

Rebuilding Indian Country – 1933

Narrator: Sometimes facts are dull. Popular interest is most easily stirred by the unusual. This perhaps is the reason scarcely one in a thousand knows the true story of the American Indian in relation to his government. It is the strange and the unusual in relation to the Indian which has been painted as permanent adornment for the walls of our public buildings, homes, and art galleries. Even a meager knowledge of Indian facts, and they're by no means dull, must be sought by those who feel them essential to a well-rounded knowledge of public affairs.

The examination of a Mercator projection of the world is not far-fetched as a point of interest in relation to the so-called American Indian. It answers the questions how and why. Archeological and anthropological studies have pretty well established the original seed of human habitation as somewhere in southern Asia. North America's first inhabitants trekked east and north, as the ice cap receded, to cross from the old world to the new in the Bering Straits area. Then down through North America into Central America and perhaps even farther south, before turning back to scatter widely through what is now the United States. There's a definite series of links between these earliest inhabitants and the people Columbus found when he discovered America. Radiation to the west from the same point of beginning was probably responsible for the civilization in the European countries to which Columbus and his contemporaries in the fifteenth century belonged. With a map as visual proof, it is interesting to observe the soundness of the idea Columbus had developed in the face of ridicule as the basis for his history-making voyage. The discovery of a new route to the east, from which spices essential to the countries' food supply were being tediously transported by desert caravans, was the goal of most explorers of the period.

Columbus became the best known exponent of the theory that the Earth is round not flat. And that it followed that at least another and possibly a better way to reach a point known to the east of the place of starting was to travel west. He sailed west from Spain looking for India, which he knew was someplace east. He was absolutely right in his conclusion. If he had not bumped into another continent, the existence of which was unknown to him, and if his mutinous men had permitted him to continue his journey two or three times as far, he would have reached his original objective. India and the islands near it, now known as the East Indies, had been charted. Columbus had a mental picture of what he was looking for. When he landed at San Salvador, discovered it was an island and that there were other islands in the group, he had good reason to believe he had attained his goal, and so the natives found on San Salvador and later on the North American continent were reasonably called Indians. Had the land been immediately recognized as new and named America these natives would have surely been called Americans and all of us who moved in after them would logically have been obliged to recognize their prior claim to our name.

The first treaty between the United States as an organized government and an Indian tribe was made with the Delaware Indians September 17, 1778. In the 93 years which followed – up until March 3, 1871 – numerous similar treaties were signed, many of them negotiated by the studious characters in American history for the consideration of American Congresses, the members of which had personal knowledge of the dangers and problems involved. There are now on the statute books 370 Indian treaties and 2,000 laws relating to Indian affairs. The nation's current Indian policy, partly expressed in the Indian Reorganization Act of June 18, 1934, has three chief objectives: economic rehabilitation of the Indians, principally on land; organization of Indian tribes for managing their own affairs; civic and cultural freedom and opportunity for the Indians.

In these later days, the Indian in relation to the federal government is the story of the Indian Bureau set up under the War Department in 1824, to become 25 years later the Office of Indian Affairs of the Department of the Interior. It's the story of nearly 375,000 people: men, women, and children, in the ordering of whose lives, all citizens of the United States participate in discharge of obligations set up by treaty and by law. Men, women, and children in every state and the District of Columbia, but resident in greatest numbers in the West and Southwest, where 90 percent of the 51 million acres in the country's 265 Indian reservations are situated. It's the story of an outdoor people who live on farms and ranches, in the forests and in the desert. Forest and stream, where abundant wildlife provided everything the hunter needed for his subsistence, are naturally associated with the American Indian. Happily situated are those tribes whose reservations stretched through northern United States from Minnesota west – among them, the Chippewas, formally the Ojibwes, and the Menominees. Now they live in cabins in the same forests their forbears hunted, homes which afford better protection from the region's winters. Many of their poetic beliefs are still marked. Spirit rock has crumbled, but countless generations of Indians who adored it have not crumbled with it nor greatly diminished in numbers.

In readjusting their lives to meet new conditions, many of these Indians of the forest primeval have turned to the timber of today for that other kind of subsistence they must earn. There's a million-dollar lumber mill at Neopit, on the Menominee reservation in Wisconsin, operated largely by Indian labor. Electrically powered, it is modern to the nth degree and has an output of about 22,000,000 feet per year. To this growing generation the forests have a different meaning than they had to their hunting and fishing forefathers. And with this new conception of life have come new problems with which the federal government must help the Indians, just as others are being helped. Forest fires are a constant threat. And among the important improvements in these northerly areas are fire towers and truck trails, the latter as further aids to firefighting as well as links in the transportation system. On the Indian reservations where the government supervision is more effective than on privately owned land, lumbering is conducted along careful lines. Reforestation is scientifically practiced and the campaign against blister rust, greatest enemy of the majestic pine, goes ceaselessly on. Don't look for wild gooseberries and wild currants in a white pine forest which is being properly cared for. They are hosts to bugs which destroy millions of dollars worth of timber annually.

