 100,000 acres of sub-marginal land, and in 1935 41,000 acres of land that remained open to homesteading were withdrawn and eventually returned to the tribes.”⁴ The BIA was returning lands to Indians, but the difficulty lay within who would manage the resources and who controlled the management. The Civil Conservation Corps—Indian Division had their own ideas.

The BIA and the CCC-ID evaluated reservation resources disregarding social context until political pushback surfaced. They concentrated their projects upon what was or was not allotted land. The Assiniboine and Sioux asserted control in the hiring for water projects. Both Assiniboine and Sioux General Councils insisted that project jobs not go to whites and landless Chippewa and Métis Indians. The Assiniboine and Sioux of Fort Peck claimed their space on the reservation based upon the relationship between land and identity, and the high stakes of who exerted that identity through resource management. The Assiniboine and Sioux worried the ‘*other*,’ Chippewa and Métis, would take away desperately needed income from recognized reservation families. The federal relief efforts on the reservation pressured Native identity in another way—by inserting non-Indian government workers into Fort Peck homes to determine not only who was eligible for aid, but to report the progress of assimilation in each home.

4. Warren, “Landscape and Place-Identity,” 80.

State of the Reservation, Relief Before Reform on the Reservation

After the New Deal was implemented, Indians had to fight to access to relief funds negotiating through a newly appointed BIA.⁵ In 1934, Montana Department of Social Welfare (MDSW), the Indian Emergency Conservation Work department, and Congress had a disconnect concerning how and when funds would be appropriated. Dolly Cusker, the first American Indian in the Montana State legislature from 1933 to 1934, went to Washington, D.C. with then governor Cooney to lobby Congress to include American Indians in the Roosevelt relief programs in May 1934. In the same session, Congress debated the Wheeler-Howard Bill, eventually passed as the Indian Reorganization Act.

Dolly Cusker wrote a detailed letter to Senator Burton Wheeler on March 8, 1935 to “help clarify the situation as is for Montana Indian Relief” and appealed for his help to straighten out the relief situation on reservations. She detailed the need for an Indian based social work program, allocation of Relief funds to help clothe and feed people, and to help with the “misguided idea that all Indians have pensions” at the State Administrative level. Impoverishment on the reservation left families with few choices. The Tribal Executive Council minutes note Mrs. Albert Day’s wish to sell her allotment

5. Senator James Murray to Dolly Cusker, Assistant Indian Coordinator, 11 February 1935, box 1, folder Correspondences, Dolly Akers Collection, Montana Historical Society Research Center. The letter explains to Akers that the Montana State Relief Commission is bound through Congressional appropriation to “make an allocation of a certain portion of the funds ... [to take] care of Indians.”

“so that her son-in-law may have his eyes treated.”⁶ For many Indians of Fort Peck, there were no other choices than to sell allotments for family needs.

In the letter Cusker details that on November 7, 1934, Mr. Harry Hopkins, the Federal Emergency Relief Administrator (soon to be the Director of the Works Progress Administration after FERA was absorbed by the WPA on May 6, 1935), “sent out a circular” establishing that “all programs and activities ... should include Indians.” On November 21, 1934, all seven Superintendents of the Montana Reservations, Mr. Samuel Gerson, Montana Director of Social Welfare, Dr. Butler, Director of the Montana Relief Commission, and Dolly Cusker met and agreed that an Indian Division should be created within the MDSW to oversee allotments for Indian Relief, and that P.H. Moller would be the Coordinator of this Indian Division. Dolly Cusker would become his assistant and visit, evaluate, and report upon each reservation so that an amount of relief money could be appropriated. Cusker stated that this would “solve Indian matters” before processing through the MDSW.⁷

Cusker and others at the Indian Relief meeting had an organizational plan in place to “meet with their people tactfully, create harmony and yet get the confidential information that the Montana Relief Commission required (MRC) so that funds could be allocated to the MDSW who would disperse those funds.”⁸ Cusker would “set-up” a

6. Tribal Executive Minutes, 11 November 1935, Record Group (RG) 75, box 107 General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, National Archives and Records Administration (NARA), Washington, D.C.

7. Dolly Cusker to Senator Burton K. Wheeler, 8 March 1935, box 1, folder F, Correspondences, Dolly Akers Collection 1930-41. Montana Historical Society Research Center (MHSRC).

8. Ibid.

Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) office at each reservation's agency
 "beginning with the Blackfeet," a Chief Clerk would be appointed

or Disbursing Officer sent from the Helena Auditing Department, one trained Senior case worker sent from the Social Service Department [receiving \$30 per week] and two stenographers who could be Indian girls to receive \$18 per week ... three Indian aides or Assistant case workers

The representatives also determined that these Indian assistants would need to be "fair[ly] educated ... and speak [the] individual language fluently."⁹ The meeting participants made the case that using Indian workers who were familiar with social work and their home reservation would eliminate the need for an interpreter. Using Indian assistants would also be necessary not to "antagonize" Indians because these relief workers would be entering their homes. She also stated in her letter to Wheeler that the Indian population had learned the Indian Service (BIA) "regulations" over the last fifty years, and that the Montana State Relief Commission's processes and procedures "conflict[ed]" with the Indian Service's. The outline of the program, which Cusker helped to create, included a Disbursing Officer. This was a position in the Indian Service and an indication that the Superintendents wanted a system in place for relief that mirrored the BIA protocol.¹⁰

By February 8, 1935, the Montana legislature still had not approved Indian Relief money.¹¹ When Cusker questioned Butler why the Montana Relief Commission had not allocated funds to reservations, Butler stated that he had "never been allocated additional

9. Ibid.

10. Dolly Cusker to Senator Burton K. Wheeler, 8 March 1935, box 1, folder Correspondences, Dolly Akers Collection 1930-41. MHSRC.

11. Dolly Cusker to Senator James E. Murray, 8 February 1935, box 1, folder Correspondences, Dolly Akers Collection 1930-41. MHSRC.

money to take care of the Indians of Montana.” In a February 11, 1935 letter Senator James Murray explains to Cusker

that the allotment for relief purposes is made to the Montana Relief Commission and that it is the rule that the State Commission should then set aside a certain part of the funds for Indian relief. You will understand that the general appropriation made by Congress is administered through the Federal Emergency Relief Administrator, Mr. Hopkins.¹²

Senator Murray goes on to assure Cusker that he will have a conversation with Mr. Hopkins and that Butler will “have to make an allocation of a certain portion of the funds allotted to the State for the purpose of taking care of Indians.” Gerson appointed Dolly Cusker as the “set-up” FERA agent for all seven reservations in Montana in 1934. Dolly would visit each reservation and evaluate their circumstances on several levels including geography, climate, resources, health, past relief, and present situation.¹³ She would meet with the Planning Board at each reservation. The Planning Board consisted of the Superintendent, Education Field Agent, Forest Ranger, Farm Agent, Scaler, and Tribal Council President.¹⁴

"The Planning Board agreed that work projects were more desirable than direct relief."¹⁵ As Robert Burnette stated in Kenneth R. Philp's edited volume, *Indian Self-Rule: First Hand Accounts of Indian-White Relations from Roosevelt to Reagan*, contrary to popular senatorial and public opinion at the time, American Indians did not want

12. Senator James E. Murray to Dolly Cusker Assistant Indian Coordinator, 11 February 1935, box 1, folder Correspondences, Dolly Akers Collection 1930-41. Montana Historical Society Research Center.

13. Dolly Cusker, Assistant Coordinator Indian Relief to Samul Gerson Director of Social Welfare, Montana Relief Commission, 9 Jan 1935, box 1, folder F, Correspondences, Dolly Akers Collection 1930-41. Montana Historical Society Research Center.

14. Ibid.

15. Ibid.

handouts, they wanted to govern themselves, determine their future, and have the kind of advocacy that a trust responsibility was indebted to give per the hundreds of treaties made.¹⁶

In early 1935 when Cusker organized surveys of reservations and a process for relief payments for Indians across Montana, several other government agencies put plans into place for the benefit of Indians. Superintendent John G. Hunter of Fort Peck Reservation had submitted a program for the reservation for relief work under the Indian Emergency Conservation Work program, the Montana State Water Conservation Board had appropriated funds and developed plans for the Poplar River Dam and other irrigation projects on Fort Peck, the Civil Conservation Corps-Indian Division had sent engineers to Fort Peck to begin irrigation, spring, well, and reservoir projects on the reservation, and the Montana Department of Transportation had developed plans for road improvements on Fort Peck.¹⁷ Government engineers, assistant engineers, forestry directors, IECW coordinators, CCC-ID coordinators, surveyors, and other government employees were descending upon the Fort Peck Reservation with plans to improve the living conditions of the Indian by transforming their cultural landscape into “proper economic” uses for land.¹⁸

Dolly Akers and others had to fight for the ability to oversee the relief programs on their reservations and who was allowed into their own homes. The federal presence on

16. Kenneth R. Philp, ed., *Indian Self-Rule: First Hand Accounts of Indian-White Relations from Roosevelt to Reagan* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 1995), 106.

17. Montana Highway Planning Survey, U.S. Bureau of Public Roads, Manual for Road Life Studies in Montana, 1936, RS 418, box 1, MHSRC.

18. Plans for Unappropriated Waters, 1936-1938, RS 37, box 6, folder 3, Montana State Water Conservation Board Records.

the Fort Peck reservation was intruding into all aspects of Native life—socially and financially—within a landscape that was supposed to be their own. Federal water projects played a role in assimilationist policy long before the New Deal.

Late Nineteenth Century Irrigation in the West

The development of irrigation works on Fort Peck started before the New Deal. The BIA had been attempting irrigation works for agriculture on the reservation since the late 1880s. In the late 1880s, Congress would sometimes approve improvement projects on reservations but the “hesitancy” to consistently allocate, or sufficiently allocate, monies would prevent the completion, construction, and critical maintenance of these projects.¹⁹ Congress’ interest in improvement projects across reservations ebbed and waned with the ideologies and changes in senators. In the late 1880s, the predominate ideology was assimilation to reduce expenditures on reservation relief, and open up reservation allotments for white settlers to purchase.

Many of the projects did not stand up to the harsh Montana climate. Many reservoir and irrigation projects failed because of the lack of preparation for extreme weather. The winters in Montana are long and extreme. Winter snows begin as early as mid-September and can last until mid-April in the lowlands of northeastern Montana. Unrelenting winds in excess of fifty miles an hour can last for days, temperatures often plummet to well below freezing and remain hovering just above or below freezing for weeks. The ice collected in irrigation channels and reservoirs would break the fragile

19. Voggesser, *Of Woods*, 299.

cottonwood and clay construction used at the time. If the ice didn't do the job in the winter, the spring freshets would finish it.

The technology of late nineteenth century agricultural processes was an emerging field of study. In Stanley Howard's 1878 book *Land of the Arid Regions in the United States*, the future second president of the United States Geological Survey "warned against" grazing practices and irrigation design that would cause "sheet erosion, formation of gullies, and especially alkalization of the soil."²⁰ "Irrigation ditch" is a deceptive term belying the complexity of its design and use. An irrigation ditch is a structure that requires a thorough knowledge of the surrounding landscape, understanding of the seasonal effects of water flow, how grading affects water velocity per feet per mile, and most of important of all requires accurate measurements.

In the late nineteenth century, a popular tool was the cause of many ditch washouts, canal failures, and contributed to the overall erosion problem in the West—the pioneer ditch level. A single plane, wooden-frame, equilateral triangle with a base of 16.5 feet, would be placed across the potential ditch. A plumb bob was affixed to the apex and used to find the level ground. When the direction of the ditch was decided upon, a half-inch block was nailed in that direction. The half-inch block roughly established the grade of the ditch to be three inches per one-hundred feet. The lack of technology of the day, remoteness of the region, and the expense of better tools prompted settlers and others to use this imperfect tool.²¹

20. Stanley W. Howard, *Green Fields of Montana: A Brief History of Irrigation* (Manhattan, KS: Sunflower University Press, 1992), 14.

21. Howard, *Green Fields*, 13.

The faults in the irrigation works of the late 19th century at Fort Peck also lay with the agency management. The quick succession of four superintendents in four years had constructed “fatally defective” irrigation works that used insufficient materials and lacked engineering assessment for proper installation that afforded a long-lasting structure.²² Underfunded BIA project managers did not have access to heavy equipment to pack the retaining walls of the irrigation channels, and did not use concrete construction to reinforce spillways. The spillways were often not graded at the proper level to prevent rapidly increasing water velocity from cutting through earth downstream. Lack of access to proper machinery added to the problem of erosion on the reservation.

In the Dawes Act years, through the process of allotment, white settlers had purchased tens of thousands of acres in the hopes of developing the land as grazeland. Fort Peck “became a focal point for white settlers in the twentieth century”²³ As part of the influx of white settlers, “The railroad and the trading stores were forerunners of a massive wave of resource exploitation that came during the non-Indian homestead boom in the 1910s”²⁴ The peoples of Fort Peck struggled with this incursion through the 1930s.

1930s Survey, Planning, and Appropriation Under State and Federal Projects

In 1930, the US Army Corps of Engineers had completed a survey of Fort Peck’s grazeland potential as part of Report 308. The map the USACE/BOR created became the base map for all the Fort Peck projects under the CCC-ID and WPA contracted works

22. Voggesser, *Of Woods*, 300.

23. Voggesser, 299.

24. Warren, “Landscape and Place Identity,” 49.

through the State Water Conservation Board from 1934 through 1940. The Montana Conservation Board projects were separate from the CCC-ID projects.

On March 22, 1934, the State Water Conservation Board met at a conference in Helena and voted in Resolution No. 5 and No. 6 to apply for Federal Grants and Loans totaling \$5,000,000 for the development of irrigation projects across the state through the Federal Emergency Administration of Public Works. The first projects at Fort Peck they approved were Resolution No. 11, for the “Little Muddy and tributaries in Roosevelt County,” and Resolution No. 15, “Poplar River Irrigation Project.” The dam on the Poplar River just north of Poplar, Montana was planned to provide twenty-four to twenty-eight thousand irrigable acres.²⁵ In the resolution, there was no mention for employing enrollees. The plans for these projects were separate of the plans that the Civil Conservation Corps-Indian Division (CCC-ID) and Indian Emergency Conservation Work (IECW) department implemented. Eventually, The CCC-ID would employ enrollees to work on the dam through the CCC-ID budget. This is an example of how some projects had cross-departmental involvement.

As part of these resolutions, the State Engineer was given absolute control of the design, construction, and procurement of resources for the Poplar River project. The Poplar River Dam, project #39, would cost the S.W.C.B. over \$90,000 and take three years to build.²⁶ S.W.C.B. records show that a 5% WPA loan was used as the foundation for the dam. C.C.C.-I.D. records show that Native residents worked on this dam, as well

25. Plans for Unappropriated Waters, 1936-1938, RS 37, box 6, folder 3, Montana State Water Conservation Board Records.

26. Lists of Projects, Locations, Status, Investment, 1937, 1940, 1941, RG 37, box 3, folder 2-16, Montana State Water Conservation Board Records (SWCB), MHSRC.

as over 93 reservoir projects, 60 irrigation, and 30 well projects between 1931 and 1937.²⁷

The 93 reservoir projects were all constructed for stockwater. Most of the dams were diversion dams. The dams ranged in materials of natural sod, concrete, cut stone, cut clay, and “native materials.” The reservoirs ranged in size between 1.87 acres to 4.67 acres. All 93 reservoirs were resettlement dams.²⁸

Resettlement dams are projects that require the resettlement of people living in the project area to other areas, or the appropriation of allotted lands in exchange for other lands elsewhere. Most of the resettlement projects moved Fort Peck residents, Native and Non-Native alike, to irrigable land closer to the Missouri, Milk, and Poplar Rivers, into communities like Oswego, Frazier, Wolf Point, and Poplar. However, many thousands of acres that were appropriated for these projects were exchanged for smaller properties shrinking the Native land and resource base further. Federal employees evaluated land on the reservation just as they did for the Fort Peck Dam project on the eastern edge of the reservation. They classified allotted and non-allotted reservation land as non-irrigable, irrigable, grazing land, or agricultural. After the USGS surveyed and classified the land, the BIA used the reports to reorganize Assiniboine and Sioux communities based upon irrigable land. The BIA gave families six months to move to irrigable lots.²⁹

During the Great Depression, farming had become untenable. 360 acres in Northwest Fort Peck could be exchanged for as little as 100 acres in Southern Fort Peck.

27. Ibid.

28. Resettlement Dams CCC-ID 1938, box 10, folder 13, SWCB, MHSRC.

29. Federal Land Bank of Spokane to Christine West, 3 January 1934, box 3, folder West Private Law, Dolly Akers Collection, MHSRC.

The CCC-ID and BIA justified the exchange by land appraisal alone. 100 acres of land was worth more in dollars than 360 acres surveyed as non-irrigable in 1930. Exchanging land with consideration to dollar amount alone proved to reduce the Native land base further, and reinforced the choice of cattle grazing as the viable option. John Wesley Powell, Director of the United States Geological Survey 1881-1894, and author of *Land of the Arid Regions in the United States* “believed 160 acres to be worthless as a farm unit” and suggested 2,650 acres of irrigable land for each family.³⁰

Drought, Depression, and Congressional Failure to Provide Adequate Funding

The projects until the New Deal were plagued by several setbacks—congressional, technological, and environmental. Irrigation works required money and maintenance. The combination of these problems would render some the irrigation works on the reservation useless. Canals washed out by spring freshets, summer torrential rains, and seepage through the bottom of the reservoirs, Congress did not appropriate enough funds to repair the works. Less than two decades later, Native and Non-natives alike had abandoned many irrigation works.³¹

Not only did the United States experience the one of the worst droughts in history in the early years of the 1930s, the market for farm products had hit rock bottom in the late 1920s. Farmers overproduced grains, vegetables, milk, and meat, which flooded markets and drove prices to below recuperation. Wheat, sorghum, and oats rotted in the

30. Howard, *Green Fields*, 14.

31. Lists of Projects, Box 3, folder 16, 1937-41, Montana State Water Conservation Board, MHSRC.

field because harvesting them would be more expensive than selling them. Millions of farm animals were slaughtered and disposed of because they were too expensive to feed for a market that didn't purchase them. The Farm Act of 1928 paid farmers not to produce.

