

## An Assessment of The Indian Reorganization Act and the Civilian Conservation Corps - Indian Division

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*Native Americans living on reservations were severely affected by the Great Depression in the 1930s. Many of them were already in poverty before the stock markets crashed, and the ensuing recession further limited their economic opportunities. The US Federal Government funded two separate programs intended to aid Native Americans: the Indian Division of the Civilian Conservation Core (CCC-ID) from 1933 to 1942, and the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA) of 1934. The IRA's goal was to help the Native Americans to regulate and govern themselves without outside influence from the Federal Government, but it failed to do so in any lasting way. The CCC-ID's main purpose was to aid the Native Americans economically, and it succeeded, along with accomplishing many goals of the IRA inadvertently. This paper argues that the CCC-ID was more helpful than the IRA in restoring Native American culture, tribal identity, and self-governance than the IRA.*



In 1933, Congress formed the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) to combat the poverty and unemployment brought about by the Great Depression. The Indian Division of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC-ID) was formed shortly after, and, like the CCC, became a very popular and successful program. Similarly, in 1934, an official act was passed by Congress to address the

“problem” of Native Americans.<sup>1</sup> This legislation, the Indian Reorganization Act (IRA), was the brainchild of John Collier, a reformer and activist for Native Americans. He intended to undo decades of assimilation of Native American tribes into US culture. Part of his plan included sponsoring a “by-Indians-for-Indians” magazine called *Indians at Work*. While the CCC-ID's primary purpose was the same as the “regular”<sup>2</sup> CCC, it ended up doing more to promote the un-assimilation of Native Americans than the IRA would ever accomplish. The Indian Division of the Civilian Conservation Corps was more beneficial to Native Americans than the Indian Reorganization Act in many areas, such as agriculture, medicine, Native American culture, and politics.

## Historical Setting

In 1928, the Institute for Government Research (IGR) created an official government report to assess the Native American “problem.” This report, called the Meriam Report after the head survey member, revealed the truly sorry state of Native American reservations. Despite the dramatic rise in standards of living all across the US during the “roaring twenties,” the status of the average Native American was poorer than that of all the other people groups living in the US. Much of this was due to the dismal health conditions caused by a lack of hospitals, uneducated doctors, and debilitating housing. Along with poor health, poor education, high crime rates, and low-income rates, each contributed to the slow and steady degradation of Native American society. Many Native Americans were jobless even before the unemployment crisis of the Great Depression. When the crisis did come, Native Americans were among the first groups of people to be fired. Adding to all of this was the failure of the US government's assimilation policy, under which many tribes remained only partially assimilated. According to the Meriam Report, these people were far worse off than those who had not been assimilated and even worse off than those who had been fully assimilated.<sup>3</sup>

Perhaps prompted by the results of the Meriam Report, the Office of Indian Affairs published a magazine called *Indians at Work* from 1933 to 1945, which provided an overview of the work being done by and on the behalf of Native Americans.<sup>4</sup> It was a bi-monthly (and later monthly) collection of articles by various authors, both white and Native American, written mainly

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<sup>1</sup> Many Native Americans today refer to themselves as “Indians” or “American Indians,” however many find it insulting to be called such a name by a non-Native American. This paper will refer to them as “Native Americans” wherever possible.

<sup>2</sup> “Regular” is referring to the non-Native American CCC.

<sup>3</sup> Lewis Meriam, *The Problem of Indian Administration* (Washington DC, Institute for Government Research, 1928).

<sup>4</sup> *Indians at Work* is one of my major sources for this paper; the other is Graham Taylor: *The New Deal and American Indian Tribalism: the administration of the Indian Reorganization Act, 1934-1945* (Lincoln, Nebraska: University of Nebraska Press, 1980). This is an overview of the IRA, along with its creation and implementation. Taylor was a history professor at the University of Pennsylvania who specialized in Native American history. While the book is mostly unbiased, it does tend to be a little soft on the few Native Americans who created problems for everyone, such as the feuding between half-blooded Native Americans and full-blooded Native Americans.

for Native Americans on tribal reservations. In every issue (except the last one) an editorial written by John Collier preceded the magazine's content. While Collier usually focused on the CCC-ID events and news, it also covered many other topics related to Native Americans in general, celebrating various events and following news stories concerning Native Americans. The magazine has an obvious bias towards the CCC-ID, praising the workers and their accomplishments, but it does not appear to have misrepresented facts.<sup>5</sup>