Wood-trimmed lakes of [...] beauty, for which some sections of the United States [...], it will be no shock to encounter in such a [...] a red man of the storybook era long past in a bravely decorated costume such as this one, which the Chippewas wore on ceremonial occasions. With simpler methods the Indians once fished these lakes for food. Now not only food but revenue for their needs and an expanded economic life comes from the waters. In markets far distant from the source of supply, there are fish on sale caught by these Native Americans.

Enjoyment of the beauties of his lake-studded domains [...] to the Indian himself. New good roads open the way for visitors and make the reservation generally accessible. Much of the rebuilding of this Indian country is encompassed in the Civilian Conservation Corps program. Modified to meet the requirements of this homogenous class of more than 350,000 American citizens, in need of the benefits inherent in it, the Corps' plan has been applied on all major reservations. At times there have been as many as 13,500 Indians in the Corps, and over a four-year period 9,000 have been employed [...] in rebuilding and developing the resources of their lands.

Indian enrollees rank with their white brothers in [...] of the arts and crafts which are common to the recreational and avocational programs in all Conservation Corp camps.

Modification of the work plan has made possible close cooperation with other federal agencies to improve Indian housing conditions. Indian houses cannot be constructed or repaired under the CCC program. A separate fund for rehabilitation is used for that purpose. Vehicular and foot bridges have been built with Conservation Corp labor. And the Indian enrollees do a fine job in clearing operations and in the construction of trails and roads. Few of these boys were familiar with heavy machinery but practical training on the job has developed handling skill.

Seen for the first time, the Columbia River in these later days is as interesting as it was when it led the courageous Lewis and Clark expedition on its final drive to the Pacific. Here in the vicinity of The Dalles, we find the Indian again in pursuits with which he seems most naturally identified. Early treaties and many instances ensured to certain tribes of Indians for all time wildlife privileges which are not now enjoyed by others. In the Columbia for instance, the Indian can spearfish but the white man cannot. The seining method used for commercial purposes isn't easy. It takes skill and strength, for a squirming big salmon in a net on the end of a long pole exerts much leverage. Great family interest in this fellow. Seems too big for the family pan. Thirty-five pounds is a lot of fish.

In the Southwest, where forests and streams are the exception and not the rule, there are fine examples of farmer Indians such as the Pimas. They take advantage of unusual climatic conditions to diversify their crops. Here's cotton growing without the aid of its time honored guardian, the southern Negro. But one must remember that these Indians were growing cotton hundreds of years before the arrival of Columbus. Considerable progress also has been made on the cultivation of oranges and other citrus fruits. Federal agricultural experts lend assistance. The same help is being extended to insure better results with more commonplace crops. In some sections agriculture has been developed on a sufficiently large scale to justify the use of modern machinery. Here startling stories are told of fortunes won and lost by those with money enough to put water on this remarkable soil.

Arizona farmhouses and buildings among the Pimas and their neighbors the Papagos may not be familiar as such. But there are stables and horses and happy children and dolls. These Arizona reservations are near southern California where chicken raising has become a major [...] and the Indians are awake to its possibilities. Even the youngsters are being taught the art of selecting individual birds [...] keeping for egg production and those for the family pot. Training for Indian youth also includes the use of woodworking tools. There's significance in the fact that this group is building houses to attract birds not to kill them.

There are lumber mills operated by Indians in conjunction [...] projects. The strong influence of such agencies as the 4-H Club is apparent. These boys are working to earn money to feed pigs which they expect to show in competition. As a part of their well-rounded life in relation to the soil, these Indians graze many cattle. The area's irrigations systems, primarily for agriculture, are serving added purposes in providing better pasture and manmade water holes. Wherever beef cattle are raised there must be roundups and branding. Lessons in these are ones the Indian boys find easy to learn.