This national calamity of market crash and drought placed farmland in Montana at pennies on the dollar of their original worth. When the PWA offered "fair market value" for farmland under eminent domain under the Fort Peck Dam project, farmers were given next to nothing for their land. The same happened on the reservation. Allottees were given less than half their original allotments when moved from government resettlement dams to other allotments along the Missouri and Poplar rivers.³² When families were removed from these resettlement dams, it separated them from other family members who lived just outside the resettlement dam project area. Sometimes families were separated by more than 100 miles.

Reengineering the Landscape, Environmental Control as Assimilation

The CCC-ID had learned from the BOR projects of the early 1900s that water projects on the reservation were going to be challenging. Engineers completed extensive surveying to make the best recommendations for profitable projects. Notes within the project maps they created belied the perspective that Native land was under the complete control and ownership of the US Forestry, Geological, or Agricultural office. These offices thought the irrigation, dam, and reservoirs their property, not Native. As early as

32. Box 3, folder West Private Law, Dolly Akers Collection, MHSRC.

1934, notes described these spaces as “our range.” Projects “will be in areas as requested by our Forestry Department to better facilitate the use of our range. These will be submitted in detail and individually to the District Office for specific approval before construction.”³³ The US Forestry department did not engage the tribes of Fort Peck in determining which spaces should be “facilitated.”

One of the largest symbols of the place that Indians would occupy in non-pluralistic America was the Fort Peck Dam. Constructed between 1933 and 1939, it was the largest earth-work dam in the world. Over 10,000 people, mostly out of work men, would occupy the country on the southwestern edge of the reservation during construction. As the Milk River is one of the largest tributaries into the Missouri, Army Corps of Engineers thought the Fort Peck location for a hydro-electric dam “practicable.”³⁴

The Milk River had already been the subject of Indian water rights in the Supreme Court case *Winters v. United States* who ruled Indian water rights protected from diversion. Although the Fort Peck dam may not have been an intentional message to Indians that the federal government controlled Native water, the Fort Peck Dam was certainly a thumbing of the nose to the peoples of Fort Peck. The Missouri River would flow by the reservation when the US Army Corps of engineers willed it.

33. Attached typed note to map of 1935 IECW Progress Report map 1934-36, RG 75, box 107, folder General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington.

34. David P. Billington, Donald C. Jackson, and Martin V. Melosi, “The History of Large Federal Dams: Planning, Design, and Construction in the Era of Big Dams,” (Denver: U.S. Department of the Interior Bureau of Reclamation, 2005), 239.

The irony of the Fort Peck Dam was that as the CCC-ID planned irrigation and pump house construction on the Missouri grazing and farming land, the Fort Peck Dam would sabotage this effort. The Missouri's flow would reduce to the point that pumps would clog with silt, channels would braid with spring downpours, and irrigation would become more difficult and much less predictable than the Montana weather already permitted.

150 Native people from Fort Peck worked on Fort Peck Dam construction but didn't stay long.³⁵ 150 Native men surrounded by 10,000 whites would have caused tense situations. Working around their homes on the reservation would also provide a way to stay close to family, and use their horses.

Checkerboarding's Effects Upon Water Project Locations

Congress passed the Indian Reorganization Act in the spring of 1934. The main tenant of the IRA was to cease allotment, and avoid selling of Native land to whites, and to repurchase land to be combined in tribal trust.³⁶ The second tenet was to respect Native cultures and encourage traditional religion and practices. The BIA had reorganized itself administratively to serve the mission of the IRA. Officials retooled bureaucratic processes and employee training to serve the mission of the IRA.

35. Warren, "Landscape and Place-Identity," 80.

36. C. Joseph Genetin-Pilawa, *Crooked Paths to Allotment, The Fight Over Federal Indian Policy after the Civil War* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2012), 178.

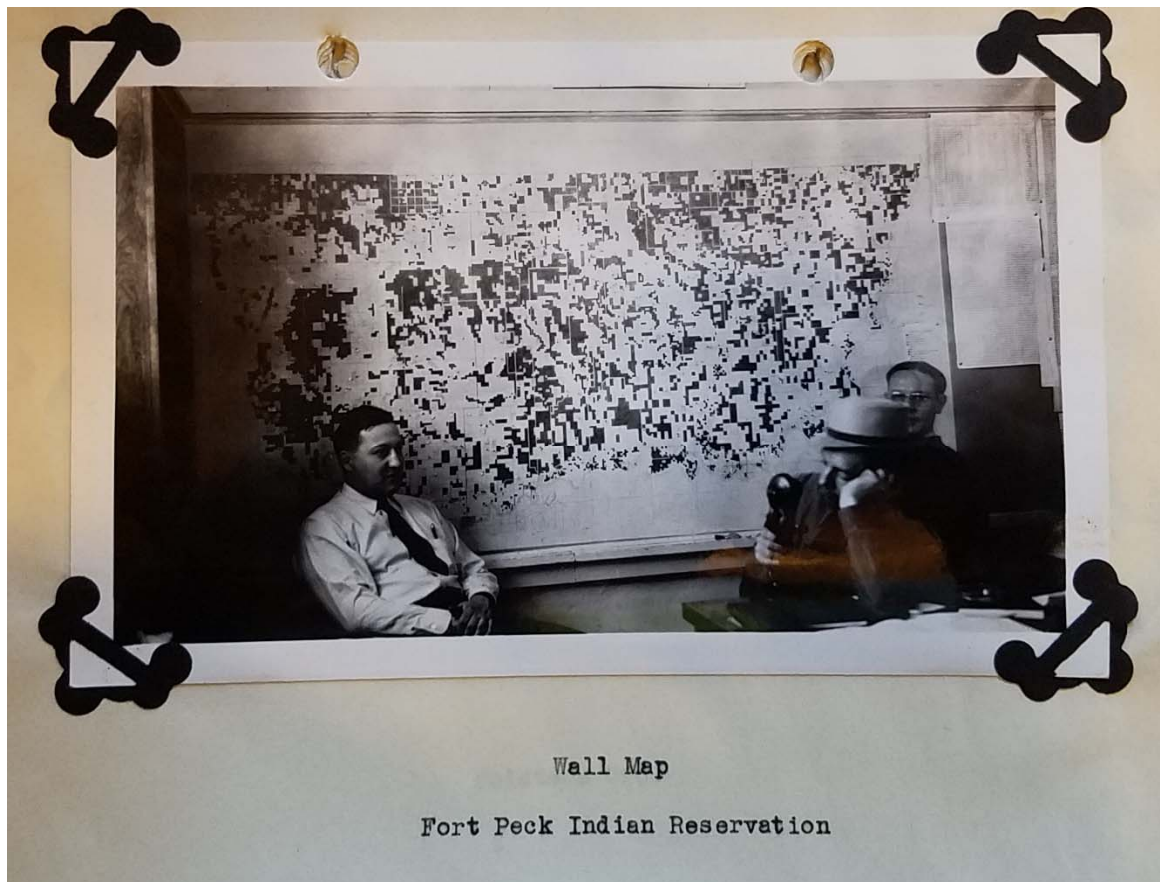


Figure 5, Fort Peck Reservation Allotment Map. Photo 1: Map of trust, allotted, and non-Indian owned land of Fort Peck Reservation which creates a checkerboard effect when represented on a map. Howard Helmer, Harry Grandall, Floyd Archiquette, RG 75, Box 106, NARA, Washington, D.C.

If a reservation official had a dispute but were not interfacing with the government under an IRA drafted constitution, communication would stall. Because Fort Peck rejected to be governed under the IRA, did not mean the federal government still played by the old rules.

Some Fort Peck families had benefited from grazing lands established after BOR projects of the 1920s. Cattle grazing had captured the interest of the Assiniboine and Sioux since farming was too unpredictable. The perspective from the outsider was that “the reservation is primarily a live-stock country”³⁷ When the new CCC-ID projects focused upon dams that would benefit white settlers, or tribal trust lands, the projects affected many of the families who already had established stock-raising operations. Stock-raising families and others who owned allotments also benefited from leasing. Even though the profits from leasing were negligible, it was a way for some families to at least have some source of income, while allowing their cattle to range upon unfenced land.³⁸

The map of Fort Peck shows the “checkerboard” pattern of land ownership on the reservation. Each type of lot—Indian, non-Indian, allotted, tribal, and public land—present on the reservation were under different jurisdictions and statute regulations. Many projects spanned more than one type of lot. Planners had to work with the BIA, the Secretary of Agriculture, and other offices to determine how they could legally proceed with projects and who would own these resources.

37. O.H. Lipps, Supervisor, to John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, copied to Superintendent John G. Hunter, 2 December 1935, RG 75, box 107, General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck. NARA, Washington, D.C.

38. Miller, *History of Fort Peck*, 295-96.

The reported intense factionalism on the reservation that caused federal-to-Indian communication issues was in part a product of the federally imposed concept of blood-quantum. Because the federal government would only recognize a person with a certain amount of “Indian blood” this forced Native peoples to recognize the impact of “mixed-bloods” on their lands. Until the idea of blood-quantum started affecting how and what access Indians had to resources within the framework of a limited reservation space, factionalism was mostly a familial-political concern. The Assiniboine, Sioux, Gros Ventres, Blackfeet, and Crow all crossed tribal social borders in the late 1880s, at one time or another, to pull together to hunt buffalo and provide for their families when faced with white resource subjugation.

The federal government had created the problem of factionalism with the very statutes they imposed during the Dawes Act years. “Allotment redirected the thrust of the federal-Indian relationship to that of property management, and with the need of supervision over the use of property came the expansion of the administrative structure of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Tribal status became less important, and natural resources became the major concern of both Indians and federal bureaucrats.”³⁹ As allotment, reappraisals, and heirship centralized in the spotlight between federal and Native interests, factionalism increased. Blood-quantum was one of the undercurrents that fractured the reservation into checkerboarding of the reservation. Federal definitions of blood-quantum affected who could own allotments. Marriage and heirship became a federal, not just a family, concern.

39. Vine Deloria, Jr. and Clifford M. Lytle, *The Nations Within: The Past and Future of American Indian Sovereignty* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1984), 12.

Marriage, Resources, and Being Indian

In 1934, one matter in the tribal minutes garnered special attention—Indian custom marriage and divorce.⁴⁰ The extent to which State and federal government interests in Native land went as far as to consider heirship. The provisions under most Indian Reorganization Act constitutional templates established that only State recognized marriages and divorces would be acknowledged in any court proceeding. “Indian custom marriage and divorce” would have to be recognized by the tribal council before the state would approve and grant a marriage certificate. The BIA approved or disapproved every Tribal Executive Council decision. Even though Fort Peck had rejected the IRA, State and Federal governments still demanded the Assiniboine and Sioux work within the State system of marriage laws and heirship recognition. The marriage provisions were another way that the state and federal governments attempted to control ownership of Native land and resources.

A woman, accepted by the tribe as married to a man, on the death of that man would retain a portion of his allotment and the remaining property would be divided among her children. Under the provisions of the IRA, if the marriage was not recognized by the state, and thus, the man had not produced any heirs, the government could reclaim the land and sell it on the open market, or return it to the Tribal Executive Board for trust. The Fort Peck Tribal council minutes from 1934 through 1938 show many sessions where “Indian marriage” and “Irrigation projects” were on the same docket. The

40. Enactment of Tribal Executive Board, 8 December 1938, Box 7, folder Miscellaneous, Dolly Akers Collection, Montana Historical Society Research Center.

connection between, marriage, heirs, and access to water through irrigation structures remained inextricably linked. Since the west is on the Public Land Survey System of township and range definitions of borders, and not by topography, one person could own an allotment that contained the headwaters of a stream and block water to the rest of the land owners downstream. The interest in resources which led to an interest in Indian custom marriages and divorces was another way in which the federal government was engineering assimilation.

No element of reservation life and “being Indian” was isolated. Lifeways, cultural norms, traditional ideals and actions, were all tied together and all tied to the land. When a sacred marriage custom has to be renegotiated for recognition because of an underlying interest in resources from the land, the renegotiation illustrates the system itself is perpetuated without regard to the changes in the collective life of a group.

Between 1933 and 1941, there was no place an indigenous person living on Fort Peck could turn and not see federal government influence and symbols of control. Social workers were in their homes to evaluate their lifestyle, education experts were mandating their children go to federal schools to learn to be white, white men were on the reservation working on roads changing how pathways of travel happened and establishing lines of status, folds in the hills were turned into reservoirs of which many sat empty scraped scars of dirt in what was once a place for game to shelter, white engineers drew up plans and dammed streams and rivers, government jobs paid Native men to remove the willow, cottonwood and native plants that were a part of Assiniboine and Sioux cultural practices and places where gender roles were reinforced.

Multi-Departmental New Deal Projects

Federal and state departments, even though at times worked together, had separate maps, separate numbers for projects, and separate accounts that allocated funds in the way that their departments dictated. Each department had its own agenda as set forth by their commissioner. New Deal projects and the departments who administered them, at first glance, are confusing. There are many reasons why. Firstly, there were many organizational names reduced to acronyms referred to as the “alphabet soup” of government agencies. Secondly, many of the names of these organizations would change in 1935. Thirdly each Department had sub-agencies that would also change or be absorbed by other departments over time. Finally, each federal organization had a specific mission and protocol to work with states to exact that federal mission, and each states had their own departmental hierarchies which also went through changes in name and scope over time.

However, a silver lining existed. Agencies were rigid in their communication stance and adherence to their department’s mission and policy. Letters between agency heads show a different story. The New Deal was highly political and personal. Agency commissioners or directors could wrap themselves in hardline administrative protocol to avoid doing something for another agency for various reasons, and just as easily find ways through loopholes to provide assistance where it was needed—or where they

wanted it to be. Communication between agency officials just before election years and agency changes illustrate this clearly.⁴¹

It was the Great Depression and accountants ruled government agencies. Every Coordinator, Director, and Administrator, no matter how important, had to account for every penny to the accounting offices of their districts down to the last ashtray for all funds or items allocated to their programs during the New Deal.⁴² All administrative heads were accountable to the accounting department. However, when the heads of two different agencies could convince their department secretary, funds could be moved from one department to another to allow for exceptional cases.⁴³

Such agency flexibility ruled at Fort Peck. Many projects are first listed as State Water Conservation Board projects. The WPA oversaw allocating funds to state departments and state departments would contract labor, equipment, and material suppliers to complete a job. But an Indian reservation comes with its own set of administrative mandates. Many times the WPA would fund State Water Conservation Board projects only to later some of the funds would be for reservation enrollee labor that had to go through the Civil Conservation Corps-Indian Division administratively.⁴⁴

41. John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, to John G. Hunter, Superintendent of Fort Peck, copied to Tom C. White, Director of Emergency Conservation Work Accounts for Billings Regional Office, 23 July 1935, RG 75, box 107, National Archives and Records Administration.

42. RG 75, box 5, Fort Peck Superintendent, dozens of signed and notarized affidavits from the agency office to the CCC-ID Chicago Accounting Offices between September 28, 1942 and July 14, 1943 concerning items missing from reported inventories like one ashtray, two blankets, and two handsaws.

43. RG 75, box 107, General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, National Archives and Records Administration, Washington, D.C. Superintendent John G. Hunter telegraphed John Collier, Commissioner of the BIA requesting Fort Peck receive a \$75,000 emergency increase in funds in July 1935 that was transferred from the War Department to the CCC-ID. John Collier approved. D.E. Murphy and Hunter had communicated about the increase in funds one month prior to the telegram.

44. List of WPA Projects Approved by County, 1939, Montana Water Conservation Board, Box 10, folder 23, , MHSRC.

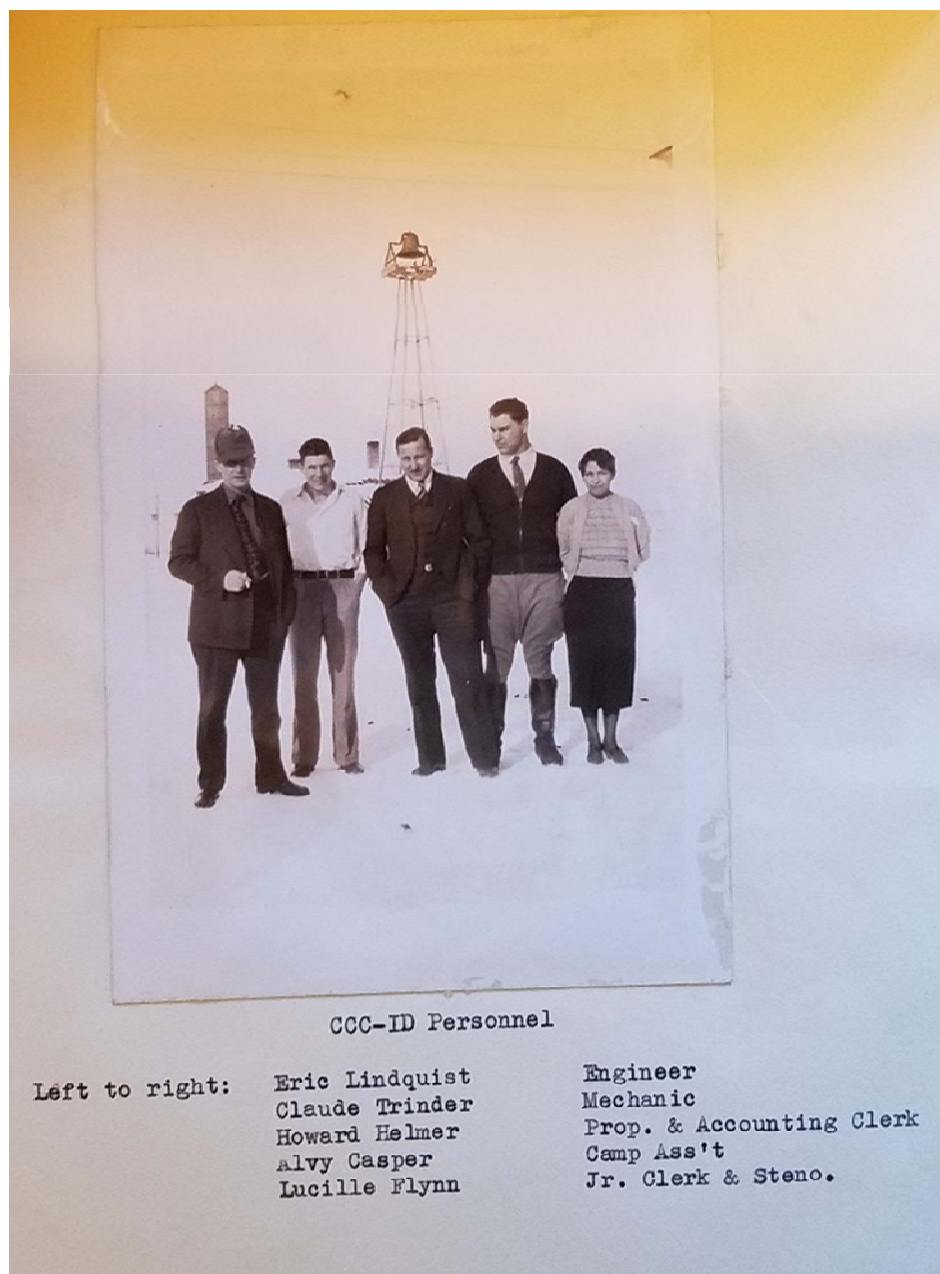


Figure 6, Fort Peck CCC-ID Personnel Photo. Photo 2: RG 75, Box 106, NARA, Washington D.C.