### **The Indian Reorganization Act**

The basic intention of the Indian Reorganization Act was to help Native Americans. John Collier had been an activist for Native American rights ever since his 1920 visit to a Pueblo reservation in New Mexico.<sup>6</sup> There he became enthralled with the idea of an independent, self-governed and self-reliant population of Native Americans in the US.<sup>7</sup> From then on he spent his time advocating the abolishment of laws he deemed harmful to Native Americans, such as the Dawes Act, which allowed the Federal Government to allot land from Native American reservations to anyone of their choosing. Due to Collier's initial attempts at improving the status of Native Americans, president Franklin D. Roosevelt elected Collier the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1933. Collier planned to aid Native Americans by "...the development of Indian economic resources and the restoration of Indian self-determination through the revival of tribal governments,"<sup>8</sup> un-assimilating<sup>9</sup> the Native Americans from US culture while encouraging their (the Native Americans') own, and decreasing US federal control over Native American tribes by increasing their own governments' autonomy. This would both allow the Native Americans to set their laws as well as remove the Native Americans' poor estate from Federal responsibility.

On paper, the Indian Reorganization Act was to start a revolution in US-Native relations. In practice, very few of John Collier's ideas ever went through as planned. For example, a major component of giving Native Americans more autonomy was new tribal constitutions, specially tailored to best serve each reservation. However, Collier found that making every constitution custom-fit for each tribe was too large of a job for the IRA to handle.<sup>10</sup> Instead, several broad templates were created, and minor adjustments were made to meet the reservation's situation. This was far more effective in getting the constitutions down on paper, but it angered many tribes who

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<sup>5</sup> Although I have not found a reliable source that directly evaluates the integrity of *Indians at Work*, the fact that it lasted as long as it did suggests that it did work enough to merit continued funding. Many of the buildings built by the CCC-ID are still standing as well.

<sup>6</sup> Taylor, *New Deal and Tribalism*, 12.

<sup>7</sup> Taylor, 12.

<sup>8</sup> Taylor, xi-xii.

<sup>9</sup> Collier had no assumptions that the Native Americans would ever again be fully removed from US culture, but he intended to undo as much of the past assimilation as he could. Taylor, xi-xii.

<sup>10</sup> Taylor, 28-29.

had different needs and wants than their neighbors.<sup>11</sup>

While Collier had the best of intentions, the practical implementation of the new laws was far from ideal. Many Native Americans had been fully or mostly assimilated into US culture and had no wish to return to the old ways of tribal government. Alongside this was the reluctance of many Native Americans, assimilated or not, to give up their property rights. Traditionally, Native Americans viewed the land as a gift to everyone, and the idea that one individual could possess any amount of land was a completely foreign concept that was eventually introduced to them by the arrival of Europeans. But when individual Native Americans began to own property, it gave them much more power in terms of access to food and other resources than their fellow tribe members. “Landed” Native Americans were opposed to returning control of their land to the whole tribe. Several entire reservations, such as the Klamath tribe of Oregon, unanimously rejected the IRA as a tribe.<sup>12</sup> The Klamath tribe was one of the most fully landed tribes in the northwest at the time. These landed Native Americans were among the most vehement opponents to the re-implementation of tribal laws on their reservations.

Another major problem with the new constitutions was the conflict between full and “half-blooded”<sup>13</sup> Native Americans. In 1937 on the Tongue River reservation, a council of “full-blood” Native Americans submitted an official report to take several hundred mixed-race Native Americans off of “the roll” (probably the federal aid list).<sup>14</sup> These issues contributed to a very lackluster implementation of Collier's original plan.

Despite these internal conflicts, an enduring accomplishment of the Indian Reorganization Act was that it rekindled many Native Americans' sense of tribal identity.<sup>15</sup> Although this had little (if any) impact on the living conditions on reservations, it slowly encouraged a small resurgence of Native American art and traditions.<sup>16</sup> A great example of this was the Blackfeet Renaissance, which began in the summer of 1936 on the Blackfeet reservation in Montana. A small group of Native American women led by the reservation's community manager, Mrs. Jessie Schultz, created traditional Blackfeet garments to be sold at a nearby camp event. These clothes, sold to both Native Americans and white tourists, became very popular items. This initial success led to the construction of an official craft house where many other traditional Blackfeet items, such as spears, dolls, moccasins, and jackets, were manufactured and sold.<sup>17</sup>

Despite Collier's good intentions, the IRA did not achieve the success he had envisioned.

