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Teresa M. Houser

*University of Nebraska at Omaha*

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# NEW DEAL EXPERIMENTATION AND THE POLITICAL ECONOMY OF THE YANKTON SIOUX, 1930–1934

TERESA M. HOUSER

*There is no investment more certain of increased returns than South Dakota farm lands.*  
—1925 South Dakota Immigration Department circular<sup>1</sup>

Franklin Delano Roosevelt's election to the presidency in 1932 signaled a mandate for sweeping reform at the federal level to lift the nation out of the economic turbulence of the Great Depression. Under Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA) joined other agencies in launching policies to rebuild economic stability. Much of the scholarship on the Indian New Deal to date necessarily focuses on the centerpiece of Collier's reform efforts: the

Indian Reorganization Act (IRA). But prior to tribal consideration of the IRA, the Roosevelt administration undertook a series of steps in an attempt to mitigate the most dramatic losses experienced by individuals in rural America. These early short-term relief measures played an important role in Native American perception of Collier's larger efforts. Study of these measures also provides important lessons for scholars to use in evaluating the positive and negative effects of the Indian New Deal in its entirety.

The initial phase of New Deal experimentation involved attempts to provide short-term assistance through relief programs and employment projects such as the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). When these programs are studied, it is frequently from the vantage point of policy decisions made in Washington. For an accurate and complete historical picture, New Deal scholarship also must evaluate the actual effects in different communities and the response to federal initiatives at the grassroots level. In examining the experiences of particular communities—both Indian and white—it becomes apparent that these

Key Words: Charles Mix County, Civilian Conservation Corps, Great Depression, New Deal, South Dakota

*Teresa M. Houser teaches in the History and Political Science Departments at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. Her published research has focused on studies of the Indian New Deal.*

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federal interventions often did not address the unique complications that local political or economic circumstances presented. For that reason, well-intended policies frequently fell short of achieving meaningful short-term gains, as this case study of the Yankton Sioux Reservation demonstrates. In this example, New Deal policies also complicated for decades the political and economic development of the tribe.

The Yankton Sioux entered the 1930s in a state of poverty, without feasible alternatives to improve their economic situation. Through a series of nineteenth-century treaties, they had ceded over 96 percent of their lands, reluctantly concluding that reservation life was the only viable option for securing a future for the tribe. The severe cultural transition associated with their settlement on the reservation, which began in 1859, meant an abrupt abandonment of their nomadic lifestyle and increased pressure for their assimilation into the white world. The Yankton collective economy—for centuries based on hunting, gathering, and strong trade relations—was supposed to magically transform itself after individuals were assigned plots of land that often proved to be unsuited for agricultural success.

As that experiment failed, Yanktons became ever more dependent upon government rations. When the guaranteed provisions ceased to arrive in a timely fashion, the people's situation worsened, and in order to survive, they were forced to lease or sell their land. A 1930 survey reported that they already had relinquished control of 90 percent of their original reservation area.<sup>2</sup> Repeatedly, Yanktons were taken advantage of by corrupt government officials, unscrupulous land speculators, bankers, and merchants, just as their nineteenth-century ancestors had been. The population was devastated further by illnesses such as tuberculosis and smallpox. By the end of the 1920s, most residents endured horrible living conditions, widespread food shortages, and a lack of employment opportunities. Conditions only deteriorated further with the onset of the nation's most significant economic disaster (Fig. 1).

#### CHARLES MIX COUNTY CONFRONTS THE GREAT DEPRESSION

The Great Depression was a time of crisis and change. American society struggled through a historic economic collapse, which was especially severe in the Great Plains. Economic difficulties that began in the 1920s for agricultural communities grew to catastrophic proportions during the Great Depression and were combined with a series of environmental challenges brought on by drought and windstorms that rendered many communities incapable of recovery. The hardship was so severe that during a 1933 inspection tour of Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA) efforts, Lorena Hickok declared the Dakotas to be "the Siberia of the United States," and she found South Dakota to be the more destitute of the two.<sup>3</sup> Thirty-nine percent of South Dakota's population received public assistance, the highest rate for any state, and the state's 7.2 percent population decline also led the nation.<sup>4</sup>

Among the hardest hit South Dakota areas was Charles Mix County, located in the south-central part of the state, on the east side of the Missouri River and just north of the Nebraska border. According to the 1930 census, this county reported a population of 16,703 residents. Of those, 11,374 residents, or nearly 70 percent of the county, identified themselves as farmers.<sup>5</sup> The Yankton Sioux Reservation was and still is located in Charles Mix County, and the experience of these particular county residents reveals the difficulties inherent in federal Indian policy during this troubled era (Fig. 2).

Between 1920 and 1930, South Dakota real estate values fell by 58 percent.<sup>6</sup> Farm income in South Dakota declined more than anywhere else in the United States, falling 68 percent between 1929 and 1933.<sup>7</sup> Private, local, state, and federal relief efforts provided support in the years to follow, but these attempts to mitigate the crisis contributed insufficient resources to reverse losses. Table 1 illustrates the changes experienced by farmers in Charles Mix County during the 1930s.<sup>8</sup>