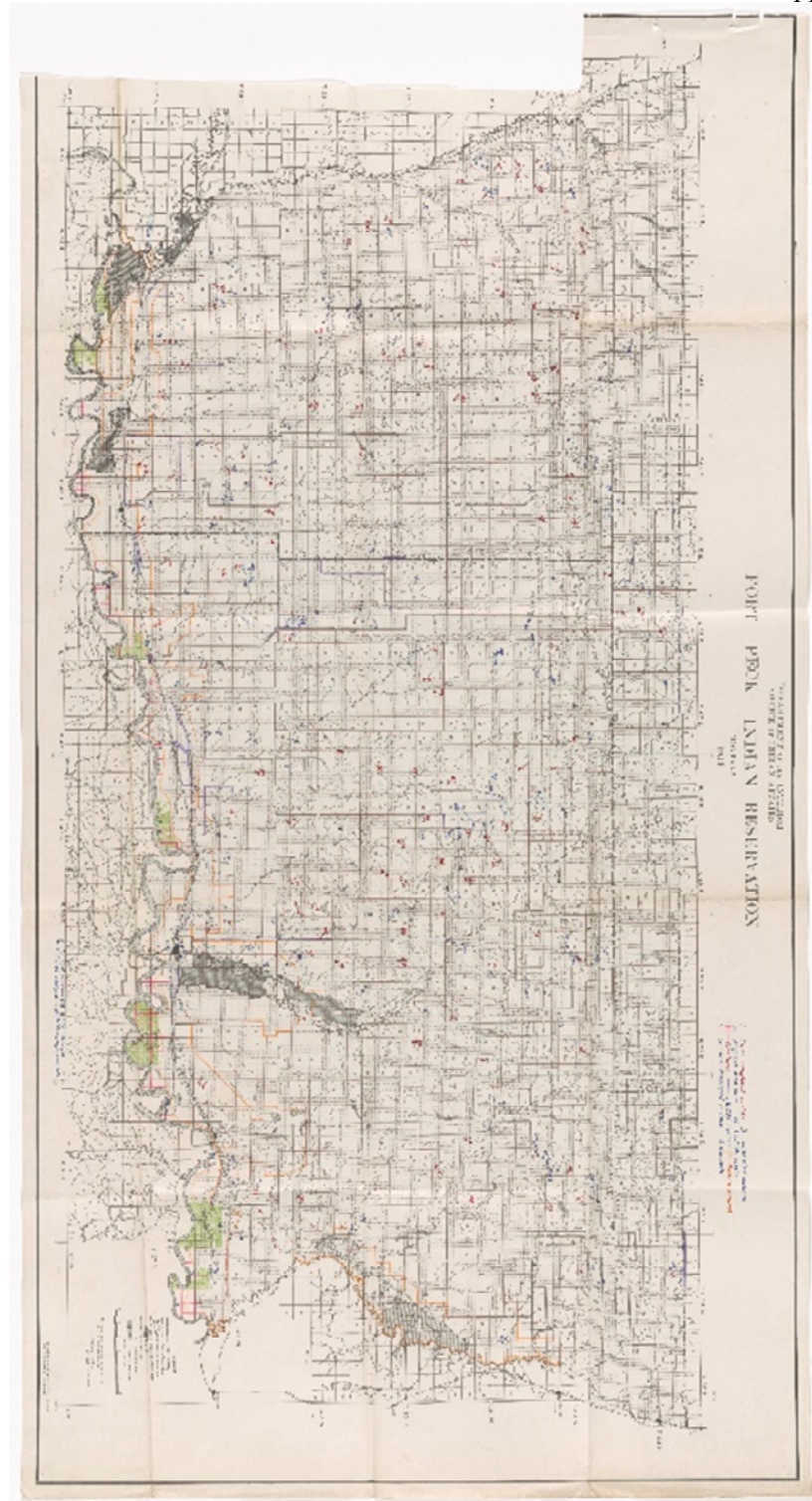


Figure 7, IECW Fort Peck Reservation Map. Photo 3a: IECW report map for all projects, RG 75, Box 107, 1934-1936, NARA, Washington, D.C.

I.E.C.W. PROGRESS REPORT



















LEGEND:	NO.
 Springs surveyed, approved, & developed, 1935 - - - - -	104
 Springs surveyed and approved, 1935 - - - - -	9
 Springs developed, 1934, have not been surveyed or approved, nor developed according to 1935 specifications - - - - -	69
 Fences constructed, 1934 - - - - -	50 mi.
 Fences constructed, April 1st to Dec. 31, 1935 - - - - -	43 "
 Fences Constructed, Dec. 31, 1935 to June 30, 1936 - - - - -	27½ "
 Subsistence Gardens surveyed (topographic maps and field notes submitted) Ground prepared, pumps, boxes & gates installed, ditches surveyed & constructed - - - - -	16,982 ft.
River Erosion Control Milk River, surveyed (maps and field notes submitted) construction proposed for winter 1935-37 - - - - -	2½ mi.
 Dams completed, 1935 (#44) Cu. Yds. <u>120,961</u> Riprap <u>14,891</u> Sq. yds.	
 Dams, Dirtwork finished (#20) Cu. Yds. <u>72,282</u> No Riprap Total Cu. Yds. 193,243 - 1935.	
 Dams Constructed, 1934 (#10) Cu. Yds. 22,380 Riprap 2,630 Sq. Yds. - 1935. Total Sq. Yds. 17,521 - 1935.	
 Dams Completed, 1934 (#21) Cu. Yds. <u>44,845</u> Riprap <u>8153</u> Sq. yds., 1934.	
 Wells (#10) 1934. Total Cu. Yds. 67,225 - 1934.	
 1934 Fire Lanes (Proposed Truck Trails) - - - - -	53 mi.
 Corrals - - - - -	4
 Buildings (Under construction - 2 duplex dwellings at Agency.) (Completed 2 IECW Camp Buildings, 1 Warehouse at Agency.) (Warehouse addition to be constructed)	
 Roads - - - - -	5/8 "
 Nursery, surveyed and leveled for irrigation (abandoned) - - - -	3 A.
 Winter Range - Development (accomplished)	
Cleared 1935-36 - - - - -	708 "
Affected - - - - -	6,000 "
(proposed clearing - - - - -	2,000 "
1936-37 (Affected - - - - - (Est)18,000 "	
(Sites Not Yet Selected.	

Figure 9, IECW Map Key. Photo 4: IECW map key, RG 75, Box 107, 1934-1936, NARA, Washington, D.C.

During 1937-38, the CCC-ID classified projects as: Dams—earth fill, dams—rip rap, dams—repair and maintenance, springs, springs—repair and maintenance, wells—stock water, rodent control, fences—drift, fence—repair and maintenance, development of winter range, river erosion work—bank protection—Milk River, miscellaneous engineering expense, equipment; athletic, recreational and miscellaneous welfare expense, and supplementary allotments. What is absent in these records is the construction of wells and irrigation works for homes. The CCC-ID directive was to make Fort Peck a self-sustaining stock-raising paradise. Even though agency and CCC-ID officials cited reservation poverty as the need for more funding, Native homes' access to clean water wasn't part of their plan. As the CCC-ID claimed more and more springs and the Missouri became polluted from the lack of flow upriver caused by the Fort Peck Dam, access to clean water for families became more scarce.⁴⁵

The cost of these proposed projects totaled \$48,000. The actual cost was \$196,500.⁴⁶ In a letter from Tom C. White, Production Coordinator for the CCC-ID, he requests \$195,000 for 1938, the same amount allocated in 1937 for CCC-ID project costs.⁴⁷ The differences between projected and actual costs stems from Tom C. White and superintendent Hunter requesting more aid. They sent dozens of telegrams to the BIA during 1936-1939 requesting additional funds to pay enrollees, provide more food, and

⁴⁵ Joseph McGeshick, *Never Get Mad at Your Sweetgrass and Other Short Stories*, (Baltimore: Publish America, 2007), 43. Access to clean drinking water, flushable toilets, and inside plumbing was still an issue described in the book based upon his life growing up on Fort Peck Reservation, and the lives of others he knows who live on reservations in the Northern Plains.

⁴⁶ RG 75, box 107, General Records, 1933-1944, Fort Peck, NARA, Washington D.C.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

construct better living spaces for Fort Peck workers citing the extreme poverty conditions at Fort Peck.

Indian Emergency Conservation Work Projects, 1933-1935

There was a specific process for securing funding for work under the IECW. This process began with the Superintendent, John G. Hunter, who was superintendent for four years, the longest term held by a Fort Peck superintendent. Hunter filed the application for allotted funding in the spring of 1935. This application consisted of a “program” for “your reservation.” Hunter met with the Fort Peck Tribal council, listened to its suggestions, and put together a program for the next year of projects at Fort Peck with the Planning Board. The program went through the chain of command for approval and allotment of funds. Tom C. White, the coordinator of projects for the Bureau of Indian Affairs Field Office in Billings was the first stop. Next D.E. Murphy, the I.E.C.W. Project Director for the BIA in Washington, D.C. had to approve. Then, the Commissioner of the BIA, John Collier, reviewed in and forwarded it to W.J. Clark, the Senior Accountant for I.E.C.W. projects for funding. This process took months, all the while, Indians waited for relief.⁴⁸

Funds would stay in a U.S. Treasury account where the Superintendent would be able to apply for vouchers through a Disbursing Officer that approved work or purchasing equipment. Each voucher had to go through the chain of command to the

48. Several letters between John Collier, Commissioner of the BIA, and John G. Hunter, Superintendent of Fort Peck Reservation between June and July 1935 concerning plans for IECW work, RG 75, box 107, General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA.

Billings Field Office where T.C. White would sign off. At which point, J.G. Hunter could write checks from the Treasury's IECW account. Hunter would attach the approval letter to the voucher for record keeping. Once the original balance was in the treasury for each fiscal year, officials monitored each transaction carefully. Any deviation in expenditure, no matter how small, had to go through the chain of command to be approved. John Collier's office would have to approve all exceptions to the original plan and be forwarded to Clark in ECW accounts. The process for approval for exceptions could take months.

At times, Superintendent Hunter would ask John Collier's office for the emergency approval of an exception, and Collier's office would decline. Hunter was not without recourse. Hunter would often write to T.C. White, explaining the need, and T.C. White would write a report to Collier's office advising that Hunter's need was warranted, and encourage the office to appropriate additional funds. Sometimes Hunter and White would beseech the assistance of the District Assistant Engineer, J.S. Allen, or the Coordinator for the District CCC-ID Projects, D.E. Murphy to help them convince Collier's office that the aid was necessary, if not critical. This process would take weeks.

As the years passed, Hunter, White, Allen, and Murphy's efforts would become more coordinated to procure much needed emergency funds. The use of telegrams, including their agreements, would be sent to Collier's office in lieu of letters. This process would take days, and most of the time have emergency IECW or CCC-ID funds placed in the Fort Peck Treasury Account within a week. These emergency funds would typically be in the tens of thousands of dollars and be instructed to be used for the balance of a fiscal year to pay employees and enrollees. Other specific construction

projects would still require White, Allen, Murphy, and Hunter's full reports before the BIA would approve.

Case Study: Project #123

Project #123 was a WPA funded project that paid for CCC-ID labor and materials in Northeastern Fort Peck in Valley County.⁴⁹ The "Montana Works Progress Administration Report on Water Conservation" lists "CCC-Indian Division" as "Official Name of Project." These records are part of the SWCB collection at the MHSRC. The SWCB received reports from the WPA concerning water projects across the state whether or not they used WPA—secured SWCB funds. In 1936, dam #123 is listed as future SWCB project. The WPA put the CCC-ID in charge of the project at some point between the SWCB project listing in 1936 and the 1937 dam project start.

The WPA report filed on August 24, 1938 listed the dam as 100% complete at a cost of \$2,433. Cost of labor and materials determined the figure. The enrollee built dam is listed as having 32.46 storage acreage feet, 5.55 acres of reservoir, and draining to 4 $\frac{3}{4}$ square miles. The WPA report lists the dam as 312 feet long and 18.3 feet high using 7,894 cubic yards of earth fill, with 1,250 yards of rip rap. Enrollees built the base of the dam at 102' wide with a crest 10' wide. Enrollees constructed a concrete cut-off wall, and a rock and wire apron 500 feet long, 80 feet wide, and 2.5 feet high. This dam, like many others, did not have gates, outlets, or flashboards listed. The CCC-ID enrollees built dam

49. Resettlement Dams CCC-ID, 1938, box 10, folder 13, SWCB, MHSRC.

#123 for stockwater, like all other ninety-three resettlement dams the CCC-ID built from approximately 1935 to 1938.⁵⁰

The 1938 report lists the dam as “adequate” and under “To Whom Given” lists “government land.” Dam #123 was a resettlement dam. The CCC-ID relocated the family that lived within the area of the dam, as other families, to locations in southern lands of the reservation near the Missouri River. If a family owned the land but did not live upon it, the CCC-ID appropriated the lands in exchange for irrigated plots closer to the Poplar, Milk, or Missouri rivers. The BIA relocated families to irrigable lands near Wolf Point or Poplar. The Superintendent dictated these relocations, many times without the families’ choice. The families were moved to where irrigable land was available either near Wolf Point or Poplar.⁵¹ These resettlements further strained the abilities of families to stay as physically connected as once before.

Once the family was moved, and the reservoir in place, the land would remain the property of the government under the Department of the Interior, and the Secretary of Agriculture, and under the management of the Bureau of Reclamation. As stipulated in the 1935 Congressional act, any lands under the control of the Bureau of Reclamation must provide $\frac{3}{4}$ of the profit from oil, coal, timber, and water to the federal government. The remaining 25% would be allocated to the county governments. In 1938, all “surplus”

⁵⁰ Almost 100 Blackfeet reservation water project records in box 10 folder 13 do not list how many cattle the WPA expected this dam to serve. Fort Peck’s project records contain much more detail. This could be because of different record keepers, or because Fort Peck was focusing on cattle grazing.

⁵¹ Dolly Cusker Akers to Wesley D’ Ewart, House of Representatives, letter concerning Mr. Thomas J. Flynn’s farm at Wolf Point that was established during the New Deal, box 7 folder Correspondences 1946-48, Dolly Akers Collection, MHSRC.

and “sub-marginal lands” located on reservations, like dam #123, were returned to the governance of the BIA.

The consolidation of the population near agency town sites was disconcerting for American Indians. Historically, consolidation was the precursor to removal. In the late 1700s, land cessions began consolidated American Indians into a smaller and smaller areas, and then in 1830 removed them to other lands east of the Mississippi. The cycle of ever shrinking land holdings due to land cessions and “surplus land” sales in the late 1870s which reduced reservations further, still echoed in the memories of American Indians living on reservations. Many resisted being moved to other locations, no matter the irrigable land which was exchanged for their previous allotment because “improvements” like dam #123 were interpreted as foreshadowing to future reduction of reservation land. These families made appeals to the Fort Peck Tribal Council.

The Native men who worked on these projects chose to do so through harsh conditions because they needed to provide for their families. The climate in Montana pendulum swings to extremes in summer and winter. The record for the hottest temperature in Montana was 117 degrees at Medicine Lake, on the eastern border of Fort Peck Reservation in 1937 during one of the worst droughts in American history. The same year in Northeastern Montana, the average temperature in January was -18.7 degrees. The average temperatures in January at Fort Peck between 1933 and 1940 were between -4.7 and -18.7 degrees.⁵² The economic conditions on the reservation were dire during the New Deal. There was not enough food, even with government rations, not

52. https://www.ncdc.noaa.gov/cag/time-series/us/24/6/tmin/1/1/1933-1940?base_prd=true&firstbaseyear=1901&lastbaseyear=2000

enough clothing, and not enough adequate shelter or fuel. There was minimal medical assistance for illness or injury.⁵³

The men worked the I.E.C.W. projects to be able to provide subsistence for their families. Stanley W. Howard stated in his book, *Green Fields of Montana, A Brief History of Irrigation*

The construction, while a very important part of the enterprise, is only its beginning. Some persons have to dig out of the soil under this ditch the interest in charges and the capital cost, and at the same time make a living for themselves and families and build the community—they will have taxes to pay. These people have a task of many, many years' work.⁵⁴

The ability to have access to a working irrigation ditch didn't necessarily mean a gain in economic or subsistence stability. The investors in irrigation works expected returns. The property owners or leasees who used the irrigation ditches would have to pay taxes on it and lease fees. In 1941, the SCWB expected two dollars per annum per acre from land owners who had irrigation ditches on their property.⁵⁵ The BOR had charged irrigation fees in the 1920s, and money recouped was minimal.

