

Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Central Classified Files, 1907–1939 Series B: Indian Customs and Social Relations

This wealth of information documents federal efforts to “Americanize” Native Americans.

The federal government in its early dealings regarded Indian tribes as independent nations and treated them accordingly. In time, however, the idea that Indian tribes were sovereign nations was challenged. The controversy was settled in 1871, when the relationship of the government and Native Americans was defined to be guardian and ward. This “wardship” was further reinforced by the U.S. Supreme Court ruling in 1886 stating “...it is a duty of the federal government to protect tribes and their members, its obligation to do this having come about in dealings, in treaties and in recognition of their weakness and helplessness under the impact of the spreading American government and its people.” In line with this principle of responsibility, the idea was conceived, particularly as Native Americans were put on reservations, to develop federal programs for their economic, social, and political reconstruction and to see that the programs were carried out. The unwavering belief was that Native Americans were obstinately wild, and they were neither able nor willing to refashion their institutions to fit the “civilized” situation. Some medium was necessary to bring about these alterations. This change-agent became the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).

“Civilizing Mission”

Series B: Indian Customs and Social Relations provides insight into the federal government's efforts to “Americanize” or, “civilize” Native Americans. This collection consists of official and personal correspondence, tribal name lists, memoranda, petitions, circulars, and reports. Of particular interest are the documents relating to tribal constitutions and bylaws and corporate charters that spread under the Indian Reorganization Act. In addition, there are news clippings, pamphlets, and minutes of meetings, press releases, marriage certificates, and congressional documents.

In carrying out the provisions of the General Allotment Act, and later similar types of acts, Indian agents/superintendents became the government authorities on the reservations. Tribal units and tribal governments ceased to be officially recognized, and in many cases they ceased to exist at all. The breaking up of tribal political and social systems—destroying the power of the Indian chiefs, splintering tribal cohesiveness, fragmenting tribal relations, and

breaking-up the cultural “matrix” that was “Indianhood”—became a prominent part of the BIA's policies and goals. Throughout the early 20th century, various Commissioners of Indian Affairs and BIA staff entrenched the belief that no synthesis of Indian and non-Indian cultures was possible.

Primary topics of this documentation relate to:

- Indian conferences
- Feasts, festivals, powwows
- Dances
- Language
- Marriage Customs, including religious and legal ceremonies; divorce; support of the family and the issue of abandonment; heirship issues; and intertribal and white-Indian marriage problems.
- Government, Charters, Constitutions, and Bylaws
- Amusements and athletics, includes information on Indian music.

Documentation in this microform outlines the promulgation and implementation of Indian policies throughout the 1907–1939 period—a period of entrenched acculturation and assimilation of Native Americans, acknowledgment of the failure of this “Americanization” policy, and the prospect for a new future in the revitalization of Native American culture and social organization, embodied in the Indian Reorganization Act.

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Source: National Archives, Washington, D.C., RG 75, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Entry 121, Central Classified Files, 1907-1939, decimal numbers 060 (Indian Customs), 061 (Convocations—Conferences), 062 (Feasts; Festivals), 063 Dances, 064 (Languages and Dialects), 065 (Marriage Customs), 066 (Forms of Government, (067) Charters, 068 (Constitutions and Bylaws), 740 (Social Relations), 741 (Marriage), 742 (Intermarriage), 743 (Divorce), 744 (Polygamy), 745 (support of Family), 750 (Amusements and Athletics), 751 (Music), and 752 (Dancing).