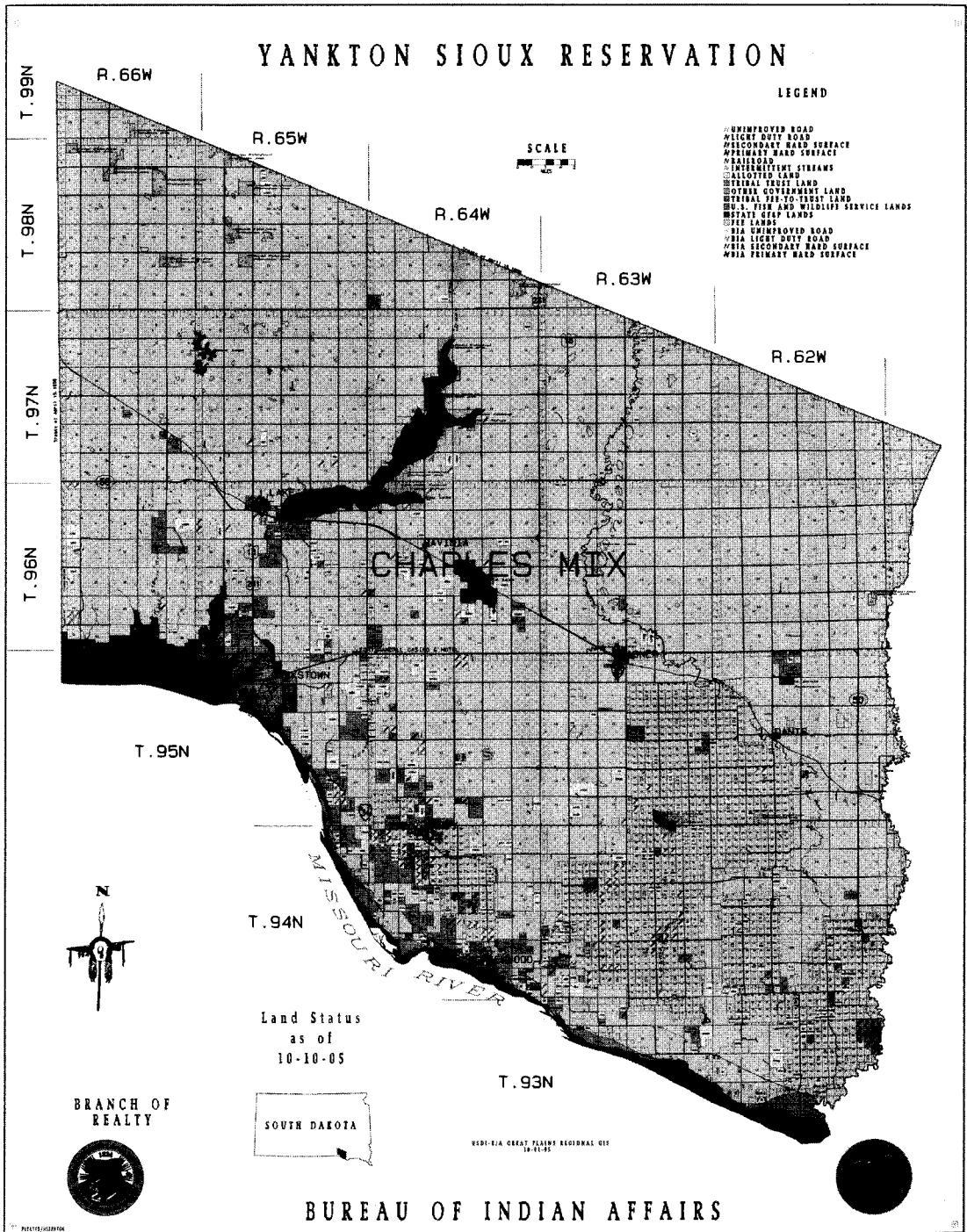


FIG. 1. Map of Yankton Sioux Reservation. All maps used with permission from the National Archives.

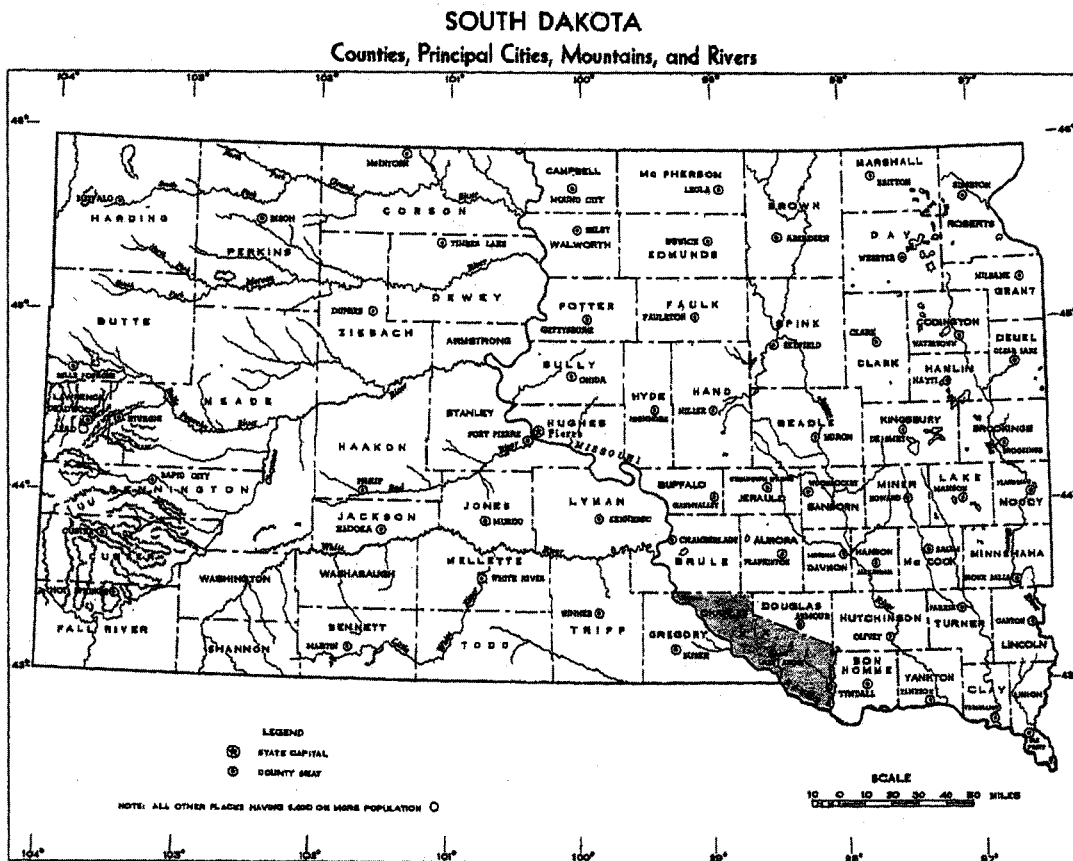


FIG. 2. Location of Charles Mix County, South Dakota (shaded area).

As the table shows, pressures did not ease for the majority of the population. As years of crop failures followed one after another, farmers left behind land, loans, and tax debts owed to the local government.<sup>9</sup> By 1940 this county had experienced a population decline of 19 percent. The decision to give up farming and leave their land was very difficult for white farmers, but for Yankton Sioux living on the reservation, alternatives were even more limited.