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<sup>11</sup> Taylor, 73-75.

<sup>12</sup> Taylor, 33.

<sup>13</sup> A derogatory term used by “full-blood” Native Americans to describe members of the tribe who did not have an unbroken line of Native American ancestry. This was a common (though insulting) description in the early twentieth century.

<sup>14</sup> Taylor, *New Deal and Tribalism*, 104.

<sup>15</sup> Calvin Gower, “The CCC Indian Division: Aid for Depressed Americans, 1933-1942,” *Minnesota Historical Society Press*, (1972): 3-13.

<sup>16</sup> *Indians at Work*, Volume 7 Issue 7 (Bureau of Indian Affairs, 1933-1942).

<sup>17</sup> *Indians at Work*, Volume 5 Issue 10.

While the individual reasons are far more complicated, most of them can be traced back to resistance from many whites BIA officials and even some Native Americans.<sup>18</sup> Another reason was the well-meaning but incorrect assumptions made by Collier about how Native American tribes would react to the IRA. It was a common misconception that once Native Americans were given all the rights and freedoms provided by the act that they would quickly and easily adapt to the more “natural” situation.<sup>19</sup> However, as seen with the many tribes who rejected the IRA, this was not a universally shared Native American value.

By far the most prominent reason for the IRA's failure came directly from those who implemented it, both Native Americans and white officials. In *The New Deal and American Indian Tribalism*, Graham Taylor explains one of the fundamental flaws of the act:

...members of the Indian Organization Division and the Interior Department legal staff under Collier and Ickes sought to give tribes the maximum degree of freedom possible in matters of internal regulatory powers. The weakness of this system was that it depended on the attitudes and flexibility of bureau officials in interpreting the limits of tribal constitutions...<sup>20</sup>

Because the IRA relied on traveling down a staircase of officials and bureaucrats, by the time any new law reached the level of the reservation, it was a pale imitation of the original law.<sup>21</sup> This severely limited the level of self-governance that Native Americans could achieve, as on many reservations some prejudiced officials in charge of the application of the IRA would amend it as they saw fit.<sup>22</sup> Taylor goes on to describe the failure of the act in financial terms: “Whatever the intentions of Collier and his associates in the bureau, they did not, in practice, promote the development of tribal self-determination in the crucial area of fiscal responsibility”.<sup>23</sup>

### **The Civilian Conservation Corps – Indian Division**

The Indian Division of the Civilian Conservation Corps, known until 1937 as the Indian Emergency Conservation Works (IECW), was created to reduce unemployment on Native American reservations. A secondary objective was to give specific job training to Native Americans so that in the future they could have employment beyond the CCC-ID.<sup>24</sup> Focusing on the same issues as the “regular” CCC, Native Americans were sent to clear land, build trails, dams,

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<sup>18</sup> Taylor, *New Deal and Tribalism*, 149.

<sup>19</sup> Meriam, *Indian Administration*.

<sup>20</sup> Taylor, 105.

<sup>21</sup> Taylor, 149.

<sup>22</sup> Taylor, 149.

<sup>23</sup> Taylor, 111-112.

<sup>24</sup> Gower, “CCC Indian Division.”

and cabins, and fight fires.<sup>25</sup> It also, like the IRA, aimed to allow Native Americans to become more self-reliant in terms of business and administration.<sup>26</sup> Another problem that the CCC-ID sought to address was the terrible state of the Native Americans' general health through the education of CCC-ID workers on basic first aid and the construction of on-reservation hospitals.<sup>27</sup>

The CCC-ID set out to provide jobs to unemployed Native Americans and to improve the quality of life on reservations, and it accomplished both of its goals. Less than two months after the CCC-ID was funded, over 15,000 Native Americans had been employed by the new organization. It was unclear how many Native Americans had steady jobs during the first half of the twentieth century, but less than half of all working-age men were probably employed.<sup>28</sup> By the CCC-ID's deactivation in 1942, it had employed over 85,000 Native Americans or around 25% of all Native Americans living in the US.<sup>29</sup> The transferal of administration duties from white to Native American officials also took place over time, although slowly. By 1934 Native Americans held over 752 managerial positions out of 1,268 in the CCC-ID.<sup>30</sup> As for the quality of life, the CCC-ID's "Rehabilitation" program was one of their most successful undertakings in reservation improvement. It created a standard housing plan to help create livable homes for the many Native Americans who lived in temporary, makeshift huts made of whatever materials they could scrounge.<sup>31</sup>