In drought years, irrigation ditches didn't guarantee they could keep fields and stock watered enough for sustenance or profit. The 1941 SCWB report which reviewed the reservoirs and irrigation projects constructed from 1935 – 1938 cited some property owners who “had no interest in the project.” The drought between 1933 and 1937 was one of the worst in American history. Most reservoirs did not fill up with water and many

53. Emergency Relief Orders for various dates between 1938 and 1939 lists the amount of money provided to each member of the Fort Peck Reservation who received funds. Amounts vary between \$3.00 and \$6.00 per person. Pencil notations concerning children's clothes. Emergency Relief Orders, Box 1, folder Correspondences, Dolly Akers Collection, MHSRC.

54. Howard, *Green Fields of Montana*, 54.

55. Lists of Projects, 1937-1941, Box 3, folder 16, SWCB, MHSRC.

irrigation channels failed. Many property owners and allottees lacked “interest” in the projects because the droughts had left them with little choice but to slowly sell off land that they could not afford to pay taxes on. By the time of the 1941 SCWB report, many lands within Fort Peck had been abandoned due to lack of access to water.

Getting the Job Done, Machines and Mechanics

Before work could begin, officials purchased thousands of dollars’ worth of heavy equipment, trucks, tools, and diesel. Superintendent Hunter, T.C. White, and D.E. Murphy, along with Project Manager Purdy drew up an extensive list of equipment from pre-approved CCC contractors. Safety was one of the important factors in selecting equipment. In a December 1935 letter from superintendent Hunter to Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier, he describes over several pages that the Jumbo Hydraulic Rotary Wheel Scraper was delivered in December 1934 with “No instructions of any sort were included, and considerable difficulty was encountered in assembling the machine.” He had been disputing the machine in letters back and forth with E.C.W. accountants since March 15, 1935. Hunter described the machine had dangerous draw-bar cracking, and faulty control shaft bearing plates and bearings. He expressed a concern for the enrollees working the equipment and demanded a better machine. After a year negotiating with accountants, Hunter sent his demands straight to Collier’s office.

In 1934 when the IECW projects began, marketing was part of recruitment to hire men on the reservation. IECW was painted in large letters on the trucks that would take men from their homes to remote job sites. Later, when projects were renamed under the

CCC-ID, trucks and equipment were also emblazoned with the logos of the program. The IECW and CCC-ID wanted the reservation to know that they were doing “good work.”

By using good equipment mounted on rubber the caliber of the work done will show marked improvement. This has been true of the work on this Reservation. Pushing a wheel barrow, mounted on rubber, certainly is work, but nothing compared to the work involved when pushing a steel wheeled barrow which sinks into the ground and acts as a brake.



Figure 10, Continental Scrapper. Photo 5: Continental Scrapper, and wheelbarrows, "especially fitted for using in soft soil of Fort Peck." CCC-ID written on scrapper, RG 75, Box 106, NARA, Washington D.C

Hopefully, seeing friends and family members working would entice other men to do the same. The labeling of equipment was also a deterrent for theft.

Enrollees expressed an interest in caring for the trucks and equipment, and the CCC-ID expressed an interest in teaching them skills. Enrollees saw the equipment as theirs. As part of the trust responsibility of the United States to care for Indian nations, enrollees often saw equipment in the same light as their forbearers saw the goods in trading posts during the late nineteenth century—as theirs. To Native peoples, the government had made a promise to provide benefits in exchange for land cessions.

Enrollees built warehouses, sheds and garages at the Poplar agency as well as at irrigation pump stations in Oswego, Frazer, Wolf Point and Culbertson. These were spaces of “orderly work” and managed resources that Native men would enter to learn how to repair tractors, scrapers, fresnos, and other implements. CCC-ID personnel offered classes in the complete care of machinery to “promising enrollees.” CCC-ID personnel suggested the classes which the accounting offices in Chicago had to approve for funding.

all are Indians except the Project Manager and two engineers. As on all the other reservations visited, Indians are used almost exclusively as operators of tractors, trucks, graders, concrete mixers and other types of equipment and machines. They are said to show special aptitude for this type of skilled work, with the result that several have become almost experts in machine operation”⁵⁶

56. O.H. Lipps, Supervisor to John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, copied to Superintendent John G. Hunter, RG 75, box 107, General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, 2 December 1935, NARA, Washington D.C.

RODENT CONTROL

Preliminary work started the latter part of April, but it was not until the middle of May before operations were in full swing. During June, July, and August four, 15 men crews were employed. The end of September saw the close of this work with a total of 231,860 square miles covered at an average cost of .048¢ per acre.

While a 100 percent kill naturally was not secured, the results were excellent and, if proper follow up is made during the 1935 season, a clean slate can be recorded. For the first 3 months work was carried on from the centers of population such as Frazer, Wolf Point, Poplar, and Brockton; the crews were transported to work by trucks. The closing campaign was carried on from two fly camps as the work was in a more isolated section.

Upon completion of this program enrolled workers were transferred to springs, reservoirs, and other activities.



Figure 11, IECW Truck and Crew. Photo 6: RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington, D.C.

By 1938, there were so many projects, enrollees steadily applying for work, and machinery broken from the harsh Montana climate that plans were approved to expand the sheds and garages. The CCC-ID did not only train enrollees in new skills but used the skills enrollees already possessed for projects. Everett Booth is an example of how the CCC-ID respected and utilized the knowledge of local men to complete work. Project managers approached Booth to locate the best paths for trails and roads to complete work because as a Fort Peck resident he knew the lay of the land. Even though the CCC-ID had surveyors at their disposal, the rough and frequently changing terrain due to spring washouts, dictated that the CCC-ID rely upon local knowledge. This reliance upon Native knowledge was another way that Native men could reinforce their traditional gender roles and assert their agency while working under a government program. The CCC-ID showed up, having learned from the previous BOR projects, but the Assiniboine and Sioux had been there for almost a century and knew their country.

Washouts and Water Rights

The Northeastern part of Montana had suffered an intensive drought from 1933 through 1938. The expediency to complete irrigation, well, reservoir, and spring projects was driven by not only government edict to get Indians farming or raising cattle as soon as possible for “self-sufficiency,” but to keep Indians from starving by providing them with produce from community gardens.

The CCC-ID understood that constructing irrigation works at Fort Peck would not be easy. The failures of BIA and BOR irrigation ditches and dams for the last sixty years

provided the CCC-ID with a model of what not to do. Despite improvements in engineering, one thing the CCC-ID couldn't predict or control was the weather. Freshets, fast moving water created from winter runoff, would create washouts that would cut channels through irrigation channels. Spring downpours would create flashfloods that would cut into earth dams, destroying the infrastructure and allowing reservoir water to flood the surrounding area downstream. The CCC-ID had their work cut out for them. One of the tenets of the New Deal was to document *everything*. The hundreds of photographs taken of Fort Peck projects served to fulfill New Deal recording practices, but also would hope to prove the CCC-ID engineers and project managers did all they could in a part of Montana that had seemed doomed to fail over the last sixty years.

From the beginning, the CCC-ID had a plan. Enrollees would build rip-rap embankments along rivers and creeks to prevent heavy spring flows from eroding banks. Irrigation channels were built with boxes and pipes in certain positions relative to the surrounding topography to prevent water from overflowing and cutting into the surrounding irrigation walls.

Freshets, or flashfloods, damaged more irrigation work than any other natural occurrence. In the Montana State Water Conservation Board Irrigation Index by County records of August 1933 to June 1934, flooding and washed out dams are mentioned extensively as the reason for new funding. J.C. Timmons writes, "Once had a dam at this site but it washed out ... dam is for diversion only concrete dam proposed 100 ft. long by 400 by 4 or 4/1 ft. high ... cost \$5,000 canal has been built ... will irrigate 2,400 acres ... several other dams can be built down the river with three dams they can irrigate 8 to 10,000 acres ... three dams and canals estimated to cost \$30,000." William Powers

writes, “Peak flood Mar. 15, and min. July 15, perpetual flow ... ice is a hazard to structures; no storage sites available; in the past there have been four diversion dams along the river; all are washed out; at least two of these had some storage in old channel, each reservoir was about 80 ft. wide, 6 to 8 ft. deep and 3,000 to 4,000 ft. long. Two of these projects had about 10 to 12 miles of canals. Under these two 2,400 acres could be flooded. Sub soil offers good drainage.” The report suggests the water charge of zero dollars per acre annual for the "West Fork Poplar."⁵⁷

All dams in the 1933-1934 SWCB reports describe dams and irrigation canals off, but bordering the reservation. The CCC-ID was concerned with reservation work, but there were millions of dollars of work actively diverting water away from the reservation. The 1936-1938 report declares the SWCB is committed to the “proper economic use of water and full development of the irrigation and water resources of this State.”⁵⁸ The SWCB directed this comment at the *Winters v. United States* ruling. The main argument of people who wanted to control Native water rights was that Indians didn’t use the water flowing into their reservation so did not have the right to it. Resolution 11 of the report intends to divert the “unappropriated waters of the Little Muddy and tributaries of Roosevelt County.” The war over the water that flowed through Fort Peck was in earnest.

57. Irrigation Index Daniels County, 1934-1935, box 2, folder 15, SCWB, MHSRC.

58. Plans for Unappropriated Waters 1936-1938, RS 37, box 5, folder 3, SCWB, MHSRC.

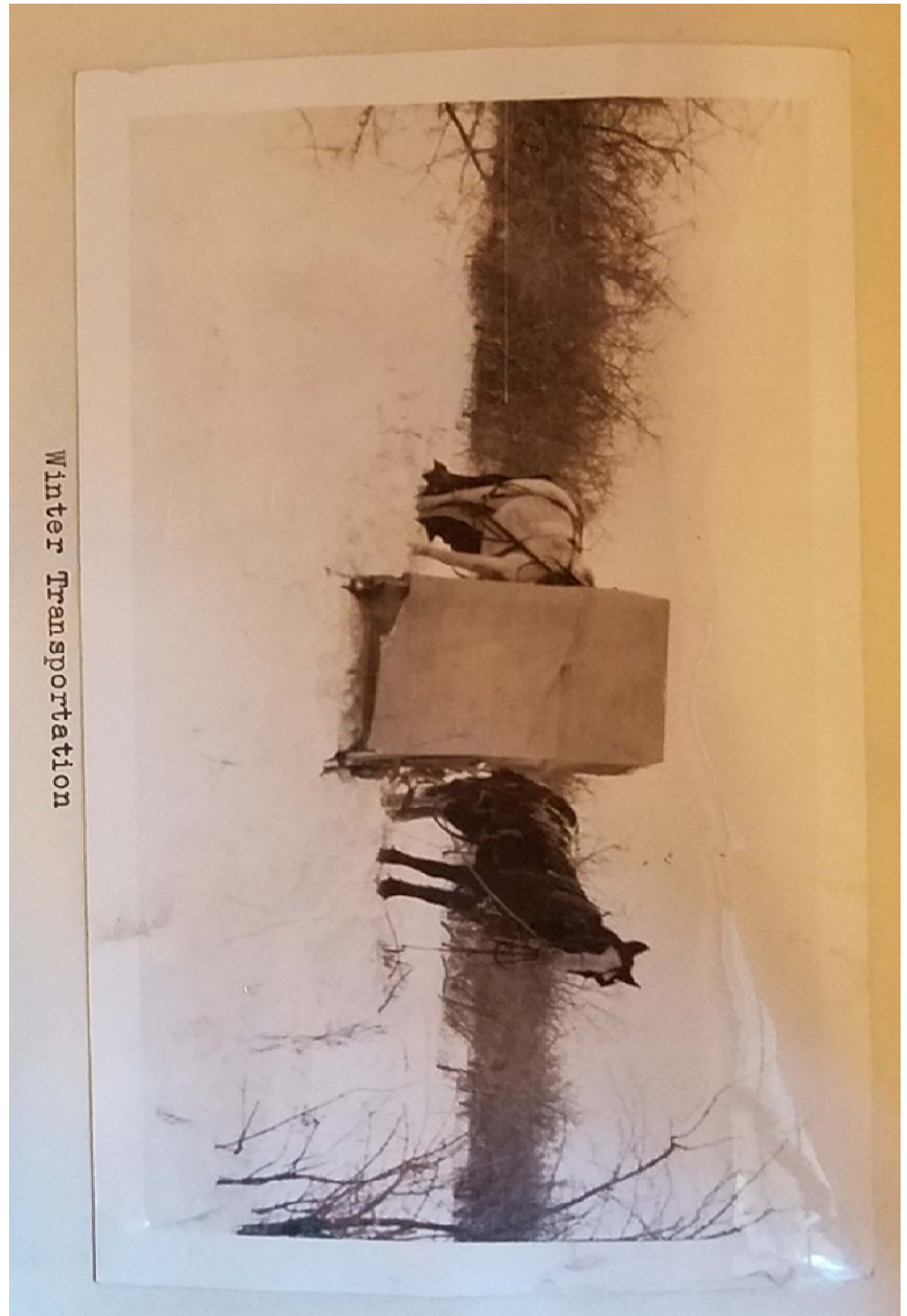


Figure 12, Horse Transportation in Snow. Photo 7: RG 75, Box 106
CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington,
D.C.



Figure 13, Truck in Snow. Photo 8: RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington, D.C.

Diesel to Oats: Assiniboine and Sioux Horses

It is ironic that during the same time that enrollees cleared traditional cultural property for cattle grazing land, their own horses were starving.⁵⁹ Superintendent Hunter and D.E. Murphy appealed to the BIA to include “teams” in the budgets for projects to feed Native horses.⁶⁰ Eventually, Hunter and Murphy convinced the BIA in 1935 and a \$1.00 to \$1.25 allotment of funds was made for teams on projects as long as they were fed “by a qualified person.” Repeatedly, enrollees would not be allowed to do simple tasks, like feeding their own horses, or changing oil in a tractor, without going through US Forest Service, CCC-ID, or other government agency training from one of the many bulletins that existed during this time.⁶¹

The CCC-ID used horses on many of these projects. For the CCC-ID, feeding horses was less expensive than diesel. The deep snows of Montana prevented reliable transportation in cars and trucks that were also expensive to repair. On some projects, several horse teams could exert the compaction needed for the base of reservoirs that was normally done with a machine. So many Assiniboine and Sioux had horses, that it didn't matter where the project was, horses were available.

In the 1930s, the Assiniboine and Sioux used them for transportation and to wrangle livestock. Great pride in capturing, driving, taming, and breeding wild horses

59. Dolly to Sen. Lynn Frazier, 13 January 1934, Indians selling hay to buy food, horses starve. Box 3, Montana Coordinator Indian Affairs, folder James Murray, MHSRC.

60. John Collier, Commissioner of BIA to John G. Hunter, Superintendent of Fort Peck Reservation, copied to T.C. White, ECW Accounts, 11 June 1935, RG 75 box 107, General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington D.C.

61. Tom C. White, Production Coordinator to John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, concerning setting up classes for enrolled men and asking for \$1500 of ECW money, 8 October 1935, RG 75 box 107 General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington, D.C.

was, and remains, imbued within their identity as a people. Hunter incorporated the wealth of horses on the reservation into CCC-ID projects. This was beneficial for the CCC-ID budget, essential due to Montana weather, and beneficial for the Assiniboine and Sioux.

Where the Fort Peck Dam project used electricity to power its dredges because of the enormous cost of importing and using diesel, the smaller Fort Peck projects used diesel with funds through the WPA. The Agency at Poplar had diesel storage tanks which the Disbursing Officer closely monitored.⁶² At 32°, diesel begins to consolidate, at 10°, diesel will freeze to a semi-solid gel and clog the fuel filter. Given that these men worked on the dam through the winter of 1937-1938, they would have to be able to find a solution to diesel freezing to continue working with diesel engine tractors.

This is one reason that after difficulties with diesel engines, the CCC-ID began to rely upon Native horse-power. The ability for men to use their horses also reinforced their traditional roles in Native society and allowed them agency within government projects. It was fortunate that the CCC-ID projects had a substantial herd of horses to rely upon. If the agency projects would have had to rely only upon cars and trucks for transportation, work would have come to a standstill during winter. An imbedded part of Assiniboine and Sioux culture came to the rescue for government projects.

This reliance upon horses established a reciprocal relationship between enrollees and government employees in charge of projects. Enrollees were not Indians “waiting for

62. Let Us Try, Fort Peck USACE Documentary showing 150K volt power lines coming from Rainbow Falls Power station. The cast iron engines that ran diesel were also too heavy for the shallow waters of the Missouri to successfully dredge.

a handout.” Enrollees understood their contribution and used it as leverage to negotiate for other needs. Just as enrollees depended upon allotment money from work to feed their families, government employees relied upon the contributions of their horses to finish water projects at or under budget in to satisfy the accountants of the BIA and WPA.

Government agencies were under pressure to prove to Congress that these programs worked. A successful IECW project could mean Native populations would someday soon require less money for rations and other services. The BIA especially needed to prove that the ideas of preserving Native traditions John Collier worked. Congress was watching. Employees filling director and commissioner positions worked a job with the same evaluation pressures as anyone else. If their projects and ideas for Indian self-reliance didn’t work, it reflected poorly upon their own work performance.⁶³

New Deal Subsistence Gardens and Interpretations of CCC-ID Photographs

The I.E.C.W. drafted subsistence garden plans among the first projects in 1934. They planned gardens for the communities of North Poplar, Little Wolf Creek, South Poplar, Brockton, Chelsea, Fort Kipp, Riverside, and Garfield. All gardens lay beside the Missouri or its tributaries. BIA Indian Supervisor O.H. Lipps stated, “It is evident to anyone who examines into the economic situation of the Indian on the Fort Peck

63. Statement of John Collier Commissioner of Indian Affairs, House Committee on Indian Affairs, Hearings 75th Cong., 1st Sess., 1937.

reservation that before there can be any permanent improvement in the matter of self-support water for irrigating subsistence gardens must be provided."⁶⁴

October 28th "I visited the Big Porcupine Irrigation District with Mr. Howard Bogard, Water Master, and saw there what can be grown on the river bottom land when water for irrigation is made available. Among the various Indian farm homes seen and visited was that of Tom Doney, who two years ago moved onto his wife's 40-acre allotment, built a log cabin and planted a garden. He had no team or farming implements, but managed to get an acre or two of land plowed and planted. He raised a nice patch of well matured field corn and in his root house we saw plenty of vegetables to carry him through the winter. There were about 20 bushels of fine potatoes, besides quantities of carrots, onions, squash, pumpkins, rutabagas, beets, and even canned peas, also cantaloupes, watermelons and cucumbers."⁶⁵

Lipps was describing the success of one of the BOR project areas from 1908. Big Porcupine Creek was well suited to farming because the soil was less alkali than other areas.⁶⁶ The CCC-ID recognized that soil content was also a factor in the success of farmed lots. The New Deal subsistence gardens utilized flat bottom river lands that received more nutrients from the river's alluvial soil. Getting water from the rivers and streams to the garden plots was still a challenge.