During World War I and in the immediate postwar period, available markets for agricultural produce had expanded and the prices paid in those markets had increased. Between 1916 and 1919, farm income nearly doubled.<sup>10</sup> Recognizing an economic boom, farmers had taken on additional debt to boost production.

But the boom went bust early in the 1920s when the overseas market for U.S. goods contracted and prices for agricultural commodities dropped. By 1922, wheat sold for merely one-third of what it had only two years earlier on the Minneapolis market.<sup>11</sup> Falling land values and commodity prices forced farmers to reduce operational costs, leading to decreased sales for local businesses and fewer job opportunities in rural communities.<sup>12</sup>

As prices for agricultural products sank, prices for non-farm items remained constant, adding stress to rural families' budgets.<sup>13</sup> Many farmers and farm communities relied on increased credit to sustain themselves economically. Banks, which had multiplied due to the ease of obtaining charters and the relatively

TABLE 1  
CHANGES IN FARMING IN CHARLES MIX COUNTY FROM 1930 TO 1940

	1930	1940
Number of farms	2,241	1,927
Average size of farm in acres	296.5	345.5
Number of farms reporting harvested acres (total acreage)	2,210 (435,163)	1,724 (239,589)
Number of farms reporting crop failures (total acreage)	155 (7,206)	1,342 (134,868)
Number of farms reporting idle land (total acreage)	181 farms (6,811)	648 farms (24,723)
Average value of farms (including land and buildings)	\$18,379.80 (\$61.99 per acre)	\$5,154.91 (\$14.92 per acre)
Number of fully owned farms	574	338
Number of partly owned farms*	588	417
Number of farms run by managers	6	3
Number of farms operated by tenants	1,073 (48%)	1,169 (61%)

Source: U.S. Census of Agriculture, Sixteenth Census, 1940.

\*The U.S. Census Bureau defines a "partly owned" farm as one being operated on lands both owned by the farmer and rented by the farmer from others.

low levels of cash reserves required to function, overcommitted themselves in extending credit and were unable to meet obligations. When the banks unsuccessfully attempted to collect on loans, they were forced to close, which created tremendous financial hardship for both depositors and those who relied upon the banks' credit.<sup>14</sup> Overproduction, drop in prices, shortage of jobs, overextension of credit, bank failures, and tax delinquencies were the economic backdrop to the story of Charles Mix County in the early 1930s.

Signs of increasing economic trouble appeared as the new decade opened. While evidencing an upbeat tone in early 1931, the county newspaper described the rail carload shipments from the Geddes station for 1930. After quantities of livestock and crops were detailed, the editor summarized, "566 carloads forwarded and only 195 carloads less than forwarded in 1929."<sup>15</sup> It is notable that a 26

percent drop in productivity was optimistically reported as "only." Businesses ranging from the railroad to automobile stations to the town bakery began to advertise reductions in prices or services (including the newspaper reducing its size by half) or to list new ownership. The Lions Club set out to raise seventy-five dollars in private donations for the Red Cross relief effort in Arkansas but raised only twenty-three dollars from nineteen individuals, with the newspaper reporting that many said they "could not spare the money right now."<sup>16</sup>

By 1932 the optimism previously represented in the paper's editorials gave way to resignation that the county's residents needed assistance. Initial relief efforts came from private organizations. Railroad cars delivered donated feed to Charles Mix County from as far away as Hope, Arkansas.<sup>17</sup> The Red Cross organized the distribution of garden seed packets and a supply of seed potatoes.<sup>18</sup> Jennie Grant, the local home

extension agent, published a series of columns in the *Lake Andes Wave* indicating ways that wheat, one of the county's most significant commodities, could be substituted for starch in recipes.<sup>19</sup>

Yet private relief efforts and cutting corners did not meet the needs of communities as the economic situation continued to deteriorate. The price of wheat dropped as low as twenty-four cents per bushel at some South Dakota elevators by 1932.<sup>20</sup> As students prepared to return to school in the fall, the local superintendent announced that three schools would have to close because of a lack of tax revenue.<sup>21</sup> Seventy percent of those allowed to reopen would adhere to the usual nine-month schedule, but the rest would begin a week late and only operate for eight months due to the shortage of funds. Additionally, teachers' salaries were reduced by 20 to 40 percent.<sup>22</sup>

The community continued to seek ways to address a situation now beyond its ability to remedy. The county board acquired a farmhouse and moved it near the courthouse to accommodate the county poor.<sup>23</sup> Sadly, front-page news now included reports of local suicides brought on by the dire financial situation. Through a proclamation of the mayor and the city council in March 1933, the City of Lake Andes no longer collected outstanding water accounts. When an account became delinquent, water service would be automatically shut off. To have service turned on again, a resident then had to pay an additional fifty-cent fee.<sup>24</sup> That same week, the Farm Holiday movement staged a successful demonstration to prevent foreclosure of a farm mortgage.<sup>25</sup>

County leaders recognized that with crop production down and no one hiring workers, the Yankton Sioux were especially facing a dire state. Early in 1931, the Charles Mix County commission unanimously adopted a "Resolution Relative to Indian Employment." In it, commissioners noted that more than 300 able-bodied Yankton men, 250 of whom were heads of households, had no means to support themselves or their families. They calculated that this translated into about 1,350

Yanktons who had no means of support.<sup>26</sup> Given that the total Yankton population at this time was 2,038, their estimate meant that approximately two-thirds of Yanktons were without means to support themselves. If the figure for the number of Yanktons residing on the reservation—1,475—is used instead, the result increases to 92 percent of the reservation population who lacked basic support.<sup>27</sup>

Commissioners described the men as willing but unable to work, emphasizing that work could not be found in the county at that time. Moreover, since the county was already over-committed financially, county officials could not offer assistance. The resolution instead asserted that the U.S. government should be addressing the needs of the Indians since they were more a federal responsibility. It affirmed the need for "a considerable amount of road work" to be done on the reservation and in lands leading to it, and further stressed how Congress was making appropriations to provide some relief for works projects in other parts of the country. The county commission therefore resolved to request that the South Dakota congressional delegation secure no less than \$20,000 in federal funds to assist the Yanktons with such employment.<sup>28</sup>

#### YANKTON SIOUX SEEK MEANS TO ADDRESS ECONOMIC CHALLENGES

Yankton people desperately needed strong leadership to develop and pursue a plan for relief from their dire situation. But all the tribe's prior difficulties had only deepened friction among tribal factions. For years, government agents had diminished the role of the band chiefs in reservation life, instead recognizing appointed representatives who were likely to support federal policy. Those adhering to traditional culture resented the interference by government authorities in tribal organization, and they gave no respect to the authority of such appointees, whom they considered to be puppets of the federal government. The "progressives" resented "traditionalists" for being unwilling to cooperate with federal

officials whom the progressives thought could provide some relief from the tribe's difficulties.

