

# **The Indian Projects**

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## **The Indian Projects**

Federal officials intended reclamation efforts to provide water to Euro-American settlers in the West, but the government also quickly realized that making Native Americans a viable part of the national community necessitated the development of water projects on Indian reservations. Unlike the projects built predominantly for Anglos, the Federal Government hoped the Indian Projects would not only provide resources for survival, but bring Indians into the larger American fold. This combination of goals, along with the often competing efforts of the Indian Service and the Bureau of Reclamation, dictated a complex and conflicted program for providing Indians with water. Nevertheless, the Indian Projects, begun in 1908, provide intriguing insight into the initial efforts at Federal reclamation and how complicated it truly was to make the arid West productive.

We must take a step backward into the nineteenth century to find the first Federal attempt to provide water for Indians. The government began in a region that was possibly the most commanding representation of the arid American West, and perhaps what would become the most notorious region for Federal reclamation. In the act of March 2, 1867 (14 Stat. 514), Congress authorized an appropriation of \$50,000 to begin a reclamation venture for irrigating the Colorado River Indian Reservation in Arizona. Work began in December of that year to construct an irrigation canal with the goal of providing a stable home for all the Indians of the Colorado River region and all its tributaries in that state. To say the least, it was an ambitious goal. Congress believed that providing water for the collected mixture of Indian tribes would aid in the effort to make them self-supporting farmers, reliant on individual diligence rather than the Federal Government. In 1884, Congress made another appropriation, and after 1893, made general appropriations annually. Unfortunately, for the most part, the enterprise failed to come

to any significant fruition until the twentieth century. In many ways, this early attempt signaled the profound difficulty that the Federal Government would face in future Indian irrigation projects.<sup>1</sup>

For many contemporary Americans, as products of late twentieth-century views on ethnic diversity, Indian-white relationships in the past provide numerous, abhorrent examples of misunderstanding and racism. While acknowledging those issues, historians must attempt to set aside judgement and analyze the past on its own terms. Nevertheless, the motives for and results of Indian irrigation often mimic the typical story of what has been called the “Indian Problem.” An act of Congress on April 30, 1908, in accordance with the Reclamation Act of 1902, stipulated for the irrigation of Indian lands in fulfillment of treaty obligations. The act provided the Secretary of the Interior with the full authority to make any decisions and arrangements necessary to construct, operate, and maintain water projects in the “best interest of the Indians.” In the course of meeting those requirements, subsequent Secretaries of the Interior, Reclamation Commissioners, and Commissioners of Indian Affairs pursued Indian irrigation for a variety of reasons. These officials wanted “to prevent Indians from straying off reservations”; to promote a value of private property; to provide jobs; to protect water rights; to raise the value of Indian land; to increase tribal funds; to reduce the maintenance costs for reservations; to provide land for whites; and, “to attract white farmers who would give Indians jobs and serve as models of industry.” This complex mixture of goals signified both good and bad intentions; the aspirations denoted a devout belief in progress, improvement, and the desire to shape a cohesive, if not wholly equal, community of Americans.<sup>2</sup>

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1. Janet A. McDonnell, *The Dispossession of the American Indian, 1887-1934* (Bloomington: Indian University Press, 1991), 71; Albert L. Wathen, “Indian Irrigation,” *Reclamation Record*, 13, no.12 (1941): 322.

2. United States Department of the Interior (DOI), United States Bureau of Reclamation (USBR), *Seventh Annual Report of the Reclamation Service, 1907-1908* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1908), 7;

(continued...)

In the first decade of the twentieth century, the Federal Government authorized numerous water projects, including a substantial amount on Indian lands. The proposals for Indian irrigation threw together the involvement of two large, and equally domineering, agencies, the Reclamation Service and the Indian Service. Instead of the two bureaus vying for complete control, Secretary of the Interior James Garfield compelled them to make an agreement for cooperation. The decision empowered Reclamation to build projects on the Flathead, Fort Peck, Blackfeet, and Crow reservations in Montana, and the Pima reservation in Arizona.<sup>3</sup> In addition, Reclamation consulted or worked on numerous other Indian irrigation projects at various times throughout the West.<sup>4</sup> In essence, Reclamation acted as an agent for the Indian Service in the construction and operation of the irrigation works. As officials later remarked, the arrangement coupled the ability of Reclamation that had the “necessary force and equipment” to handle large projects and the expertise of Indian Service employees “acquainted with Indian characteristics and habits.” Yet more realistically, Reclamation had the upper-hand; it provided the plans, materials, workers, technical supervision, and on-the-ground control, while the Indian Service supplied the money. Despite the apparent accord, the relationship would be an uneasy one and

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2. (...continued)

McDonnell, 72; Donald J. Pisani, “Uneasy Allies: The Reclamation Service and the Indian Office,” unpublished chapter of a manuscript, copy in author’s possession, 26.