The IECW referred to the gardens as 'subsistence.' When the IECW evolved into the CCC-ID, they changed the name to 'community garden.' Just like the trucks that carried enrollees to and from work sites with the brightly colored acronym painted on the side, marketing played a role in the CCC-ID garden plans. Subsistence was a word associated with relief and hard times. Community was a word associated with building

64. O.H. Lipps, Supervisor, to John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, copied to Superintendent John G. Hunter, 2 December 1935, RG 75 box 107 General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck. NARA, Washington, D.D.

65. Ibid.

66. Voggesser, "Fort Peck Project," 10.

and harmony, two components of the social endeavor that John Collier sought to create on reservations after the Indian Reorganization Act.⁶⁷ Subsistence gardens were a part of the CCC-ID to market their work to Congress and others as much as they were for providing food to families.⁶⁸

The blueprints for the subsistence and community gardens list total acreage, acreage per lot, and how many families would work the gardens. On average, each garden serviced twenty-five families, each receiving a ½ to ¼ acre lot.⁶⁹ Each subsistence garden was located near a town center and access to BOR pump houses built in the 1920s. The CCC-ID wasn't trying to reinvent the wheel, and used previous project paths and equipment when it was possible.

The "CCC-ID Pictorial Report" for 1936-1939, contain photos of men using horses to plow fields, but photographs of harvesting food were not included. The absence of harvest photographs is another curious silence in the record of CCC-ID project documentation, especially when the CCC-ID had set a standard for extremely detailed photographic recording. The BIA and CCC-ID espoused the New Deal projects were about helping Indians recover from poverty and becoming self-sufficient, but time and again there are no photographs showing the reaping of this self-sufficiency.

There are no photographs of harvests, working fields full of plants, or pictures of tidy homes showing the 'better life' that the IRA said it was championing for the benefit

67. John G. Hunter, Superintendent of Fort Peck to John Collier, Commissioner of the BIA, copied to Tom C. White, Production Coordination Officer, RG 75 box 107 folder General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington D.C.

68. Statement of John Collier Commissioner of Indian Affairs, House Committee on Indian Affairs, Hearings 75th Cong., 1st Sess., 1937.

69. Who and how they chose families to receive community garden lots is not contained in the CCC-ID Fort Peck General Records collection at NARA, Washington D.C.

of Indians. O.H. Lipps had seen such a prosperous irrigated farm at Big Porcupine in 1935. Why did the CCC-ID not choose to record the same? The CCC-ID did record the harvesting of hay, sorghum, and oats—the crops associated with the business of cattle and horse raising. When the CCC-ID took photographs, they documented their own interests, communicating what the New Deal planners in Washington wanted to know about. Federal interests are codified within the photographs and tell us not only what Washington presently wanted to know, but also what Washington wanted Fort Peck to become.⁷⁰

The monthly pictorial reports focus upon four things—the state of the land before work was done, the land after work was done, men actively working, and women and children engaged in normative nurturing roles. The selection of these scenes predicated the visualization of intent for the CCC-ID, BIA, and Department of the Interior. Nature was to be reengineered and controlled. The photos capturing the ‘good work’ evidenced after a project well done. Images of men at work instead of in bread lines encouraged and saved the psyche of many Americans during the New Deal. For Fort Peck it seems different. American culture perceived Indians as a part of this ‘nature’ concept. ‘Savages,’ ‘wild beasts,’ and all the other racist monikers that Indians endured surfaced in the legacy of New Deal water project, transformed as pictorial documentation of the death of the savage. Through the choices made in how to photograph Native men and women on Fort Peck, the evidence of the federal psyche concerning Indians is revealed. Indians working the Euro-American way, doing Euro-American things, and the families

70. Sarah Pink, *Doing Visual Ethnology*, Chapter Six (London: Sage, 2007).

under the head of a perceived quickly assimilating Native man reflects what the federal government was interested in—assimilation.

Engineering the Environment: Redefining and Separating Nature from the Native

The water projects had several goals. Keeping erosion from changing the paths of the rivers, diverting water to irrigable land, and storing water for later use. Through the constriction and diversion of the rivers, a redefining of spaces took place. Places of ‘nature’ gave way to places of ‘control.’ During the New Deal, certain ideologies

The Fort Peck Reservation Indian Stock Association was very interested in the water projects on the reservation.⁷¹ Representatives approached T.C. White and Superintendent Hunter about the grazing lands soon to open along the Missouri and Milk Rivers. Hunter and CCC-ID Director D.E. Myers expressed that opening lands in this area would have to consider allottees. The funds allotted through the BIA for CCC-ID work had to produce a project of sustainable return for the public, and not for specific allottees. T.C. White included in his proposal for the next fiscal year that “no work should be done on allotted lands until a satisfactory agreement has been signed by the allottee so that this land worked upon may be subject to lease in accordance with other adjacent lands.”⁷²

71. RG 75 box 107 General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington, D.C.

72. Tom C. White, ECW Production Coordinating Officer to John Collier, Commissioner of the BIA, copied to John G. Hunter, Superintendent of Fort Peck, Milk River Project No. 55, 30 October 1935, box107 folder General Records Fort Peck, NARA, Washington, D.C.

The enrollees removed the willow, cottonwood, black haw, buffalo berry, and other traditionally important plants from the Milk, Poplar, and Missouri river bottomlands to make way for grazing lands. This devastated the habitat for native game birds and other animals as well as put constraints upon Natives who hunted and gathered resources along the river banks. Since the 1700s, the Assiniboine and Sioux peoples pounded prairie turnips with serviceberries to make a kind of flour, and harvested chokecherries for pemmican. Serviceberry and chokecherry grow primarily in river areas or in coulees where water collected. The CCC-ID paid enrollees to rip these plants out with tractors and replace the banks with rip-rap to subvert erosion.

These bushes and small trees had given shelter to birds that the Native peoples of Fort Peck hunted for food. Project managers on the Milk River brush clearing job noted that the cottonwoods they cleared out were a primary source of fuel for the Assiniboine. Later, the CCC-ID would replant cottonwood seedlings but away from the river to keep game from polluting water sources. Cottonwood grows quickly but it would still take years for habitat to return enough to support game habitat. The CCC-ID projects redefined traditional river resource areas as grazing land and spaces of engineered control.

Local white-owned hunting clubs provided food for bird shelters, looking forward to future shooting on the reservation.⁷³ The CCC-ID was not concerned for Native traditional reliance upon these birds for food during times of Congressional austerity and annuity cutbacks, or times of drought or blizzard. The CCC-ID focus was bank control of

73. Bird Feed Yard photograph notation, RG 75 box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington D.C.

the Missouri and its tributaries during freshets and spring deluges. Once grazelands were established, the CCC-ID and BIA posited that a stable cattle-grazing economy would preclude the need for Native reliance upon 'nature.'

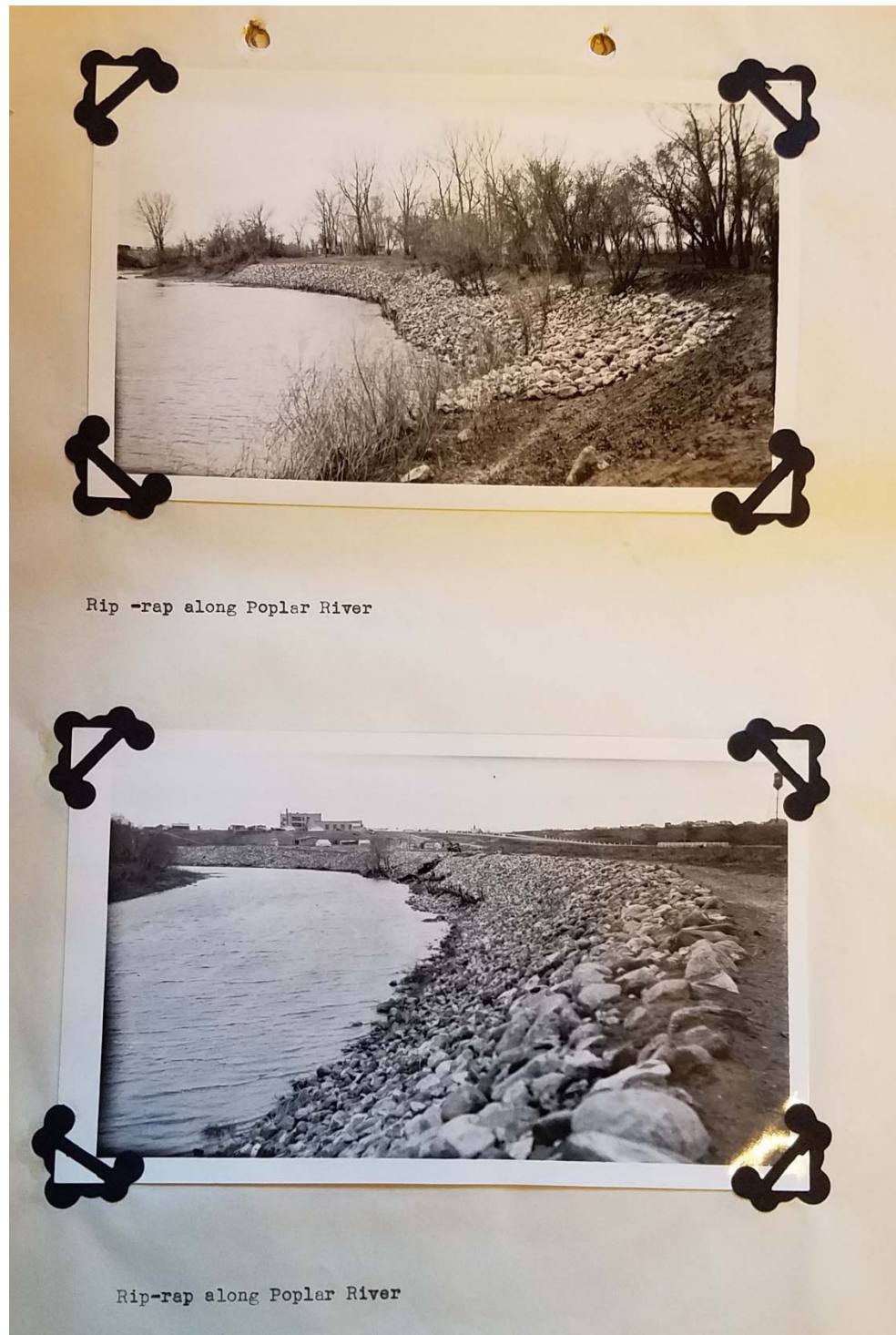


Figure 14, Rip-Rap Along River. Photo 9: hand built rip-rap river embankment, RG 75, Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington, D.C.

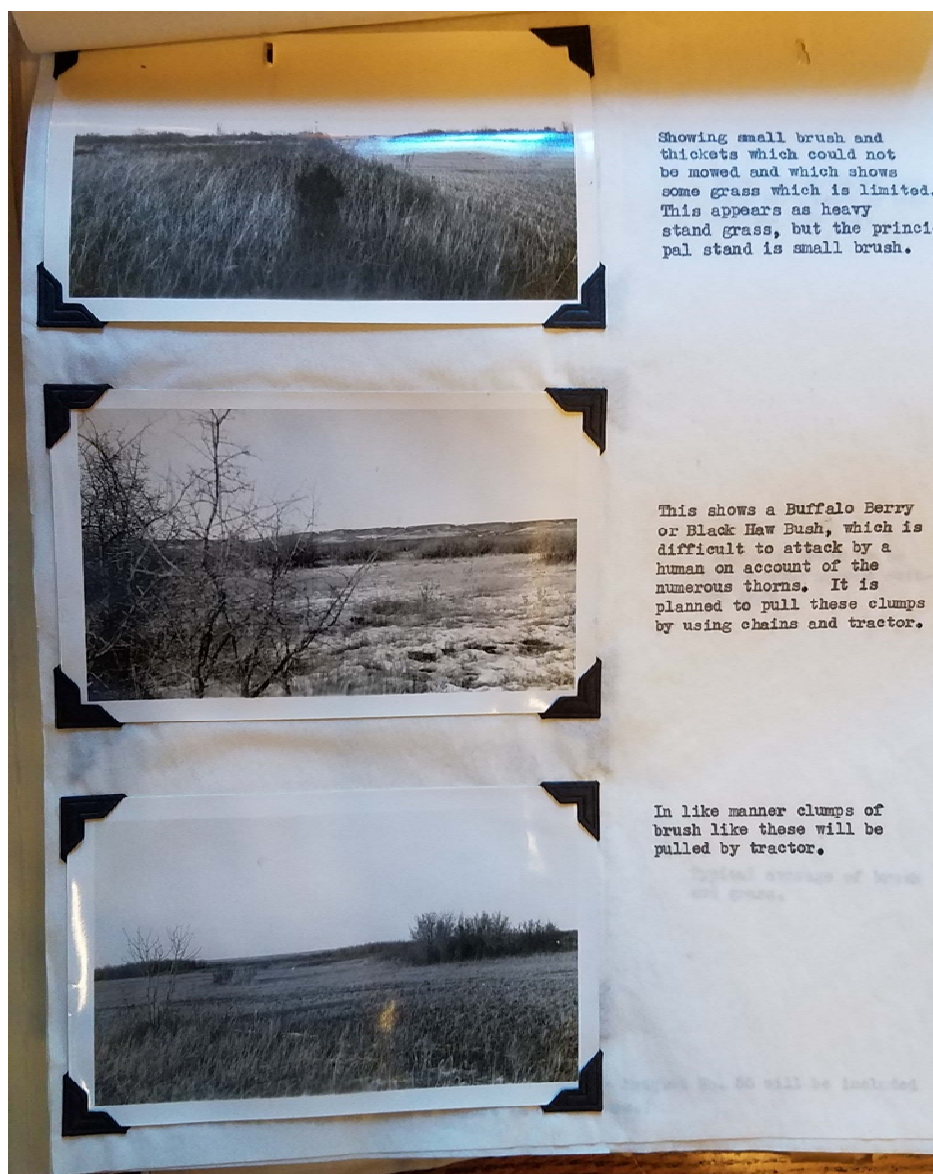


Figure 15, Black-haw in Landscape. Photo 10: Black haw bushes described here as “difficult to attack by hand,” yet Assiniboine and Sioux women had harvested black haw berries every June for centuries. RG 75, Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington D.C.

It is ironic that at the same time federal policies sanctioned the stripping of 'natural' habitat on Native lands, the government preserved the natural habitat for white outdoorspeople. The US Forestry Service set aside the Fort Peck Game Range up river from the Fort Peck Dam reservoir in 1936.⁷⁴ Whites needed to 'get away from it all,' and 'return to nature,' to impart balance into their lives from all their hard work, but Natives needed to abandon 'nature,' and embrace mechanized farming and other "civilized" practices. The WPA Montana Guidebook outlined the best places in Montana to hunt, fish, canoe, and camp. In the section about Recreation, authors associated the joys of camping with Native culture, "The pattern was fixed before the white men came, having been the Indian way of life for generations."⁷⁵ *Having been* alludes to the idea that the previous life of Indians was over. The west was now redefined as grazeland, farmland, or playground. Paradoxically, WPA writers associated the grandeur of natural spaces with a people the US had sought to eradicate, and wrote about as if they no longer existed.

The redefining of 'natural' spaces as resources, and the separation of the Native from Nature was a theme permeated in CCC-ID projects. Indians were to master nature. The redefining of natural spaces were a part of irrigation works at Fort Peck reservation. Projects transformed springs from accessible sources of clean drinking water for wildlife and Native people, to clean sources of drinking water for cattle. Fencing ensured that grazing cattle stayed within limits of a set boundary that allotment borders set. Dams on streams and rivers constricted the flow of water elsewhere, dedicating reservoir resources

74. Now called the Charles M. Russell National Wildlife Refuge.

75. Federal Writer's Project, *The WPA Guide to 1930s Montana* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 117.

to irrigation of hay to support feeding cattle in winter. Once enrollees built reservoirs, some were stocked with fish, but the Montana State Fish and Game Commission Service banned Native from fishing. Brush removal projects along the Milk, Missouri, and Poplar rivers wild fowl habitat scrapped their habitat away, but humanmade boxes for birds were built elsewhere in a controlled environment for hunters.

The constricting and diverting of water resources redefined natural spaces of living on Fort Peck as areas that could to be measured, evaluated, and managed. Indians of the Northern Plains had manipulated their environment before with controlled burning of prairie grasslands for better rangeland for buffalo, and seeding prairie turnips so the resource was in known spaces to reduce gathering time. Indians engaged in this form of environmental management to support the predictability of resources for a nomadic lifestyle. Now, as reservation life became a reality, the manipulation of resources had to be contained within their reservation with respect to the borders of allotted or trust lands.

The diverting of water caused other consequences. As the Missouri River water depths fell, pollution became a problem. Tribal Executive Board minutes from 1935 “Report that the Missouri River is polluted by sewage disposal.”⁷⁶ The dredging for the Fort Peck Dam upriver on the Missouri made the levels of the river fall. Less water made the sewage run-off from the Fort Deck dam and Fort Peck reservation communities even more severe.

76. Executive Board Meeting Minutes, Fort Peck Agency, 14 November 1935, Minutes transmitted with John G. Hunter, Superintendent of Fort Peck letter, 7 December 1935, RG 75, box 107 folder General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington, D.C.