Limited tribal cohesion was achieved for a time during the 1920s. A petition to the U.S. Court of Claims signaled the possibility of winning compensation for Yankton interests in the Black Hills and for their claim to the sacred Pipestone Quarry of Minnesota. Thus in 1924, the adult males of the tribe voted to create the nine-member Yankton Sioux Claims Committee, comprised of both traditionalists and progressives.<sup>29</sup> Although pursuit of compensation was important, the claims committee focused solely on that effort. A tribal government that could develop plans to address the extensive poverty issues, or to serve as a voice to U.S. government officials about their difficulties, did not officially exist in the eyes of federal authorities.

Since U.S. officials were posted on the reservation, it is not that they were unaware of the economic circumstances faced by the tribe. Instead, agency superintendents through the mid- to late 1920s seemed to believe that ample opportunities existed for Yanktons to improve their lot, but they chose not to do so. Annual reports from 1923 through 1927 expressed the view that employment opportunities were available, but Yanktons refused to pursue them. Rather than seek a means through which to create jobs, Superintendent R. E. L. Daniel claimed in 1927 that there was no need to develop roads on the reservation because the county could do so. The following year, he again insisted that it was possible for Yanktons to successfully farm, but they would not. He concurrently abolished their annual fair because it allegedly had been taken over by "moral degenerates."<sup>30</sup>

In 1928 the Meriam Report was released, which raised national awareness of the difficult conditions on reservations and called for significant reforms in federal Indian policy. Later that year, Herbert Hoover was elected president. During his administration, Congress increased appropriations for the Bureau of Indian Affairs from \$15 million in 1928 to \$28 million in 1931. However, the majority of these

funds were spent on personnel costs. Two thousand new employees were hired and salaries were raised by 25 percent.<sup>31</sup> Many of these new positions were part of a reorganization of the bureau called for in the Meriam Report. But such administrative reforms did not address the widespread poverty that also was discussed in the report, or the specific policy recommendations, including the necessity of a jobs program.

Extreme hardship continued on the Yankton Reservation throughout the late 1920s. But without a tribal government, members lacked an official voice through which to direct federal attention to their plight. They therefore continued to rely on the reports of agency superintendent R. E. L. Daniel to communicate their need for assistance. In his 1929 report, Daniel used the onset of tuberculosis (TB) and trachoma among Yanktons to call for the construction of a hospital, but he did not urge immediate medical assistance or short-term relief to help combat the underlying causes of outbreaks. That year, amid observations about Yankton factionalism, he also suggested creation of an employment office. He attributed their inability to organize to a "recalcitrant class always trying to control action of the tribe for their own gain at the expense of their people."<sup>32</sup>

As the BIA began using its increased budget to hire new staff and boost salaries, Superintendent Daniel again reported on the immense burden required to administer the Yankton Agency. In his 1930 report, he echoed his prior complaints that that Yanktons were incapable of managing their own affairs. He said his staff was too small to handle the work before them and he requested authority for additional personnel. Daniel reported that 60 percent of Yanktons were "doing good farm work." He thus claimed that agricultural pursuits were doing well at the same time that non-Indian farmers in Charles Mix County experienced a 26 percent drop in their productivity.

Superintendent Daniel noted an increase in the category of "idle going to work," although the type of employment they found was not described, nor was the success rate further quantified. He renewed his call for development



of an agency employment office but did not include details of the type of jobs that could be generated, how many people might be served by this office, or at what cost. He found no need for development of springs or ditches to expand irrigation systems, concluding that sufficient water was available from wells.<sup>33</sup> Aside from the difficulty this presented for access to water on the reservation, it also again meant another lost opportunity to translate infrastructure improvements into employment opportunities. It appears that Superintendent Daniel was aware that money was available as part of the BIA reorganization effort, and he used the reports to demonstrate why his agency merited increased personnel expenditures. He did not, however, use them to document the tremendous need on the reservation, or to take initiatives to propose how additional federal support could benefit the tribe.

In 1931, Superintendent Charles Hickman replaced R. E. L. Daniel at the Yankton Agency. By this time, only four of the nine-member Yankton Sioux Claims Committee still served as members. Four of the members elected in 1924 had died, and one had resigned. Many Yanktons felt that elections needed to be held to update the membership of this body. It was also apparent that they needed to establish an official tribal entity to interact with the federal government for matters beyond claims compensation. That summer, a number of Yanktons signed a petition calling for the election of a new tribal committee. The petition was forwarded to Commissioner of Indian Affairs Charles Rhoads, who approved of an election being held but wanted the Yanktons to first develop a tribal constitution and bylaws. He reminded them that his office would need to approve these documents prior to the vote.<sup>34</sup>

A draft constitution and bylaws were approved by the commissioner in September, and Superintendent Hickman scheduled a vote to be held in order to approve the documents. Opposition to the new tribal entity was led by the husband-and-wife team Raymond and Gertrude Bonnin, who argued that the Claims Committee was the authentic tribal voice, and

this new committee would serve only to forward the interests of a faction led by Clement Smith. The new constitution was approved by a vote of 230 to 125, and Clement Smith was elected chairman of the new Business Committee. However, after the ratification and election occurred, Hickman and the tribe realized that the constitution had not addressed the status of the Claims Committee.<sup>35</sup>

The Commissioner of Indian Affairs responded to the Yankton Agency's request for guidance on the matter by recognizing both elected Yankton committees. It was assumed that the Bonnins, who were known Indian activists at the national level and personally knew the commissioner, had influenced his decision. The majority of Yanktons did not desire the dual committee arrangement, and a new petition drive was launched in April 1932. This time, the tribe sought to merge the two committees into one that would be governed by a revised constitution and bylaws. The commissioner agreed to let the Yanktons hold a meeting to resolve these concerns.<sup>36</sup>