3. The Crow Project is a partial exception to this. Reclamation began work on it prior to the agreement of cooperation. Despite labeling it an “Indian Project,” from the beginning Reclamation also intended it to help whites. For more information see Garrit Voggeser, *The Indian Projects: The Crow Project*, Bureau of Reclamation History Program, Research on Historic Reclamation Projects (Denver, Colorado, 2001).

4. In the first decade of the twentieth century, Congress also appropriated funds for projects on the Yuma, Fort Hall, Mission, Navajo, Pueblo, Wind River, Zuni, Fort Belknap, Tongue River, and Walker reservations. Depending on the case and time frame, Reclamation and the Indian Service either worked together or one of the bureaus had sole responsibility for these projects. For more information on Reclamation involvement in the projects themselves, consult the Reclamation Annual Reports from 1907 to 1924. For all work done on irrigation for Native Americans, consult the Reports of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in the Annual Reports of the Department of the Interior. Beginning in 1904, there are numerous Acts of Congress and court decisions concerning Indians and irrigation, see *Federal Reclamation and Related Laws*, volumes 1-4 (Washington, D.C.: United States Government Printing Office). For a proper understanding of conflicts over Indian water rights, the seminal decision came in the *Winters* case, see *Winters v. United States*, 143 Fed. Rep. 740 (1906) and the numerous historical articles written on the subject. Finally, to understand the situation for a particular tribe one must look to the root of many Congressional acts and court decisions, see the United States Treaties ratified with specific tribes.

ultimately result in an untenable situation.

Some of the Indian projects can be considered successful, while some were complete failures. Making the distinction is not easy; the label depends on the definition. As a whole, the Indian Projects failed to live up to the expectations of government officials, Indians, and white settlers, however, each project must be analyzed on an individual basis to determine its benefits and problems. Yet some generalizations apply to all the projects. Congress often proved slow in appropriating sufficient funding for the projects, and in some cases, it went years without supplying money to specific irrigation works. As a result, by 1924, seventeen years after Reclamation began construction, many projects were less than 50 percent completed. On the other hand, Reclamation consistently employed Indian labor, providing needed work, income, and teaching the “virtues of thrift and money management.” Yet, this silver lining belied other intentions. Federal officials not only intended the irrigation projects to provide water, but assimilation. They envisioned the prospect of supplying water as inextricably connected to “eventual absorption of the Indians into the community.”<sup>5</sup>

The goals for acculturation did not always square with the actual results of the irrigation projects. The glaring problems became apparent as early as 1912, when new Secretary of the Interior Franklin K. Lane realized that Indian irrigation projects aided whites more than Indians. The coupling of the Reclamation Service and Indian Service ultimately meant that money intended for the benefit of Native Americans actually subsidized white settlers who quickly bought up allotments from willing Indian sellers who did not want to become white farmers. Although Department of the Interior officials held firm to the belief that they must protect Indian property, the view did not always translate into reality. By 1920, Congress became a harsh critic

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5. Pisani, 2; *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1931* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1931), 19.

of irrigation policy when it came to the conclusion that 90 percent of the land utilized under the projects was being used by whites. Reconciling the goals of benefitting Indians through Indian irrigation with the facts of substantial benefits for whites prompted serious and heated discussion within the Department of the Interior. As Secretary Ray L. Wilbur later commented, “Prima facie it presents an anomalous condition.”<sup>6</sup>

In 1924, due to the consternation caused by the problems, Interior Secretary Hubert Work transferred the Indian projects back to the Indian Service. The two bureaus’ rationalizations for the causes of this decision proved “wildly contradictory.” Reclamation officials argued that they had been originally assigned to Indian irrigation because of their expertise at handling large water projects, but that reductions in the size and budgets eliminated the necessity for Reclamation participation. The Indian Service contended that Reclamation had consistently shown “incompetence, inefficiency, and poor treatment” to Indian interests on the projects.<sup>7</sup> Neither explanation told the whole story. The truth lay in the somewhat conflicting visions that the Indian Service and Reclamation had posed to resolve two persistent problems in the American West – aridity and Indians. In essence, the two issues were both inextricably linked and mutually exclusive. Supplying water to Native Americans might solve the problems of poverty, community instability, “shiftlessness,” and the failure to assimilate that Federal officials saw as the root of the Indian problem. Providing water to white settlers might offer opportunities for the masses that moved West in search of making a living and a reality of the

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6. Pisani, 18-9; McDonnell, 78-9; *Annual Report of the Secretary of the Interior, 1930* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1930), 30-1.

7. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs cited the failures of the Fort Peck and Blackfeet projects as prime examples of that ineptitude, but failed to mention other causes for the problems of those projects. For more information, see Garrit Voggeser, *The Indian Projects: The Blackfeet Project History*, Bureau of Reclamation History Program, Research on Historic Reclamation Projects (Denver, Colorado, 2001) and Garrit Voggeser, *The Indian Projects: The Fort Peck Project History*, Bureau of Reclamation History Program, Research on Historic Reclamation Projects (Denver, Colorado, 2001).

symbolic American dream. Yet using irrigation as an end-all answer to both problems just did not work. In the end, one group would win out over the other.<sup>8</sup>

The intricacies and subtleties of the issues at stake seemed insurmountable. In 1927, Secretary Work ordered a report compiled on water policy headed by Porter J. Preston, an engineer from Reclamation, and Charles A. Engle, an engineer from the Office of Indian Affairs. Their report severely criticized the handling of Indian irrigation and the resulting conditions on the reservations. They argued that the problems stemmed from one basic fact – “many of the so-called Indian irrigation projects are in reality white projects.” The “evils of the allotting system” proffered by the Indian Service had provided Indians with an amount of land in excess of what they could realistically use and resulted in the sale or lease to whites. In addition, many Indians had little interest in farming and survived by their land rentals. Reclamation, Preston and Engle accused, “learned that the building of dams and canals does not of itself create irrigated agriculture,” but served only as an initial step in convincing Indians to use irrigation. They charged that the Indian Service had begun the projects with little engineering “supervision,” and made plans wholly beyond the scope of available water supply, reasonable storage capacities, and the actual needs of farmers. But the tongue-lashing did not stop there. According to Preston and Engle, Reclamation had enlarged upon the inept and inadequate work practices by using the projects as employment agencies or “welfare activity” for Indians. The engineers concluded that officials of both bureaus had created problems through their own “overoptimism”; that they had fallen victim to the “inherent human tendency to minimize difficulties and swell the irrigable acreage” to include lands that would never be profitable no matter how hard a farmer (white or

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8. *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1924* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1924), 18-9; Daniel McCool, *Command of the Waters: Iron Triangles, Federal Water Development, and Indian Water* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1994), 164-6.



Indian) worked, or how much he irrigated.<sup>9</sup>

Perhaps the scathing attack went beyond the bounds of good taste, but the authors did provide some important insight into the limitations of reclamation. With all told, they recommended that when the two bureaus had truly cooperated, such as in the beginning of the projects, Indian irrigation worked. When Reclamation and the Indian Service mixed and confused the interests of whites and Indians problems resulted. A strict line needed to be drawn. Accomplishing that goal would prove challenging and elusive, if not impossible.<sup>10</sup>

Despite the inadequacies and failures of the Indian Projects – whether in logistics, practicality, scope, or ultimate results – they involved considerable effort and good intentions. However misguided, officials of the Indian Service and Reclamation attempted to provide Indians with the necessary resources and a fair shake for obtaining a reasonable amount of stability in their lives and in geographical regions that posed serious challenges. Those efforts to supply aid certainly reflected a measure of misunderstanding and a hedging of bets; reconciling the needs of both Indians and whites in an arid landscape proved more difficult than the government ever imagined. Yet, cultural misinterpretations aside, the Federal Government took significant steps to provide Indians with work, the water they needed to survive, and access to new opportunities for the future. While the Indian projects had limitations, each also contained positive characteristics. The scope of assistance the Federal Government attempted under the Indian Projects represented an important testament to an ongoing revision of the relationship

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9. Porter J. Preston and Charles A. Engle, “Report of the Advisors on Irrigation on Indian Reservations,” in *Survey of Conditions of Indians in the United States*, Hearings before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Indian Affairs, U.S. Senate (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1930), 2220-3, 2258-60; Pisani, 23-5; McDonnell, 84-5.

10. They contended that the main reason the earlier cooperation had broken down was that “some of the projects selected by the Indian Bureau were not feasible and Indian Bureau officials soon evinced a tendency to create an alibi by claiming that they were not in any way responsible either for the selection of the projects or conduct of the work.” Preston and Engle, 2258-9.

among whites and Native Americans.

### **About the Author**

Garrit Voggesser was born and raised in Colorado. He received a BA in history from Colorado College in 1996, an MA in history from Utah State University in 2000, and is currently working on a Ph.D. in environmental and Native American history with a focus on the American West at the University of Oklahoma.

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