Spring 151 has a constant flow of sparkling water coming from its depths. It flows into a small pool where fish feed thence into the meandering stream called Smoke Creek. Smoke Creek's course is underground in many instances during the dry summer months.

The marker stands close by Spring 151. Fish were planted here by the Montana State Fish & Game Commission.

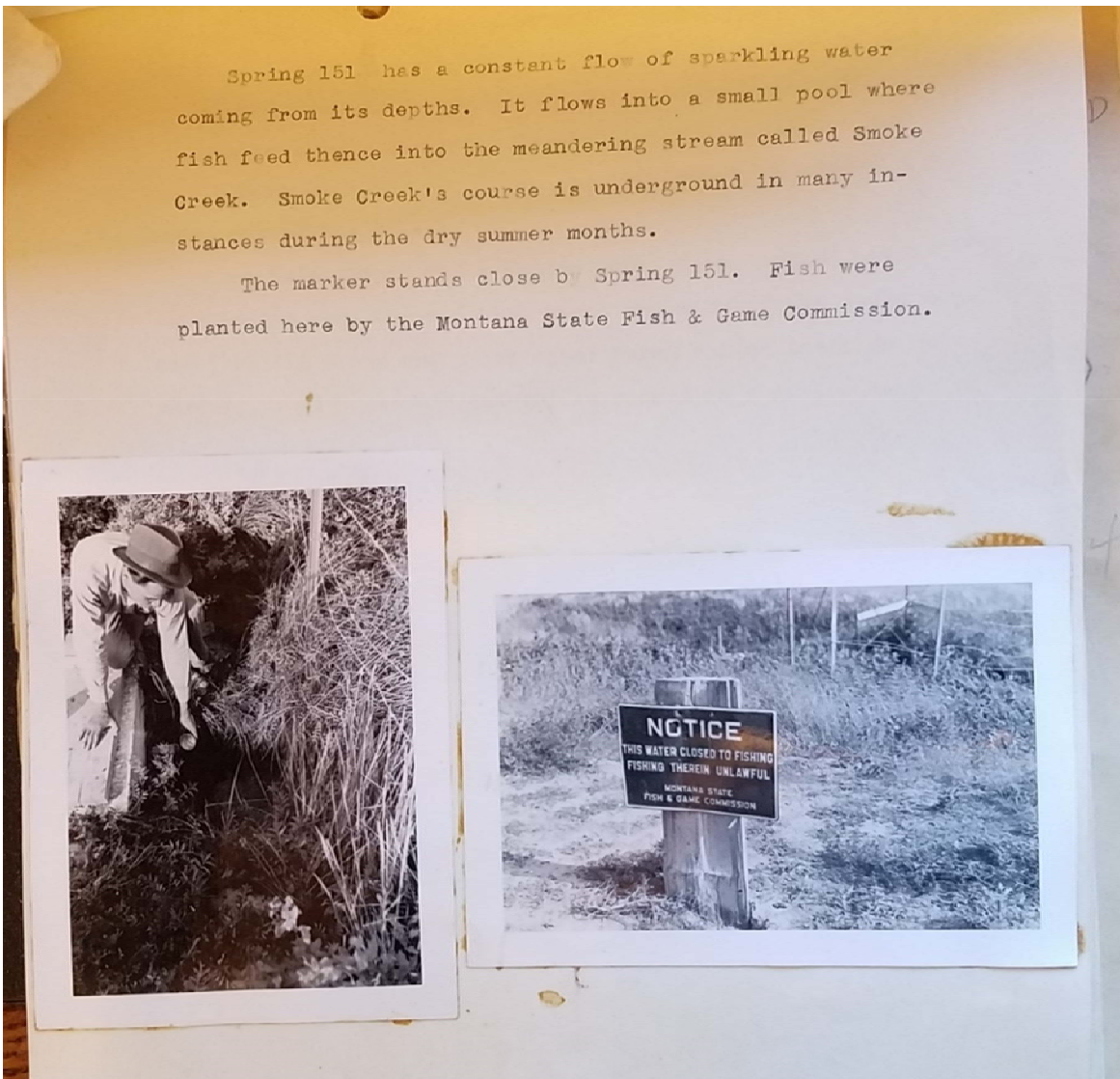


Figure 16, No Fishing Posted. Photo 11: Fishing “planted” in Spring 151 but sign says “No Fishing. Fishing here unlawful. Montana State Fish and Game Commission” It is ironic that now the Indians of Fort Peck had forbidden spaces on their own land. RG 75, Box 106_CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944, NARA, Washington, D.C.

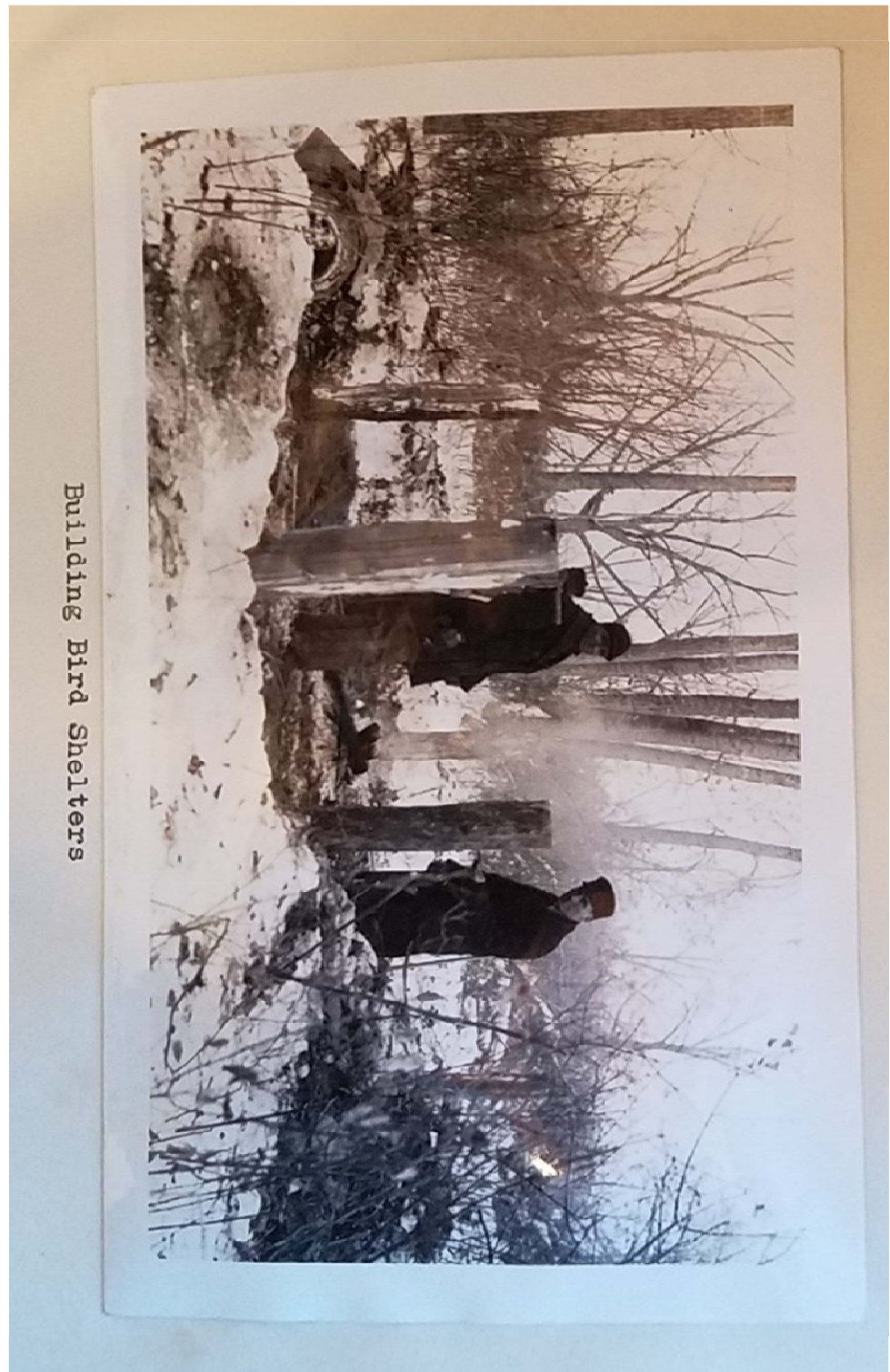


Figure 17, Bird Shelter and Workers. Photo 12: RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944 NARA, Washington, D.C.



Bird Feed Yard

If you look closely you can see gravel, straw and grain. The grain was furnished by the local Gun & Rod Club, and the State Fish & Game Commission.

Figure 18, Bird Feed Yard. Photo 13: RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944 NARA, Washington, D.C.

From this same water, the water works' planners expected the Assiniboine and Sioux to irrigate their community gardens. Since the focus of the CCC-ID was to build water works that benefited more than just one allottee, wells for private home use were not built making the access to clean drinking water even more difficult to obtain.

Negotiated Spaces—Poplar's Assimilationist Environment and the CCC-ID

The CCC-ID building was a multi-purpose building housing the CCC-ID support staff, Eric Lindquist, engineer, Howard Helmer, Property and accounting clerk, Alvy Casper camp assistant, and Lucille Flynn, the junior clerk and stenographer. When the CCC-ID planning board would meet, they would use this building. T.C. White, Superintendent Hunter, D.E. Myer, would ask the Tribal Council to meet them here for meetings when it involved tribal suggestion. Suggestion should not be confused with consent. Superintendents still had control of what happened in an administrative sense on the reservation. Yet, Hunter's records indicate that he did listen to Assiniboine and Sioux needs.

Buildings are places of power. They are situated on the landscape to evoke reverence, obedience, control, or to conform to a sense of shared community identity. Buildings sit upon but also within landscape. The way in which buildings are designed speaks to the identity of the community, whether imposed or constructed centrally. To ask the Tribal Council to meet at the CCC-ID building situated the power within the

CCC-ID landscape and reinforced the permissive inclusiveness of the tribal leaders' presence.⁷⁷

Agency employees showed CCC movies in the CCC-ID building in Poplar The films ranged from USFS, CCC-ID, and WPA films that were produced to encourage workers, but also the public. These films were shown as shorts before movies in theatres across the country in the 1930s. As part of their reeducation, the CCC-ID brought reservation children to watch the movies.⁷⁸ The CCC movies focused upon a behavior-based model to teach safety using hand tools, clearing land, and working on machines.

Characters in the films like "Wacking Willy" portrayed workers that didn't pay attention to safety guidelines endangered their coworkers. "Stop and think before you take a chance."⁷⁹ *Trench Collapse Hazard* was a short film that spoke directly about the safety while digging trenches.⁸⁰ While the exact films the CCC showed workers and children at Fort Peck are not listed in the 1934-1939 CCC-ID reports from this research, the above films are representative of the types of movies the CCC made for behavior-based programming to protect and educate workers. In the "Your CCC" pamphlet, "The person who neglects or violates safety rules or regulations is foolish indeed..."⁸¹ and

77. Permissive inclusiveness describes the state in which a dominant culture presents an acceptance of inclusivity to a minority culture, yet, the dominant culture has enough power to enforce the bounds of inclusivity, permitting the minority culture to operate in some facets of the dominant culture but not in all facets. e.g. A Connecticut community in the mid-nineteenth century accepted Cherokee men to attend colleges, but when John Ridge married a white woman, the community burned effigies of them.

78. CCC, 1933, "Safety on the Job," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IexAgMYCxE&t=15s>
CCC

79. CCC, 1933, "Safety in Woods Work"

80. CCC, 1934, "Trench Collapse Hazard"

81. Roy Hoyt, "Your CCC: A Handbook for Enrollees," (Washington: Happy Days Publishing Company, Inc., 1933), 20.

threatens the well-being of “those with whom he works or lives.” The CCC used caring for others to encourage workers to act safely.



Some of the "Younger Generation" attended one of the meetings for Indian CCC Enrollees. Weekly meetings are held at the CCC Office. The Indian gymnasium is used for some of the larger meetings at which Safety pictures are often shown.

The children are often shy at first but respond readily on short acquaintance.



Figure 19, Children Attending CCC-ID Movie. Photo 14: Children attending CCC movies in Poplar, MT, RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944 NARA, Washington, D.C.

The CCC pamphlet also instructed behavior that was expected in camps. How to “Say Sir ... keep your hands out of your pockets...,” “Manners—Courtesy,” and how to interact with women who came to CCC camps from neighboring towns. “If you are the type of man who valued self-respect...you probably will exercise the same trait of character in your relationships with young women while in camp.”⁸² The pamphlet has a section on “Getting Along” with others at the camps just before the section on “10% of Enrollees are Colored.” The section about African Americans in the CCC points out the Colored Camps are separate from white camps, and that colored men “have worked on some of the largest CCC projects...” and “...the educational programs in the Negro camps have been among the outstanding ones in the corps.”⁸³

The American Dream for American Indians was questionable. In its application, the films and pamphlet acknowledged the white, male, protestant, audience. The films were another example of permissive inclusiveness. American Indians had been told since the 1790s that if they “civilized” they would become part of America, and reap the rewards of farming, being educated, and assimilating into the mainstream. Years of broken treaties, reduced land base, discrimination, popular culture stereotyping, and violence made it apparent that American Indians were permitted to work within the system if they conformed, but broad acceptance into the mainstream was just as far away as it was for other minority groups.

82. Hoyt, “Your CCC,” 36, 40, 42.

83. *Ibid.*, 44-5.

The “initial development of Poplar’s landscape reflected the federal government’s ... control and in turn the landscape was influential in normalizing that control.”⁸⁴ The cottages constructed at Fort Peck are an example of the communication of federal control. The house plans were the same used at the Fort Peck dam village. Superintendent Hunter and CCC-ID Coordinator D.E. Murphy lobbied the BIA together to provide housing for agency employees. In their letters over the course of three months, they suggested moving some of the cottages from Fort Peck. The BIA rejected this offer. Hunter then asked if they could use the same plans for the “cottages” at Fort Peck. They reasoned that the cottages offered more protection against the cold winds of winter than the temporary barracks housing.

During the New Deal, the symbols of federal control continued to be communicated across living spaces. In 1938, Superintendent Hunter suggested the Poplar cottages’ grounds be landscaped using water from the new irrigation system built in Poplar in 1936. The cottages had landscaped lawns as part of Hunter’s wish to “beautify” the Poplar agency.⁸⁵ Establishing lawns in a part of Montana that only received twelve inches of rain a year was folly. Hunter’s idea of landscaped yards illustrates the disconnect between federal mindset and the realities of Montana’s environment. Fort Peck agency was a long way from a typical American suburban town. Building the all-American clapboard cottage with white picket fence and carefully tended lawn was a way to show that Fort Peck could be like the rest of America too. For officials interested in

84. Warren, “Landscape and Place-Identity,” 44.

85. O.H. Lipps, Supervisor to John Collier, Commissioner of BIA, copied to John G. Hunter, Superintendent of Fort Peck, and attention to D.E. Murphy, 2 December 1935, RG 75 box 107 General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington, D.C.

assimilation, manicured cottages showed the Indians an example of what civilized life was supposed to be like.

In 1908, the “Indian Fairgrounds” lay immediately east of the agency office and north of the Great Northern railroad.⁸⁶ On the blueprints for Poplar CCC-ID barracks, the “old Indian fairgrounds” are marked in the same location. Where the new Indian fairgrounds moved to is not shown. In the nineteenth century, the Assiniboine and Sioux bands met along river banks in separate camps every June to trade horses, furs, blankets, and other domestic goods. It is interesting to note that despite the agency presence, and the roar of the Great Northern Railroad, the Assiniboine and Sioux did not move their fairgrounds until the early 1930s.

Negotiating Space—The Shape of Identity in a Building

NARA documents provide a glimpse into a curious recreation center design blueprint that intentionally or unintentionally crossed cultural boundaries. The blueprint design titled the “I.E.C.W. Recreation Center, Fort Peck Indian Reservation, Poplar Montana” is strikingly similar of the Gros Ventre Dance House in Hays, Montana on the Fort Belknap Reservation.⁸⁷ The Gros Ventre and the Upper Assiniboine bands had become allies in the early 1850s because of pressure from the Sioux and extensively intermarried in the mid-before being forced to live on the lands of Fort Belknap in

86. Warren, “Landscape of Place-Identity,” 44.

87. Loretta Fowler, *Shared Symbols, Contested Meanings: Gros Ventre Culture and History, 1778-1984* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1987), 79, 109.

1888.⁸⁸ In the late 1870s and 80s, the Assiniboine Upper and Lower bands were split between Fort Belknap and Fort Peck Reservations. These reservations include in their populations people from both Assiniboine

88. Fowler, 25. Fort Belknap Reservation over time. Blackfeet, Gros Ventre, [Upper] Assiniboine reservation began in 1855, but in 1888 the Blackfeet were separated and placed upon their own reservation.