While questions of leadership were being decided, both factions took the tribe's needs to the media. In the summer of 1931, shortly before the local election, the Bonnins spoke with the local newspaper about the difficult conditions on the reservation. They said they needed to raise awareness among government authorities "before it is too late," explaining that the late frost in the spring had ruined the wild fruits and native vegetables that were staples of the Yankton diet, that the summer drought and grasshopper infestation had destroyed all the tribe's crops, wild hay, and gardens, and that the lands leased to whites would not yield any crop returns again that year. The Bonnins affirmed that many tribal members lacked food and had no means to gain credit to purchase any. They were joining other Sioux tribes in an appeal to South Dakota governor Warren Green to weigh in with the BIA on the dramatic need for assistance.<sup>37</sup>

Two months later, the Red Cross launched a relief effort in South Dakota that was to

include every county. Yet just as the Charles Mix County Red Cross office was established at the courthouse, officials announced it would not provide assistance to Indians because they should receive help through federal institutions focused on Indian relief.<sup>38</sup> Early in 1932, Henry Frederick, a newly elected member of the tribal Business Committee, led thirty-five Indians in a gathering at the Charles Mix County courthouse. They sought to raise awareness of the tribe's plight and highlighted that they too were citizens. The group discussed the lack of feed for their livestock and provisions for their families to make it through the winter.<sup>39</sup>

The newspaper further reported that the Red Cross remained reluctant to provide assistance to Indians despite worsening conditions. Tribal members then made their plea to a local radio station in Gurney. The radio station succeeded in procuring a carload of hay and promised to work for the collection of two additional carloads of provisions.<sup>40</sup> During the summer of 1932, physicians and other clinicians visited the Yankton Reservation to vaccinate children against communicable diseases and to conduct testing for TB. Those diagnosed with TB were to be hospitalized or, at a minimum, quarantined to stop the spread of the disease.<sup>41</sup> Perhaps the most significant change on the reservation was that Superintendent Hickman had secured federal funds to hire Indian laborers for work on reservation roads near the agency headquarters in Greenwood. Other reservation communities, such as White Swan, initiated a petition calling for these funds to be apportioned for construction in their areas as well.<sup>42</sup>

On September 22, 1932, the tribe met and agreed to the new constitution and bylaws for the Yankton Sioux Tribal Business and Claims Committee (referred to as the Tribal Committee). They also elected members to the new committee, which included Clement Smith as chairman. The constitution declared that the committee's objective was the promotion of "the social, financial, industrial, and general welfare of the Tribe," and asserted that the committee would make recommen-

dations to all branches of government. The Tribal Committee would be composed of nine enrolled members of the tribe who were residents of Charles Mix County and at least twenty-one years of age. Elections would be held every two years. Under the membership requirements, a special clause was added to note that because of "the peculiar economic conditions of the country and owing to acts of God in this particular region," membership on the committee would not be denied to anyone living in Charles Mix County who received charitable aid, as long as they could demonstrate that before the present economic strife, they had been engaged in gainful employment.<sup>43</sup>

Less than two months after the Yankton Sioux achieved their long-sought organization, a seismic shift occurred at the national level. The election of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt brought a new series of challenges and opportunities for the tribe. The depth of the Great Depression had overwhelmed the capacity of private relief organizations, as well as state and local governments, to respond. Roosevelt entered office with a broad mandate to quickly implement a national relief program. The new president promised to do so through "bold, persistent experimentation."<sup>44</sup> To lead the BIA through this new era, he selected longtime social reformer and Indian rights activist John Collier.

#### ROOSEVELT ADMINISTRATION AND SHORT-TERM RELIEF MEASURES

Roosevelt's New Deal programs ultimately brought over \$486 million in relief and recovery funding, including repayable loans, to South Dakota between 1933 and 1939.<sup>45</sup> Due to poor recordkeeping and the involvement of multiple agencies in projects, it is difficult to estimate the total amounts that individual counties received for programs.<sup>46</sup> But the county newspaper repeatedly indicated a strong level of community enthusiasm for brainstorming projects that Charles Mix County and its towns could submit to the federal government

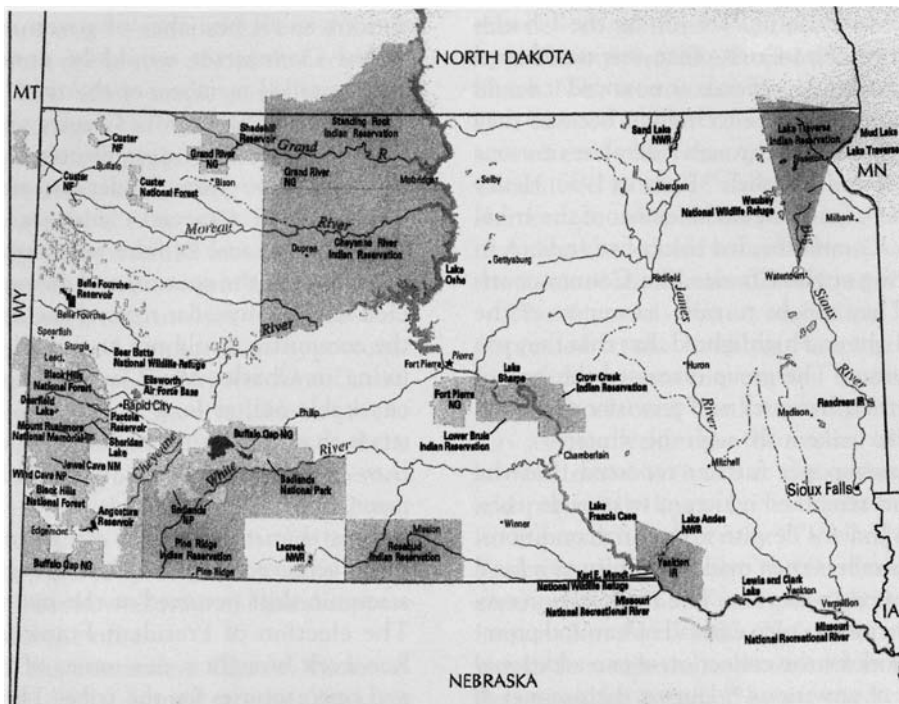


FIG. 3. Map of reservations located in South Dakota.

in order to receive as much federal funding as possible. On reservations, BIA agents also eagerly planned projects to secure aid.

