

AMERICAN ASSOCIATION ON INDIAN AFFAIRS, Inc.
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JUSTIFICATION FOR PROPOSED WORK IN THE NORTHERN PLAINS AREA

The work of this Association in the Northern Plains to date has not been impressive. Previous to the union of the two organizations, the American Indian Defense Association had done certain specific pieces of work in this area and Mr. Collier had developed an extensive documentation against the operation of the allotment system, but there has been no consistent drive to improve the existing conditions.

These conditions, almost directly attributable to the allotment system, have also been neglected by the Indian Service, and the complex situation of land holdings with its resultant social and economic implications remain an indictment of our failure to help this large portion of the Indian population.

In the area of the Northern Plains, and the states adjoining it directly east and west live approximately one third of the Indians of the United States. Formerly they had vast territories, and had achieved a simple economy based on the resources of the land. To quote from a recent report of the government, "On the vast reaches of grass covered plains a finely adjusted equilibrium had been established between herds of bison, antelope, and deer on one side, the Indians and predatory carnivora on the other; and the safe carrying capacity of the range on the third side of the triangle."* The effect on this economy of the westward advance of the white man is well known. Confined by force to small areas of land that have been hacked and taken by whites, and broken by an aggressive policy based on individualism, today these Indians are facing poverty and degradation. So far has this disintegrating process gone that in many areas it is doubtful if groups of Indians should be considered as Indians any longer. The neglect of the Northern Plains by the United States government stems from a reluctance on the part of the Indian Administrations to face the failure of the allotment system. Not until Commissioner Rhoads took office was there a recognition of the appalling results of a land policy based on this act, and a need for some immediate change. An additional obstacle to constructive work has been the low standard of Indian Service personnel on the Northern Plains reservations. In recent years there has been an attempt, general throughout the Service, to fill positions with more competent men, but an inefficient residue remains.

There is an immediate need for reform of Indian Service activities in the Northern Plains, and a review of the policies governing social and educational services. The economic problem, however, is fundamental and unless there is some reversal of the present trend towards land poverty, and disuse of land there is little hope for these Indians. Few of the reservations in this area have survived the ravages of the allotment system. Many Indians are virtually landless, and in other parts the character and extent of the division of land renders it useless. Here one finds the inevitable consequences of the allotment of reservations: the great loss of land when reservations were first allotted, the subsequent loss of individual small and scattered holdings. Leasing, that destructive corollary of this system, is also common, and checkerboarded reservations are dominated by white interests owning and leasing key pieces of land. The attitude of the Indian toward his land, and his preference to live on the proceeds of leasing rather than work it himself, is an additional problem which must be faced. The Indian Service has done little to stem this steady flow of Indian land into disuse, and conditions have become increasingly desperate.

* Indian Land Tenure, Economic Status, and Population Trends, 1935.