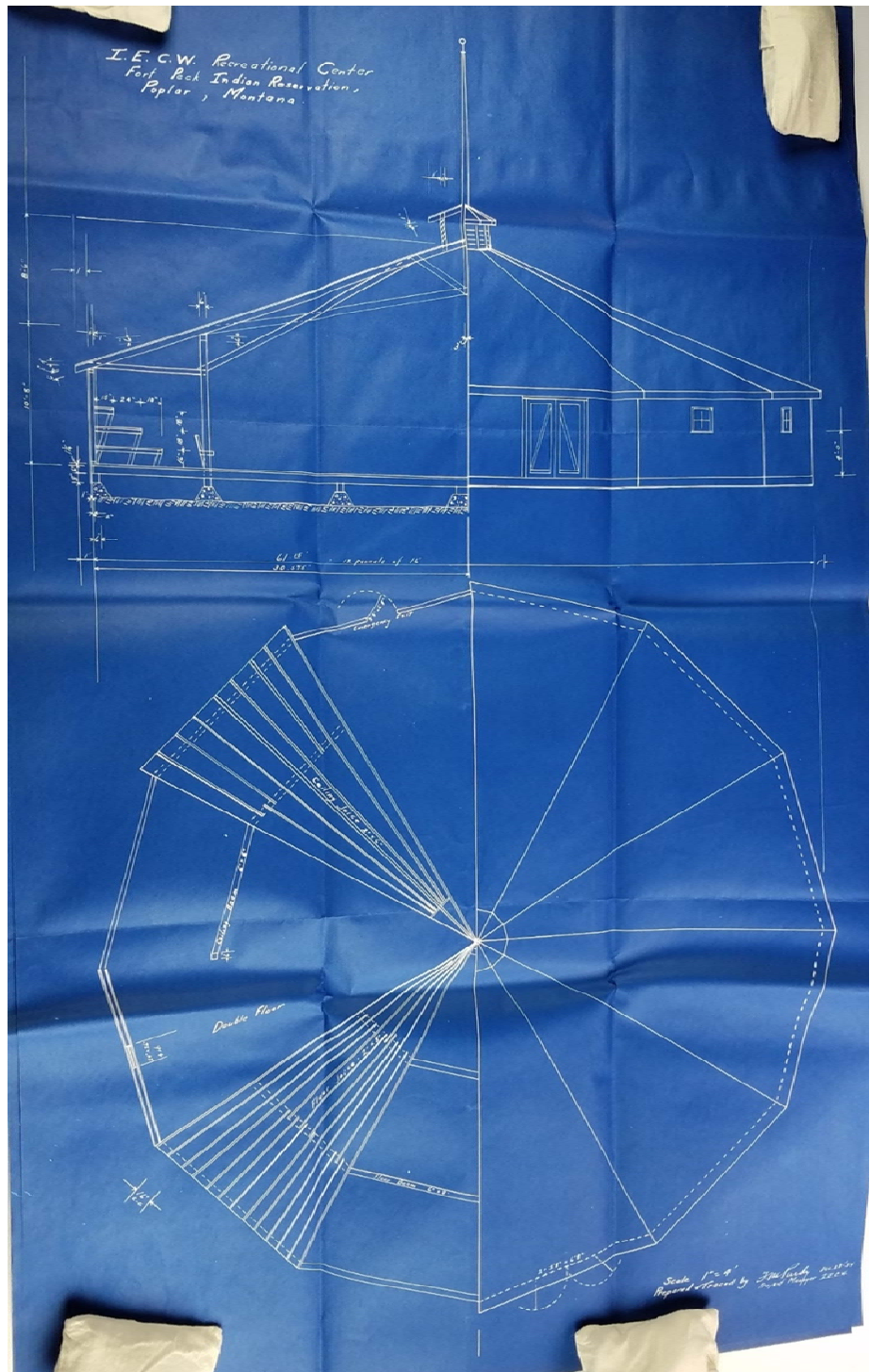


Figure 20, IECW Round Recreation Building Blueprint. Photo 15: Blueprint of a IECW recreation center drafted 28 December 1934. The design mirrors that of the Gros Ventre Dance House in Hays, Montana that the Assiniboine also used. RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944, NARA, Washington, D.C.

bands with most lower band Assiniboine being removed to Fort Peck. Children of Gros Ventre and Assiniboine marriages were and are present on both the Fort Belknap and Fort Peck Reservations.

On December 27, 1934, the I.E.C.W. Project Manager F.M. Purdy traced a plan for the Fort Peck Recreation House. Purdy traced the blueprint two years before Hunter asked for an extension of the CCC-ID barracks for a recreation room. The traditional Gros Ventre Dance House and the I.E.C.W. Recreation Center have the same circular floor plan with a high pitched, twelve-section conical roof, one main double-door entrance, shallow to no eaves, and cupola meant for ventilation. The double doors of the recreation center are labeled as six feet and eight inches tall with two, two feet eight-inch wide doors.

The recreation center design is almost exactly that of the Dance House at Hays, Montana, but there are some differences. The dance hall was built with the floor below the ground line while the recreation center plans show a footed pier system under the building. The recreation center plans show a planking or clapboard exterior while the Gros Ventre Dance Hall was built with saddle-notch log construction using logs of at least twelve inches in width. The photograph of the dance hall dates to 1933, but the building shows the extensive weathering and settling common in log constructed buildings in Montana that date to the late 1800s. The recreation center also shows one single, four-lite window situated centrally and four feet from the ground in each of the twelve sections whereas the dance hall has no windows.

Logs retain more heat, especially important when Montana winters fall below zero for months at a time. Clapboard buildings are substantially more difficult to insulate.

Placing the recreation house upon piers would also allow the cold to move under the floor, making it more difficult to heat the building above. These architectural differences illustrate the persistence of designers not understanding the climate they designed for.

The doors on the Dance Hall were large enough for Gros Ventres to bring in horses to give to exceptional dancers for award. The doors on the recreation center would accommodate the passage of a horse into the building.⁸⁹ The NARA records in this collection do not indicate that this recreation center was built between 1934 and 1941. It would be interesting for future research to determine if the Tribal Council had ever seen these plans and what the Assiniboine reaction would have been to a Euro-American designed building resembling so closely the Gros Ventre-Assiniboine traditional dance halls. As preserving and encouraging traditional culture was a tenet of the IRA, this building plan is an example of the cultural brokerage that existed between the CCC-ID and the Fort Peck Native residents.

Negotiating Space—Poplar’s Barracks

There were permanent camps at Poplar near the agency headquarters. The CCC-ID camp was situated north across the Poplar River from the Agency. Sometimes a project was out of the scope of the mission of an agency and the CCC-ID work. Plans for any CCC-ID building had to conform to CCC-ID standard blueprints. Adjusting the footage or design in anyway would negate CCC-ID funding. For the Poplar barracks,

89. Fowler, *Shared Symbols*, 79.



Figure 21, Winter at Poplar Barracks. Photo 16: Poplar Winter Barracks, RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944, NARA, Washington, D.C.

superintendent Hunter agreed to the negotiation of the enrollees to have more room for their families. Adding on forty extra feet to the end of the barracks was outside CCC-ID plan regulations. The construction of the Fort Peck Poplar Camp barracks building is a good example of the ways in which state and federal agencies would work with one another to assist one another and reach individual goals.

Superintendent Hunter requested the barracks for enrollee workers be built but with a slightly altered roof truss system that would allow for a larger barracks. The CCC-ID could not build a building that was outside the specifications of the US Forestry Trucks and Trails Handbook, mainly due to cost differentials, so other labor had to be found to offset the cost of more materials. Superintendent Hunter met the Director of the Montana Department of Transportation at a conference. After a discussion, Hunter proposed to Coordinator of CCC-ID projects, D.E. Murphy, to build the barracks but using CCC-ID materials, but with the BIA contracting the MDT for labor. The MDT Director had been looking for projects for unemployed men to work on.⁹⁰

This compromise involved two budgets from separate state and federal agencies which the BIA finally approved. The budget office of each individual agency would only act within the hardline administrative policy for projects that strictly adhered to internal specifications. The coordinators and administrators had to be inventive getting the projects they needed for their individual circumstance approved. For superintendent Hunter to agree to the enrollees requests, understanding the mountains of paperwork it

90. John G. Hunter, Superintendent of Fort Peck to John Collier, Commissioner of BIA, 16 July 1935, RG 75 box 107 General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington, D.C.

would produce for his office, shows that the superintendent tried to serve the people of the reservation.

At the Poplar, the CCC-ID built sixty-man barracks were built for enrollees. Houses were built for employees of New Deal programs. The CCC-ID used the same barracks plans used at Fort Peck Dam for the barracks at Poplar, but with an extended floorplan that allowed an additional room for the camp project manager.

Superintendent Hunter also demonstrated that he cared for, or at least considered the health and comfort of the Assiniboine and Sioux that he assisted through Tribal Council request for better living spaces. Enrollees, and in some cases their families, immediately overcrowded the “sixty-man” barrack leaving a lack of “air” for the people living inside.⁹¹ In less than a year, he appealed to the BIA for another extension to the building to allow for more space in a lengthy letter citing health was a concern. T.C. White supported Hunter’s intensions.

Hunter also appealed for an addition to be made to the barracks for an entertainment room. He cited the cold winters that left many on off-hours inside with nothing to do except occupy themselves in their immediate sleeping spaces. With CCC-ID projects running sometimes in twenty-four-hour shifts, sleeping and men rising to prepare for the day would share the same space. Any activity, no matter how quiet, would be disruptive to the men who had labored for hours in the subzero Montana winds.

91. John G. Hunter through Tom C. White to John Collier Commissioner of the BIA, RG 75 box 107 General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington, D.C.

The Fort Peck CCC-ID projects employed at least 300 Assiniboine and Sioux men each year between 1935 and 1941⁹². The barracks only accommodated up to 60 men. The records in this collection did not indicate that other barracks were built, but the Assiniboine and Sioux were able to negotiate different terms than the white CCC-ID camps. The Assiniboine and Sioux negotiated having their families with them at projects distant from Poplar and even in the poplar barracks at times. Many men were in mobile camps constructing reservoirs, digging wells, and excavating springs but also could bring their families at least part of the time out in the far reaches of the reservation.

Negotiating Spaces—Remote Camps and Reinforcing Traditional Values

The Assiniboine and Sioux negotiated successfully with Hunter allowing their families to come with them on projects. Extended family would work at the sites, and support the men working on CCC-ID jobs. Children were omnipresent at remote job sites and the bonds of family, and traditional practices continued. Euro-American CCC camps did not allow family. The ability of the Assiniboine and Sioux to negotiate having their families present was an out of the ordinary arrangement considering the strict policies of the CCC. A key irony is that it is possible that families resettled due to water projects had family members working on building reservoirs on top of where they used to call home.

With family present in these remote spaces, Native language was perpetuated, news shared, politics discussed, upcoming give-away celebrations prepared for and,

92. Conservation Working Plan for the Period July 1, 1939 to June 30, 1940, RG 75 box 107 General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington, D.C. 1939 CCC-ID reservoirs show enrollees increased to 600.

traditional activities continued. Families living close reinforced cultural values needed within a traditional landscape in flux. Bringing children to the work site also kept them out of the assimilation school.⁹³ CCC-ID photographers documented children at remote camps. In all photographs, children are with their parents, at home tent or trailer sites, or present at the creation of dance circles.

Families at Fort Peck had always been mobile. Historically, the Assiniboine and Sioux moved with the buffalo herd. In the 1930s, Fort Peck peoples continued to move with resources, wintering near rivers and the resources those ecosystems would provide. The remote CCC-ID camps allowed the autonomous family band to continue patterns of travel. CCC-ID photographs of camps show families still positioned themselves in accordance to their traditional family status. Status of the family units dictated the specific order of CCC-ID tents.⁹⁴

During the New Deal, families remained mobile and used their skills to work from camp to camp using their horses. After the buffalo herds had gone, the Assiniboine and Sioux used canvas tents to continue moving from camp to camp, from the agency center of Poplar to other family resource sites.⁹⁵ Indians had always embraced new technologies when the item serviced their needs. Since the fur trade, kettles, knives, guns,

93. Dolly Cusker to Montana Relief Commission, report of Fort Peck details under heading "The education problem can probably be summed up as follows ... 10. Boys who should be in school working on CCC-ID," n.d. ca.1936, box 1, folder Correspondences, MHSRC.

94. At pow-wows during the 1930s, family status still dictated placement of tipis in the greater circle of visiting families. Notes on CCC-ID photographs implied the continuing practice at remote sites. The photographers may not have known the significance of what they noted. RG 75 box 107 General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington D.C.

95. Photographs of families using tents at CCC-ID sites, RG 75 box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington, D.C.

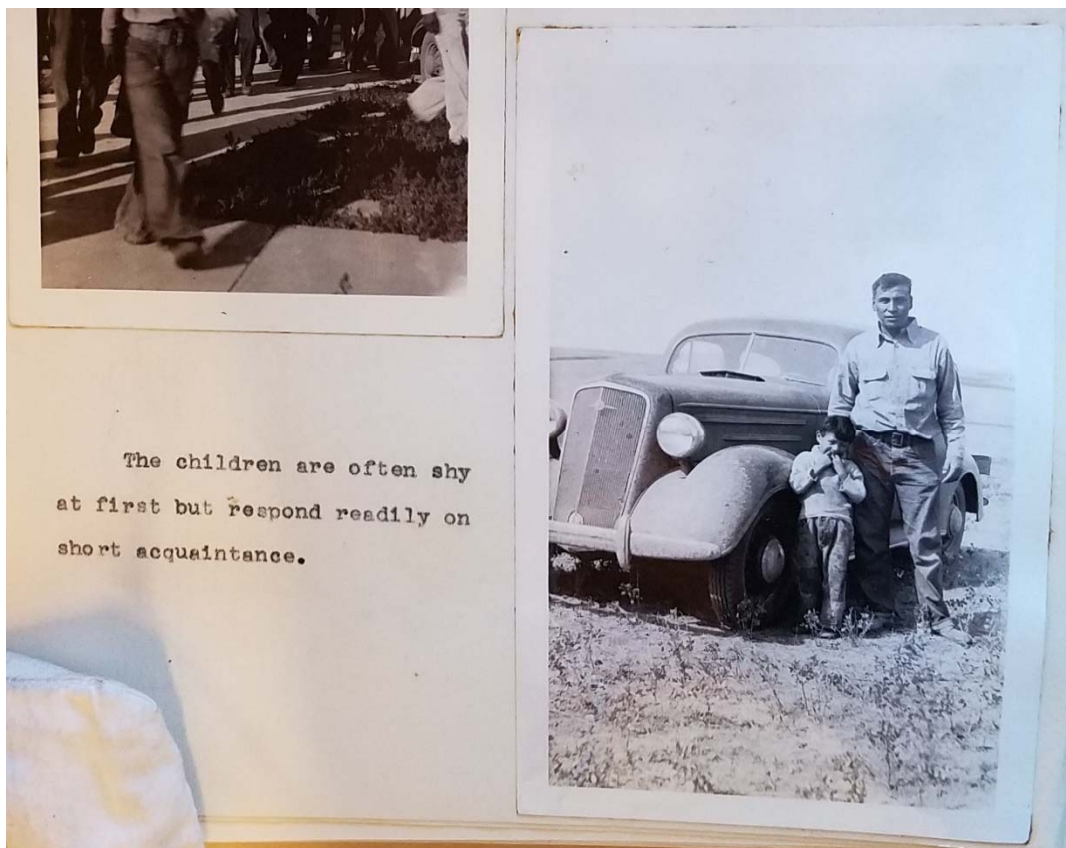


Figure 22, Father and Child in Front of Car. Photo 17: RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944, NARA, Washington, D.C.



Figure 23, Women on Blanket at Remote Camp. Photo 18: RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944, NARA, Washington, D.C.

Each camp is headed by a man who has had First Aid training. An adequate supply of First Aid equipment is always at hand.

After working hours the men enjoy playing kittenball, baseball and horseshoes. In the camps the women form groups and make quilts, do bead work and read the many magazines which are provided by the Camp Assistant in his frequent inspection trips. The children in the camps glow with health and vitality. They wander over the prairie in search of gophers which they snare. They enjoy wild berries when available and may be seen often digging for wild turnips.

Indian Children in the camps are not a problem.

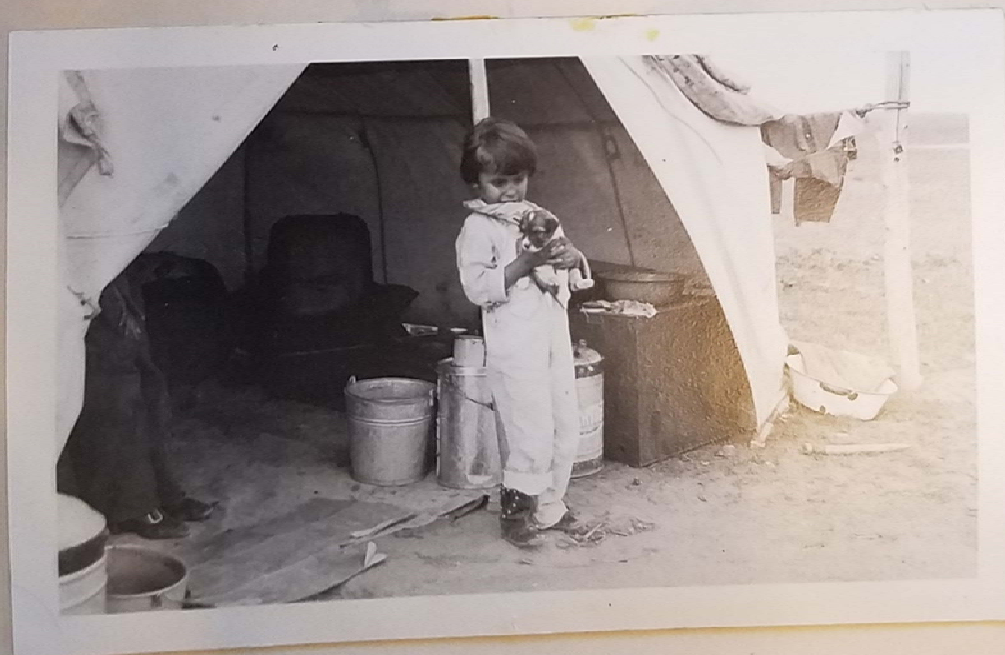


Figure 24, Child in Front of Tent. Photo 19: RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944, NARA, Washington, D.C.

All is not work for here you see preparation being made for a dance. Branches from trees (cottonwood in this case) are cut and placed around a large circle in which the dance will take place. The branches give shade for those who look on and make a fine enclosure for the dancers.



Figure 25, Man and Boy in Ceremonial Circle. Photo 20: RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944, NARA, Washington, D.C.



Figure 26, Tent Positions at Remote Camp. Photo 21: RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944, NARA, Washington, D.C.

This is a small "Dam Repair Crew" Camp. No set arrangement or line up of the tents, in such a small camp, is enforced. Should a family be in Camp, they quietly camp away from the others.