It was under the rubric of reservation administration that the New Deal first presented problems for the Yanktons. The Economy Act of 1933 was enacted on March 20, 1933, with the goal of eliminating needless federal spending. Federal agencies were tasked with reducing personnel expenditures through administrative reorganization and salary cuts wherever warranted. Under this requirement, Commissioner of Indian Affairs John Collier downgraded the Yankton office to sub-agency status in April, placing it under the jurisdiction of the Rosebud Agency. Superintendent Hickman was removed from office over allegations of interference in reservation politics.<sup>47</sup> Yanktons again would have to adjust to a new superintendent, but this time he was posted approximately 150 miles away. Neither Yankton nor

Rosebud tribal members were pleased with the new arrangement (Fig. 3).

By the time Roosevelt took office, Yankton per capita annual income had fallen to \$41.28, a 72 percent decrease since 1926, when the Meriam Report had surveyed reservations.<sup>48</sup> The editor of the *Lake Andes Wave* visited the reservation during the summer of 1933 and interviewed Tribal Committee member Henry Frederick about the conditions. Frederick reported that approximately 150 families lacked adequate food and clothing. He said Indians there would “trade whatever they could find for sustenance.” Frederick further noted that the children were sick and badly undernourished, as they lacked milk and food.<sup>49</sup>

Father Sylvester Eisenman, a Catholic missionary who founded the Marty Mission on the Yankton Reservation in 1920, believed the Yanktons were near starvation. In 1933 he opened a soup kitchen and claimed that

between 25 and 100 Yanktons arrived there for food each day. This free service would continue on and off throughout the 1930s.<sup>50</sup>

A prolific fundraiser, Father Sylvester often had several building projects underway at the mission and frequently tried to hire Yanktons to work on them. He paid a rate of twenty cents an hour to adults. Children attending the mission school could work on projects for three cents a week (five cents if they did exceptionally good work) or for ten cents if they were over age ten. They then were required to put one-third of their earnings in the Sunday collection. Youths at the school spent half their day in class and half at work. Duties ranged from cleaning bricks to welding, depending on age and ability.<sup>51</sup> Although Marty Mission provided some Yanktons with seasonal employment and meals, it could not be the sole answer to the overwhelming poverty and lack of employment surrounding the tribe.

On March 31, 1933, the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC) began as a collaborative effort among the Departments of Agriculture, Interior, Labor, and War. Over the duration of the program, it provided work for 23,709 men in South Dakota.<sup>52</sup> All enrollees received room, board, clothing, medical attention, and a monthly salary of thirty dollars, twenty-five of which was sent home to their families. Camps were administered by the U.S. Army and each included an educational advisor who ran religious, recreational, and athletic programs in which enrollees could participate.<sup>53</sup>

Two weeks after the CCC program was launched, President Roosevelt directed that 14,000 Indians should be inducted into the CCC. Discretion for participation was left to each tribal council, as long as potential enrollees were at least eighteen years of age, free of communicable diseases, and able to perform the labor required by a project.<sup>54</sup> Although Native Americans were permitted to enroll for service in the CCC, discrimination in the selection process and a requirement that employees had to live away from their families resulted in development of a separate program.<sup>55</sup> The Indian Emergency Conservation Work (IECW)

program, more commonly known as the Indian Division of the CCC (CCC-ID), established six district offices. The one located in Billings, Montana, oversaw the program in the Dakotas, Wyoming, Montana, and Nebraska.<sup>56</sup>

The Roosevelt administration decreased the minimum age to seventeen for participation in CCC-ID camps and relaxed the requirement that a project should support a minimum of 200 enrollees. Accordingly, Indian camps could be organized in work units of forty to fifty men.<sup>57</sup> In addition to the monthly salary CCC enrollees received, participants also received an additional sixty-cent subsidy if they lived at home for twenty workdays each month, and between one and two dollars a day if they supplied a team of horses for use on the project. A portion of wages were held back from paychecks to be paid in the winter months when no work was available.<sup>58</sup> The Billings office approved projects planned by tribal committees and submitted by agency superintendents.

Some projects were large enough that a call could be made to other reservations for additional labor. The first positive news in months arrived on the Yankton Reservation in August 1933, when Rosebud Superintendent W. O. Roberts sent R. E. Manion, field clerk of the Yankton sub-agency, blank enrollment forms for up to fifty Yanktons to sign up for a CCC-ID project on the Shoshone Reservation. The project would provide seven months of work, and applicants would be accepted on a first-come basis.<sup>59</sup> In less than two weeks, fifty men left by truck from the Yankton Reservation to their new temporary employment in Wyoming.<sup>60</sup> A year later, an additional 100 Yanktons accepted enrollment for work on the Shoshone Reservation.<sup>61</sup>

In South Dakota, the CCC-ID employed 8,405 Indians and spent over \$4.5 million on reservation projects over the course of its existence.<sup>62</sup> Four Indian camps were established in the state: Pine Ridge, Rosebud, Lower Brulé, and Fort Thompson.<sup>63</sup> Because the Yankton Reservation was located in an area suffering from severe drought, it was determined that large-scale agricultural projects should not



FIG. 4. (left) *Problems Arise on Dam Number 75. Water and mud slowed progress and had to be removed.* (right) *Work on Dam Number 75. Crews and a mechanical shovel create a trench to prevent future seepage.* Source: Report on Dam Number 75, Box 4, Narrative and Pictorial Reports, Records of the CCC-ID, RG 75, National Archives.

be attempted there. But the BIA believed that despite existing ecological challenges, the Sioux could make an adequate living if they learned more about the appropriate use of natural resources and acquired new trade skills.<sup>64</sup> Projects instead focused on infrastructure improvements such as construction of fences and roads. Also, because access to water had become such an important issue on the reservation, notwithstanding Superintendent Daniel's prior assurances to his superiors to the contrary, the CCC-ID revitalized old springs and constructed a dam to assist with an irrigation project (Fig. 4).<sup>65</sup>

Yankton crews conducting road work grew to 180 members during November 1933. That month alone, \$5,800 was spent on labor on the reservation as part of the \$10,000 approved for an Indian public works program. The project prepared fifteen miles of road for graveling, to be done as weather permitted during the winter months.<sup>66</sup> In addition to work on their own reservation, a Yankton camp was established on the Rosebud Reservation. During the two years it existed, camp enrollees made important improvements. They built new roads, terraces on hillsides to prevent soil erosion, and dams and spillways to provide flood control.