In contrast to the CCC-ID's empowerment of Native Americans, under the IRA's administration, most Native American officials had very little power over their tribes. A tribal council was sponsored by the IRA so that the tribe felt more autonomous. Council members were hand-picked by IRA officials from important men in the tribe. While the tribe council was populated entirely by Native Americans, they often only represented small constituencies in the tribe, and most of the tribe's population remained unrepresented or were represented by white governors. This was seen on the Flathead Reservation in Montana, where the tribal council represented less than ten percent of the tribe's population.<sup>32</sup> This means that the other 90% of Native Americans on the reservation were not being represented by other Native Americans, but by white BIA officials who were not on the council.<sup>33</sup>

Hundreds of other construction projects were completed by the CCC-ID, most on Native American reservations. The *Indians at Work* magazine was an excellent source for these and lists a large collection of projects throughout the issues. For example, in Pipe Stone, Minnesota, a large

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<sup>25</sup> *Indians at Work*, Volume 2 Issue 2.

<sup>26</sup> *Indians at Work*, Volume 2 Issue 19.

<sup>27</sup> Gower, "CCC Indian Division."

<sup>28</sup> Information from Meriam Report statistics.

<sup>29</sup> Gower, "CCC Indian Division."

<sup>30</sup> Gower.

<sup>31</sup> *Indians at Work*, Volume 6 Issue 1.

<sup>32</sup> Taylor, *New Deal and Tribalism*, 86.

<sup>33</sup> Taylor, 86.

community center was built for the Native Americans on the reservation.<sup>34</sup> In Pine Ridge, South Dakota, CCC-ID workers “...built a dam, set up a windmill and dug a well.”<sup>35</sup> These three projects allow the tribespeople to regulate river flooding, grind corn and wheat, and have access to safe water right in their town. Also, in Pine Ridge, a dam was constructed that successfully provided water to the farms near the reservation.<sup>36</sup> In Nett Lake, Minnesota, an on-reservation hospital was built by the CCC-ID workers. At Rice Lake, also in Minnesota, a large rice-farming camp was built for a village of 1,500 Native Americans.<sup>37</sup>

Fire-fighting was very important in the West, where many reservations were located in fire-prone areas. In one instance, described by the very first issue of *Indians at Work*, Native Americans worked around the clock for nearly forty-two hours to extinguish a large forest fire on the Fort Belknap reservation in Montana.<sup>38</sup> Along with the heroics of large-scale fire-fighting, every CCC-ID detachment in the West worked on some form of fire-prevention project. The CCC-ID even set up small schools to train Native Americans in the specifics of sustainable modern forestry methods.<sup>39</sup>

Unlike the IRA, the CCC-ID sought to address and solve problems that affected the everyday life of Native Americans. Life on reservations was often difficult, mainly because so many lived in poverty.<sup>40</sup> Because of this, there was always some project or problem that needed a solution that the Native American residents were unable to provide for themselves with their limited resources. Many reservations had very little or poor access to medical services.<sup>41</sup> The CCC-ID built hospitals, such as the facility on the Nett Lake reservation mentioned above. It also helped the Native Americans improve in the area of agriculture by aiding in techniques and constructing equipment. They also constructed farming facilities, such as the rice camps at Rice Lake, mentioned above. As a result of the CCC-ID’s financial support and organization, Native Americans living on many reservations were able to vastly improve their quality of life.

The practical issues of construction and conservation were more readily solvable than trying to reverse decades of cultural assimilation of Native Americans into the US culture. Additionally, while there was heavy resistance for Collier's IRA proposal in Congress, the CCC-ID received the green light shortly after Congress approved regular CCC.<sup>42</sup> Native American tribes loved the CCC-ID almost universally, while many of those same tribes resisted the IRA.<sup>43</sup> This was most likely due to the IRA directly affecting the tribal governments, whether for better or

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<sup>34</sup> *Indians at Work*, Volume 5 Issue 6.

<sup>35</sup> *Indians at Work*, Volume 6 Issue 2.

<sup>36</sup> *Indians at Work*, Volume 6 Issue 1.