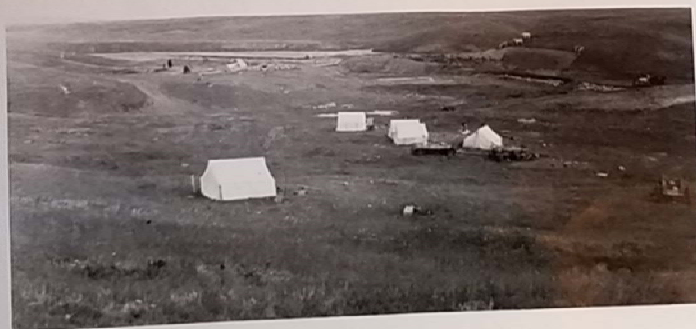


Figure 27, Dam Repair Crew Camp. Photo 22: RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944, NARA, Washington, D.C.

and steel awls were popular items incorporated into Assiniboine and Sioux living.⁹⁶

Indians were not frozen in time, they adapted to their new cultural environments. Using canvas for tipis and tents in the early twentieth century was no exception.

The New Deal brought a new kind of residential mobility that the Assiniboine and Sioux embraced, trailers. The small fifteen-foot by ten-foot trailers accommodated the entire family. Each trailer had a stove that provided a cooking surface and heat during the winter. The CCC-ID photographs note project foreman's families as occupants. The NARA collection examined did not contain CCC-ID photographs depicting groups of single men using trailers. Since the CCC-ID photographed every facet of project work and life in detail, the absence of groups of single men using trailers points to the absence of that practice, or at least the rarity of it. Trailers cost money for the CCC-ID. For superintendent Hunter to be able to procure trailers for families points to the need for keeping families comfortable and together that was worth the expense.

Horses could pull trailers. As the CCC-ID learned, the swiftly changing weather of northeastern Montana made using heavy trucks problematic. Sudden downpours made remote, ungraded dirt roads impassable. Horses could pull trailers on two wheels out from muddy ruts. During the winter when snows routinely surpassed three feet in depth, horses could pull the trailers better than trucks. Another absence in the CCC-ID photographic record was the absence of heavy trucks at remote sites using trailers. Photographs showed the presence of teams of horses and pulling equipment but no heavy

96. Janet Spector, *What This Awl Means: Feminist Archaeology at a Wahpeton Dakota Village* (St. Paul: Minnesota Historical Society Press, 1993), 83-86.

Some Indian families working in the crews like to get away from canvas roofs and plain dirt or grass covered floors and naturally take to trailer houses. Here we see Mrs. Dan Blacktail posing in the entrance of her summer home on wheels. Her husband, Dan Blacktail, is in charge of a Spring Crew. When it comes time for the Blacktails to move to the next spring job, no stakes have to be pulled or canvas folded.



Figure 28, Dan Blacktail Family in Front of Camper. Photo 22: Dan Blacktail family RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944, NARA, Washington, D.C.

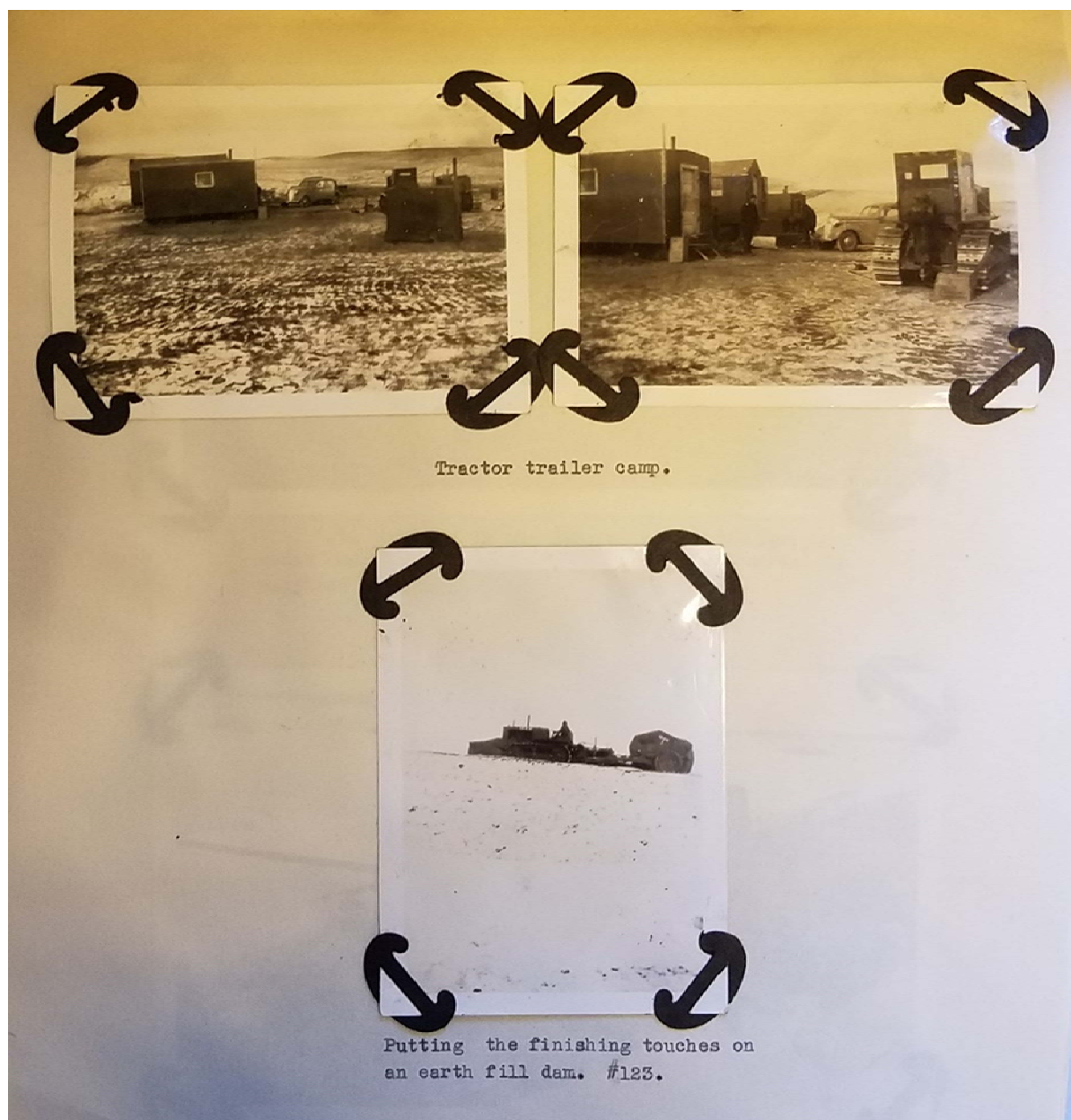


Figure 29, Trailer Camps. Photo 23: Tractor trailer camp. Putting the finishing touches on an earth fill dam. #123. RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944, NARA, Washington, D.C.

97. Kim Taylor, "Fabrication and Function of Star Quilts on Fort Peck Reservation in Northeastern Montana," (master's thesis: University of Montana), 5.

98. Taylor, "Fabrication," 59.

While her husband works on one of the crews she sits quietly at the tent tending the children and sewing. All sewing is done by hand and each stitch is tiny and exact. There is an immense amount of work connected with the making of a "Star" quilt for each block must be cut with exactness. The colors are as many as those in the rainbow and are as pleasingly and harmoniously arranged.



Figure 30, Woman Making Star Quilt at Remote Camp. Photo 24: RG 75 Box 106 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944, NARA, Washington, D.C.

In the 1930s, the give-away ceremony may have served more to secure “extending social ties,” as noted in 1981, but the giving away of the quilt fixed the producer within the context of traditional cultural norms.⁹⁹ While allotment-generated factionalism may have been evoking tension on the reservation during the New Deal, the practice of taking care of one’s community and expressing identity was also still alive.

The star was a popular motif of protection used in the Ghost Dance on ceremonial clothing in the late nineteenth century.¹⁰⁰ The star is also represented in Northern Plains Indian oral history.¹⁰¹ One story records the saga of two girls and their efforts at returning home after choosing stars as husbands. Northern Plains peoples also used star quilts as a substitution for buffalo robes once skin resources evaporated, the star quilt taking on an essential role in vision quests and medicine ceremonies.¹⁰² Plains peoples considered stars an important part of their cosmology. Stars were used to navigate, but held powerful medicine as stars fell from the sky to the earth unlike the moon and sun.

As men painted stars onto shields in the nineteenth century for protection, women touched the same power when making star quilts. Star quilts are associated with the processes of birth and death, as the “morning star” travels east to west across the sky just as the spirits of the dead. The Assiniboine and Sioux both wrapped their babies and their dead in star quilts. Patricia Albers and Beatrice Medicine “believe the morning star represents immortality.”¹⁰³ As the Assiniboine and Sioux persisted through the invasion

99. Taylor, “Fabrication,” 8.

100. *Ibid.*, 7

101. *Ibid.*, 40, 41.

102. *Ibid.*, 40-1.

103. *Ibid.*, 42-3.

of white government workers and projects on their land, the production of the star quilt in spaces of federal power—remote camps—is as a metaphor that their people would live forever and live through the latest version of federal interest.

Enrollees negotiated the remote camp spaces to include their families, but the underpinnings of this negotiation revolved around identity. Allowing families was to allow ‘Indianness’ to be present in the same place as a heavily orchestrated, coordinated and Army controlled space. The planners in Washington may have superimposed an umbrella of projects over the reservation, but Fort Peck peoples navigated that arrangement and superimposed Native practices upon the remote camp sites.

The Assiniboine and Sioux continued dance celebration at work sites. The dances used the very cottonwoods that they were instructed to cut down for the reservoirs. It is not clear from this study whether the use of the cottonwoods to encircle the dance site was a traditional part of preparing the sacred space, or whether it was invented to keep white prying eyes from a sacred tradition. The Assiniboine and Sioux had public and private dances. Some dances were specific to male only religious sects. What is referred to outside of Native society as a “cult,” the Bear “cult” and the Horse “cult” of the Assiniboine is an example of an intra-cultural society that performed dances that only male members could perform and witness. Indians at work sites negotiated the performance of their dances in the federal spaces of remote CCC-ID camps.

The CCC was more than just a program for work. It was a doctrine. The pamphlet circulated to the initial white CCC camps illustrates this point. A commitment to Christian ideals, love and dedication to country, and the clean living that an “honest day’s

work” provides echoed across the pages of this government produced document. There are no depictions of men other than white men in this document.

The CCC regulations for keeping hair trimmed, and the schedule of dressing, eating, and reporting for work was a Euro-American institutional construct that the Assiniboine and Sioux understood because of assimilation schools and serving in the Army. Most Natives on the reservation had been through the assimilation school process or currently had children within its walls. Many Fort Peck Indians had gone to schools as far away as Carlisle and Riverside. The CCC-ID took photographs of enrolled men at remote camps getting their hair cut because “young men like to present a neat appearance upon going into town and therefore like to have their dark hair trimmed often.” Traditionally for American Indian men, cutting hair was a mark of shame that had been used in assimilation schools as a tactic to erase Native culture.

CCC Project managers and higher-level personnel were career military men. U.S. Army regulations mandated short hair. These U.S. Army military personnel ran the CCC-ID camps and many Fort Peck men served in the first World War. Native men were used to the Americanized grooming routine, but photograph notes describing the act of cutting “dark hair” belies the intentions of pruning the Native out of the man.¹⁰⁴

104. Hoyt, “Your CCC,” illustration of hair cutting 37.

The young men like to present a neat appearance upon going to town and therefore like to have their dark hair trimmed often. As a result we find many expert barbers in the camps. The accompanying photo shows no fancy mirrors or chairs. A sack of horse feed will suffice for a chair and the hair cut had just better be good.



Figure 31, Man Getting Haircut at Remote Camp. Photo 25: RG 75 Box 106
CCC-ID General Records 1933-1944, NARA, Washington, D.C.

The End of CCC-ID Projects at Fort Peck

In 1939, the Fort Peck CCC-ID records show the War Department was beginning to prepare for the possibility of war. The ECW's replies to Hunter and Murphy's requests for more funding began to mention ECW funds diverted to the War Department and the scarcity of funds.¹⁰⁵ Many letters between Hunter, Murphy, White and John Collier's office between 1939 and 1941 discuss continuing the CCC-ID after the government stopped the CCC. In 1939, the ECW began asking Fort Peck officials for the inventory of all items at camps. Hunter prepared detailed inventories and forwarded them to the ECW accounting offices in Chicago. The letters between Chicago and Hunter expose the extent to which the ECW wanted an accounting for all items, no matter how small. Between 1939 and 1940, Hunter and the Chicago office communicated over a dozen times disputing the loss of one stainless steel cigarette ashtray.¹⁰⁶ Hunter described that there had been a fire at a camp and that the ashtray was most likely not recovered and therefore not inventoried.

Problems arose in the inventories after 1940. Project managers, T.C. White and Murphy began to write Hunter complaining that items were missing from camps. Shovels, spades, mattocks, wrenches, tires, kerosene, oil, gasoline, diesel, canvas, and other portable items were on the lists. In his 1942 inventory report, O.C. Gray, Superintendent of Fort Peck agency stated, "I have never been at an Indian Agency where the feeling of ownership of government property by the large majority of Indian people is

105. John G. Hunter to D.E. Murphy 1939 telegrams, Box 105 CCC-ID Records, NARA, Washington, D.C.

106. John G. Hunter letters, Box 105 CCC-ID Records, NARA, Washington, D.C.

so prevalent, or where Indian Service employees were subject to the demands from the Indian people for every sort of service.”¹⁰⁷ Indians understood the program was coming to an end. The probability that Indians stole these items is not surprising. The US had always promised the fulfilment of trust responsibility in treaty agreements, providing for their community’s welfare. Indians interpreted these items and more as being owed to them as fulfilment of that trust responsibility. Indians weren’t stealing, they were taking what was owed. This same idea is reminiscent of the ways in which Indians took items from decommissioned outposts in the nineteenth centuries. The Indians at Fort Peck understood that another federal program was coming to an end, and it may be another twenty years before their welfare became part of federal interests. The theft of items from CCC-ID camps is another form of agency that Indians participated in during the New Deal.

107. O.C. Gray, Superintendent of Fort Peck Reservation to John Collier, Commissioner of the BIA, 2 July 1942, box 105 CCC-ID General Records 1933-1941 Fort Peck, NARA, Washington, D.C.

CONCLUSION

Thomas King, in *Cultural Resource Laws and Practice* stated, “Landscapes and their components—particularly plants, animals, and human populations—are also dynamic; they change and this may be challenging to people accustomed to thinking of historical places as a static phenomena[sic].”¹⁰⁸ Native peoples have never been static, although mainstream American culture has placed American Indians into a stereotype frozen in time with head dress and painted ponies. Native peoples have taken the right tool for the job, the right method for production, and adapted to environmental and social change to fit the needs of their time and place. Fort Peck of the 1930s was just that—a fluid space of change with many social facets, environmental and government pressures, and opinions all coalescing into trying to fix the problems of poverty and resource access on the reservation. The Assiniboine and Sioux participated in federal large-scale water projects, not as passive observers, but as active constructors of their environment.

How these historically significant structures should be documented and recognized falls between three concepts of historic preservation: community perspective, themes of historical constructs used to support preservation recognition, and how outside organizations may work with Native peoples and places. Adjacent to Fort Peck Reservation is the much documented and recognized Fort Peck Dam. The dam is lauded as a testament to American engineering and as a pinnacle site of New Deal history, involving tens of thousands of out of work Americans during a time when the country

108. Thomas King, *Cultural Resource Laws and Practice* (Reno: University of Nevada Press, 2013), 272-73.

struggled to get back upon its financial and social feet. As the intricate system of irrigation channels, reservoirs, dams, and springs built on Fort Peck lays within the same framework of recognition, what makes the large-scale water works within Fort Peck Reservation different? Are there different parameters to approaching these structures in preservation theory?

Firstly, community perspective, as in all preservation recognition work, should be examined. An outside observer such as an engineer may stand upon the ground of Fort Peck and readily agree that the irrigation works fall represent a historically significant construction method and thus should be recognized through a national register of historic places nomination. An outside observer such as a social historian may also agree that the works should be recognized because they represent a relationship shift in how American Indians and the federal government worked together for the first time constructing physical forms upon the landscape on a large scale. However attributable to sound preservation theory and supporting national recognition, how does community perspective fit into this schema?

Native peoples on the Fort Peck Reservation, may or may not, attribute importance to these structures in the same way that an outside observer does. Do the Assiniboine and Sioux perceive these water works as a testament to their survival of the Great Depression in the same way as historians have written about the workers engaged in the construction of the Fort Peck Dam? Do the Assiniboine and Sioux share the same perspective when viewing historical engineering works upon their land as an engineer would? When asking the Assiniboine and Sioux about how they perceive the New Deal water works, they may recognize the sites in a similar way, or not recognize them at all.

As historic preservationists, we would need to ask their communities how they interpret these sites and follow their lead. What an outsider to a community sees as important and significant can be different than what the community sees.

The early Fort Peck Irrigation projects “exemplified the naiveté of the federal natural resource policy on tribal lands.”¹⁰⁹ Federal mismanagement of irrigation projects and less than minimum rations pushed the survival of the Fort Peck tribes into decades of even further hardship.¹¹⁰ By the end of the 1880s, the irrigation improvements constructed on the reservation for subsistence gardening and farming had failed and laid unused. The water projects of the New Deal were more successful; however, they changed the way that water was accessed on the reservation, shifted the control of and profit from water to few Indian families and more toward Euro-Americans. As much as the irrigation projects helped, they also thrust upon the peoples of Fort Peck more government interference and presence upon their land. It would not be surprising if the Assiniboine and Sioux did not recognize the significance of these water works in the same way as historic preservationists from outside Native culture.

The gargantuan efforts of completing the largest earth-work dam in the world, Fort Peck Dam, in 1939 lays next to another such effort on Fort Peck Reservation in the irrigation works between 1933 and 1941. How the engineering efforts of the Native workers on Fort Peck should be recognized and documented through the still extant structures lays outside the shadow of the preservation theories of Fort Peck Dam recognition and within the perspective of Fort Peck’s Native communities.

109. Voggesser, 299

110. Ibid.

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