In the great Southwest the wind and the rain are vicious and soil erosion is the country's curse. So the rebuilding process, stimulated by the Civilian Conservation Corps, deals chiefly with the correction of these erosion conditions. In natural contours, reservoirs and water holes are being constructed. Stones are hauled miles for riprapping, without which the elements would continue to wreak their havoc and in an hour make a mockery of man's labor for a year. From new reservoirs now comes precious water, caught in times of plenty and stored against the day when all growing things must have it or die. It's sluiced through permanent concrete channels and open ditches, wells bored deep into the bowels of the

earth, some of them a thousand feet. Trackless wastes, once a true description, will not be apt much longer. Roads are breaking down the trackless idea and irrigation projects are turning wastes into productive land.

Weird evidence of the curse of soil erosion is the Monument Valley in the Navajo Country –scenic grandeur to the visitor, ominous warning to those concerned with protecting and improving the range for the Navajo's million sheep. Navajo country. The new Navajo nation – strong, sturdy people with a past as rugged as the high plateaus on which they live. Fewer sheep, better pasture, and diversified farming are the answers to the Navajo's problem. In Fruitland Valley along the San Juan River a new agricultural community is being developed through the construction of an ambitious irrigation system. Five thousands acres of desert are being transformed into fertile fields. In the midst of these acres it is expected there ultimately will be another Navajo community like Shiprock.

There still are to be found Indian dwellings with that sylvan beauty and romantic charm commonly associated with the life of the red man. Generally speaking, however, the Indian housing situation has room for improvement. And through the years there has been constant change for the better. This row of seven cabins was built a long time ago for seven old Indians. Formal houses and Indians are not basically compatible. Before house building can be undertaken, the Indian must be convinced of the superior advantages of the white man's home over the shelters he has found to his liking for so many generations. But the transformation of thought is underway. The new Indian is the Indian in overalls learning masonry and carpentry and the use of the white man's implements. When Indian moves on to a job he moves his wife, his children, and his chickens, and there he camps until the job is done.

Public interest in the art and utility object of fine handicraft produced by Indians is being capitalized in vocational training projects on many reservations. Not only do these projects make for educational training but with a market for the things produced, greatly expanded through increased tourist and general outdoor recreational activities, the training has immediate economic value. There is a marked degree of proficiency among various tribes in the several handicrafts. Museum exhibit pieces of Indian-made basketry have been known to sell for a thousand dollars. The beadwork exhibits the Indian's instinctive appreciation of color and design. Weaving and general textile work recall that in his native state the Indian produced all his implements and accoutrements of living. Blankets – from wool grown on his own sheep, carded, spun, dyed and woven, or from his own cotton plants – were originally produced as a household necessity not for sale to others directly or through traders.

Modern methods of canning and preserving foodstuffs are taught. Food put up in these demonstration kitchens are distributed among the needy and among the growers of the foods.

Most of these educational activities are centered about the Indian community schools. Instruction in first aid is eagerly received particularly by men and boys recently inducted into fields of endeavor far removed from anything they have previously known.

Perhaps most colorful in the life of the Indians, as they live today, are their frequent assemblies, largely for recreation. The annual fair held by the Crows at their central agency in southern Montana is an example. Steer roping and other of the common but interesting rodeo events are prominent on the entertainment program. Horse racing packs a big thrill because the riders are usually lightweight Indian boys who display instinctive reckless ability. Use of automobile tires in old fashion hoop races is a sign of the changing times. And here's the time-honored tug-o-war with struggling Indians on both ends of the rope. There must be ample reference to native religious and ceremonial customs and it comes in

the elaborate exhibition dances. While the federal government's policy, as worked out through contact with the Indians for more than 200 years, is stated as helping the red man to live his own life and manage his own affairs, it is obvious there always must be influence by the majority of inhabitants in the United States to change the habits and customs of the minority. Such influence is intended to be nothing other than helpful, to raise the Indian standard of living, to make him happier and more comfortable.

Effective tools of helpful change are at work. With the aid of the white man, Indians in the United States now have fine schools in which there is available to the youth of the race education comparable to those attended by white children. Where the concentration of population warrants, there are day schools with modern buses to transport pupils. Also numerous consolidated schools, in which all grades including high school, are taught. Vocational training, as practical preparation for future living, is emphasized. Splendid hospitals are provided and in addition a field health service is in operation. The latter is effective in teaching modern sanitation and those careful habits of living which will eradicate the diseases of the Indians including tuberculosis and the dreadful trachoma, disease of the eye. Religious influence is tolerantly applied. The Indian, like any other citizen of the United States, is allowed to worship as he pleases.

If there ever was any justification for the term "the vanishing race" in relation to the American Indian, not only is it not true now but nothing in the formulated policy of the Office of Indian Affairs is a threat against the Indian's development in the future to a position of dignity and prominence in world affairs.