They planted trees, poisoned grasshoppers, and installed telephone lines.<sup>67</sup>

Tom White, a non-Indian, served as the district coordinator in the CCC-ID Billings office. He consistently advocated for increased efficiency of the machinery, then advocated for white skilled labor to be hired to run it, lest the expensive equipment be damaged.<sup>68</sup> In 1934 White reported to Commissioner Collier that fifty Yanktons were employed in what was known as the "Y Group" camp, located approximately twenty miles from the Rosebud Agency. He wrote to request purchase of a Caterpillar tractor to be used for truck trail work, if work could be funded that spring. He noted that most of the work being done there was by hand-trailers and horse-drawn small graders.<sup>69</sup> By the end of the summer, 100 Yanktons would be employed by Y Group camp.<sup>70</sup>

The Yankton camp primarily was occupied by young, single men, although a few married men came to work there for a time. It did not include permanent buildings, but rather housed camp managers, engineers, cooks, and kitchen patrols in wall tents, or structures with wooden walls and floors but canvas tops. The mess halls, latrines, tool rooms, wash rooms, and showers also were wall tents. Enrollees lived in army-issue squad tents and used Sibley stoves to heat them; oil barrels were used as stoves in the wall tents. When it became particularly cold, camp members traveled to the St. Francis Mission school to use the showers.<sup>71</sup>

Harold Shunk served as the camp manager from the launch of Rosebud Agency camps in June 1933 until December 1, 1934.<sup>72</sup> In April 1934, Y Group camp, along with others in the area, was visited by a special investigator due to complaints about conditions at the camps. Special Agent Perry Williams found the camp to be providing three meals a day and paying wages appropriately, as well as being orderly, well equipped, and well located.<sup>73</sup> C. H. Schmocker, the Camp Superintendent at Large who worked for Commissioner Collier, toured the Yankton camp in August 1934. He complimented the camp on being "well

set up and maintained." He noted that it was apparent that the "kitchen and dining room are scrubbed daily and the grounds are well polished."<sup>74</sup>

The enrollee program provided training in workplace skills to make Indians more employable, but it also offered other subjects useful in everyday life. It also had a recreational component. Although the Billings office insisted that production should come before education or recreation, these programs often provided a much-needed boost in Indian well-being.<sup>75</sup> Frequently, CCC-ID camps did not receive the same level of investments in time or materials as non-Indian camps did.<sup>76</sup> An exception was the Yankton camp, where Shunk was particularly committed to enrollees' educational experiences.

In April 1934, Shunk received permission from Superintendent Roberts to add lighting to the camp. Later that month, he submitted a request for musical instruments to form a camp band, specifically asking for a coronet, trombone, saxophone, clarinet, violin, bass violin, and drums, among others.<sup>77</sup> Following that requisition, Superintendent W. O. Roberts wrote to Commissioner Collier about the complications presented by the camp leader's emphasis on education. Roberts said that the Yankton camp was behind the Rosebud camp in productivity, and he blamed this on too little attention to work and too much on educational and recreational pursuits. He noted that Shunk was "a college man and wants to teach them botany, forestry, geology, and what-not." Roberts had not objected to the debating societies Shunk started, or to the athletic contests or even the other artistic pursuits, but the request for musical instruments seemed to exceed his tolerance.<sup>78</sup>

Although his immediate superiors objected to the comprehensiveness of his enrollee program, Shunk published a summary of Yankton camp activities in a 1934 issue of the Bureau of Indian Affairs' official publication, *Indians at Work*. He discussed the camp newspaper, which included a new cover design drawn each week by one of the Yanktons. Local businesses

placed advertisements in the paper, and Shunk used that revenue to purchase athletic equipment. Basketball and volleyball courts also were set up for the men to use during leisure time.<sup>79</sup> He coached a camp boxing team and pitched for a baseball team. Shunk was pleased that two of his boxers went on to become state champions and was proud of himself for piling up twenty-two strikeouts when the Yankton camp played the Rosebud team. He even ensured that his men got to see the famous Harlem Globetrotters basketball team play.<sup>80</sup>

Enrollees attended weekly classes taught by Shunk and other speakers that he arranged for on Wednesday nights during the fall and winter months. Topics included discussions on botany, history, anatomy, English, sociology, and sports. He wrote that the botany class would be enhanced by the new camp lighting system. Shunk also sought to develop a camp orchestra, and he gave tap-dance lessons. Shunk believed these educational and recreational programs were essential in building confidence and morale among the young men of the camp.<sup>81</sup> It appears that despite Roberts's objections a month before, Shunk was able to continue his program and even see it highlighted nationwide.

Despite the success of camps and sponsored projects for those who could get work, the CCC was not a cure-all for the problems of the Great Depression. First, the time it took to get projects up and running meant a delay in enrollees receiving pay. Moreover, the CCC could not provide jobs to all those lacking employment. In fact, as budgets ebbed, the program had to implement staggered employment, so that an enrollee worked only on assigned days during the month rather than full-time. This was done to try to provide assistance to as many families as possible, even if it meant a bit less aid going to the recipients.

But the greatest obstacle to the CCC's achievement was that the crisis in rural America stubbornly refused to abate. For example, the summer of 1933 presented Charles Mix County with subnormal rainfall, high temperatures, drying winds, and a grasshopper

infestation that destroyed the corn crop. It was one of seventeen counties in South Dakota scheduled to receive special federal aid because of the severity of the summer drought and grasshopper infestation.<sup>82</sup> A steady flow of emergency relief funds and supplies continued to arrive throughout the winter. Despite this assistance, the situation continued to worsen.