<sup>37</sup> Gower, “CCC Indian Division.”

<sup>38</sup> *Indians at Work*, Volume 1 Issue 1.

<sup>39</sup> *Indians at Work*, Volume 7 Issue 12.

<sup>40</sup> Meriam, *Indian Administration*, all pages.

<sup>41</sup> Meriam, all pages.

<sup>42</sup> Gower, “CCC Indian Division.”

<sup>43</sup> Such as the Klamath tribe mentioned above.

worse. So, while the IRA and the CCC-ID shared many goals in improving the Native American's status, the CCC-ID left the government of the Native Americans for the Native Americans to sort out.

While the CCC-ID was officially a subdivision of the “regular” CCC, in reality, it operated more like a parallel program. Regular CCC officials had little or nothing to do with CCC-ID administration, as tribal leaders (assisted by the BIA)<sup>44</sup> chose projects.<sup>45</sup> Unlike the “regular” CCC, Native American divisions often worked on their land. This allowed much-needed direct federal aid to be given to reservations, without any red tape getting in the way. This was almost a complete opposite of the IRA's handling of similar situations, as problems created by uncooperative officials would often slow implementation of the new laws down to a crawl.<sup>46</sup>

One example of this can be seen in the building of work camps on Native American reservations. Camps that were away from their homes were built on a situational basis, depending on how far away the worksite was to be. When camps were built, they usually were constructed to accommodate the Native American worker's entire family, as the directors of the CCC-ID assumed that most Native Americans would not work if they were separated from their relatives for too long. They were free to return to their homes at any time, to take care of any domestic issues, or to tend to the harvest. This was especially important because the little agriculture that the Native Americans did was often their only source of income (outside of CCC-ID payments). If they chose to live in a camp away from home, their pay was \$30.00 a month. If they lived at home, it was \$2.10 a day with a maximum of \$42.00 a month.<sup>47</sup> Workers in the “regular” CCC did not have a choice, as residence in on-site camps was mandatory. The choice of living in a camp or at home gave the Native Americans a greater sense of autonomy compared to non-native workers.

Another significant difference between the two organizations was who was able to join. In the “regular” CCC, the only men who qualified for enrollment had to be unmarried and between the ages of eighteen and twenty-five. Native American workers could be of any age, as long as they were physically fit, and their marital status was not a factor. And while “regular” CCC workers would often not see their families for their entire employment, Native American workers could live with their families while they worked. All in all, due to the circumstances seen by CCC administrators, the Indian Division was given a much more flexible employment program than the “regular” CCC.<sup>48</sup>

## Conclusion

The Indian Division of the Civilian Conservation Corps more successfully aided Native

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<sup>44</sup> The Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) was the highest administration level in the US government concerning Indian affairs.

<sup>45</sup> Cody White, “The CCC Indian Division” (National Archives, 2016), single page.

<sup>46</sup> Taylor, *New Deal and Tribalism*, 148-149.

<sup>47</sup> Gower, “CCC Indian Division,” 3-11.

<sup>48</sup> Gower.

Americans than the Indian Reorganization Act. Although the IRA was well-meaning, its officials failed to effectively put the law into practice.<sup>49</sup> There were several reasons for this, such as the resistance from both white and some Native American groups, as well as a flawed method of implementation. Conversely, the CCC-ID was successful in nearly all of its tasks. Granted, the CCC-ID's tasks were much simpler than the total reversal of decades of US-Native American policy. But because they were simpler, they were more achievable, as the CCC-ID completed many hospitals, dams, roads, houses, and schools. These projects had a much greater and more positive impact on Native Americans.

Unfortunately, the CCC-ID was shut down along with the regular CCC in 1942 as the US prepared for war. Its sudden deactivation was a terrible blow to the morale of Native Americans. Their monthly paychecks, however small, were helpful in more ways than just financially. Like other Americans, the Native Americans wanted to work and feel proud of themselves, and without the CCC-ID bringing jobs onto reservations, many Native Americans fell back into perpetual unemployment.<sup>50</sup>

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<sup>49</sup> The Hopi, a Pueblo people in Arizona were a very isolated and unique Native American tribe, with specific issues and needs. But under the IRA, they were treated the same as the other Pueblo tribes, leading to an almost harmful shift in life for the Hopi people. Taylor, *New Deal and Tribalism*, 74.

<sup>50</sup> Taylor, 74.