

Change

During the late 1880s and early 1890s, a severe drought gripped the country. Bad weather and severe droughts destroyed crops of the Mandan, Hidatsa and Sahnish. Government attempts to "civilize" and "christianize" the Indians governed Federal policy, as was the blatant focus at breaking up their land base. In 1883, Secretary of the Interior Henry M. Teller initiated the Court of Indian Offenses. His goal was to eliminate "heathenish practices" among the Indians. (Secretary of Interior Report, Nov. 1, 1883).

J.D. Adkins, Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1885 to 1888 exerted great influence and pressure to promote use of the English language in schools attended by Indian children stating "A wider and better knowledge of the English language among them is essential to their comprehension of the duties and obligations of citizenship." (Report of September 21, 1887, in House Executive Document, No.1, part 5, vol. II, 50th Congress, 1st Session, serial 2542, pp. 18-23).

School age children were sent to school and encouraged to become farmers. Indians were to follow the laws of the Court of Indian Offenses, which punished them for having more than one wife and for participating in dances and traditional religious ceremonies. Although many men agreed to become farmers or wage earners, difficulties were encountered in doing large-scale farming. Year after year, the crops were killed by droughts, early frost, insects, or other disasters. The Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara were accustomed to farming only the floodplain of the Missouri for their crops, but the government wanted them to plant and raise surplus crops away from the river bottom.

In 1871, Indian agent Tappen reported that the men had broken 640 acres in the flood plain and grew enough corn and squash to last the winter. As a reward, the men were given wagons and horse harnesses. Later, they would grow wheat and oats, which was turned over to the agent to sell and the agent controlled the money made from the sale of these grains.

Agent Tappens' 1873 report, described the general surface of the land as not fertile, sparsely timbered, and without water. The Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara were surrounded by wilderness of prairie for hundreds of miles where very little game lived, hardly a good location to start an agricultural economy. They worked diligently with the primitive implements given them and had nine hundred acres under cultivation. Corn, wheat, oats, barley, field peas, potatoes, turnips and

garden varieties were raised. Agent Tappan requested proper accommodations for himself and his employees, a schoolhouse, with a dwelling for the teacher, two or more storehouses, a hospital building, where native doctors could be kept from patients, and a new building for a sawmill.

Indian agent, L.B. Sperry succeeded Tappan in 1874, and initiated a policy of giving annuities directly to the families instead of a chief. This policy eroded the role of the chief and the tribal system of the people. In 1874 the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Edward P. Smith, urged the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara (Sahnish) to leave Fort Berthold, with its unproductive soil, unfriendly climate, scant supply of wood, poor water, high winds, dust, drought, frost, flood, grasshoppers, and the Sioux. That year a delegation from the Three Tribes went to the Indian Territory (Oklahoma) to investigate the possibilities of moving to that area. Although pleased with the country, they refused, fearing it would be too warm, dreading the long journey, and, most of all, losing their attachment to the place of their birth and homes of their dead. (Dunn, 1963). See letter in the Appendix.