The Roosevelt administration was aware of the need for relief beyond the temporary employment provided by the CCC program. In May 1933, Roosevelt signed legislation to create the Federal Emergency Relief Administration (FERA). Under the provisions of this measure, State Emergency Relief Administration (SERA) offices were established to distribute federal funds to local programs that provided both direct and indirect work relief for those who established need.<sup>83</sup> Each county determined its own parameters to define need. In Charles Mix County, relief officials established that anyone possessing four or more horses or cows, twenty chickens, and two or more sows surpassed the threshold to receive relief. The county relief committees met periodically to review applications, and of the approximately 1,000 who filed for assistance within the first six months, nearly one-third were rejected as surpassing the "worldly goods quota."<sup>84</sup> Assistance allowances ranged from five to fifteen dollars per month per family, depending on need and the size of the family.<sup>85</sup>

Thus non-Indians living in poverty, if they could demonstrate need, could benefit from FERA relief. But once again, Indians often were denied assistance and told to pursue support via the reservation. Not until November 1934, when FERA director Harry Hopkins wrote a letter to all state relief administrators emphatically stating that Indians were eligible for FERA relief, did the situation begin to change. In the meantime, FERA made an important contribution to alleviate hunger on the reservations through the purchase of livestock from tribes and Indian ranchers unable to sell their herds.<sup>86</sup> The Department of Agriculture, which funded these purchases, intended them to remove surplus food from

the market in an effort to stabilize prices while providing income for farmers.

Meat from these animals was packaged and distributed to Indians in the Northern Plains, including the Yankton Sioux.<sup>87</sup> They also benefited from livestock operations closer to home through this program. In July 1934, government agents bought 1,500 head of cattle from local producers. Of those, 1,100 were given to the Yanktons for food.<sup>88</sup> Relief officials followed up such deliveries with training in the butchering and preservation of beef products. Yanktons attended demonstrations on drying techniques, making jerky, tanning, canning, and the importance of conservation to maintain supplies through winter months.<sup>89</sup>

Despite these advances, ecological adversity continued to challenge the reservation and its surroundings throughout 1934. In March, dust storms arrived that were severe enough to cancel school activities.<sup>90</sup> In May, a storm blew so much soil from the Great Plains eastward that the *New York Times* reported it dimmed their city light for five hours.<sup>91</sup> Rainfall that summer was eight inches below normal, and remained the lowest recorded until 1976.<sup>92</sup> Record high temperatures, including several days between 106 and 113 degrees, burned up crops and killed livestock.<sup>93</sup> Under renewed threat of grasshopper infestation, the federal government provided funds to launch a control program both on and off the reservation.<sup>94</sup>

The devastated agricultural economy continued to depress economic life in Charles Mix County. Commissioners and community leaders went to the state capitol at Pierre to try to secure a state commitment to initiate new projects despite federal support tapering off in 1934. They proposed road construction, lake development, swimming pool construction, and crafts made of wood donated to the county from relief projects located in the Black Hills.<sup>95</sup> But government funds never met the expansive need in this community.

With the county too strapped to provide services, with the local economy still void of any work opportunities, and with the land unable to produce, Yanktons had no alterna-

tive but to rely on federal support. A positive development occurred when Superintendent Roberts received notice in May 1934 that the Department of Interior approved the construction of an Indian hospital for Yanktons' care. A site-selection committee visited the area in April and chose a tract of land just west of Wagner. Originally, the budget for this construction was set at \$85,000, but after the site was determined, Superintendent Roberts received news that it was increased to \$120,000.<sup>96</sup> In addition to greatly needed health care, Yanktons also benefited from the new hospital via jobs becoming available through the Works Progress Administration (WPA) during construction.<sup>97</sup> But these few jobs available through the CCC, CCC-ID, and WPA, even when augmented with rations and other free supplies, could not meet the extreme need on the Yankton Reservation.

#### CONCLUSION

When John Collier became Commissioner of Indian Affairs in April 1933, he was adamant that the allotment system had failed Indians. He directed reservation superintendents to stop the sale of Indian lands held in trust and to cease the submission of competency certificates. Collier's underlying thesis was that the Indians' remaining asset, their land, had to be preserved for them to emerge from their dire economic situation. Collier believed that Indians would have to learn to sustain themselves on their land before they could successfully transition into more complex industrial endeavors.<sup>98</sup> The difficulty with Collier's view was that non-Indians in the same geographic location during the same period could not pass this test either.

This disconnect between federal reformers' intentions and the reality of program implementation in specific communities proves the value of examining local experiences when evaluating the broader legacy of the New Deal. For example, it is estimated that between 1926 and 1935, 95 percent of South Dakota's arable land was destroyed by



the ecological catastrophes that befell the state.<sup>99</sup> It was an impossible time and place to attempt building an agricultural expertise. Actually, the white farming experience in Charles Mix County offered the opposite lesson. By the end of the 1930s, the number of farms decreased, crop failures significantly increased, and the value of farms plummeted (see Table 1). During the decade, 19 percent of the county residents moved away.

Yanktons had more limited opportunities and alternatives than their white neighbors whose attempts at farming this land had failed. Indians could not access credit to begin agricultural pursuits on any scale, even before the bank failures of the late 1920s. When the local economy failed, there were no job opportunities for them. Financially strapped local and state governments in turn assigned responsibility to the federal government, which could not meet the enormity of the problem. Frequently, when Yanktons sought assistance through government relief programs for which they qualified, they were turned away.

Federal administrative reforms disrupted Yanktons' efforts to organize themselves politically and to develop a unified voice with which to interact with policymakers. They were dependent on federal assistance and, lacking a tribal government through the early years of the depression, often their immense need was not adequately communicated to the authorities in Washington, DC. The top-down, one-size-fits-all BIA policies did not address the particular needs of the Yankton community during this critical period. Factionalism stirred by the crises of the early 1930s complicated Yanktons' consideration of the IRA and ultimately resulted in their inability to organize an official tribal government until the 1960s.

U.S. officials, although often well intentioned, did not have the means to offer sufficient employment to assist Yanktons in an economic recovery. Existing federal policy continued to endorse teaching Yanktons how to be better farmers but failed to help them retain their lands, acquire the necessities of life, or learn other essential workforce skills. Beyond

the short-term difficulties this presented, such a myopic view of development potential by BIA officials stunted Yanktons' economic growth for decades to come.

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