

Arikara, Sioux, and Government Farmers: Three American Indian Agricultural Legacies

HERBERT T. HOOVER

There are three American Indian agricultural legacies in South Dakota history. The first originated in the prehistoric gardening economy of the Arikaras (also called Rees) that flourished within the boundaries of this state until the mid-1830s. A second evolved as an agrarian component in the traditional, diversified food-getting practices of the Sioux, which they developed in a woodland environment and then adapted to prairie conditions following their immigration into present-day South Dakota during the eighteenth century. The third has taken shape from the non-Indian farming techniques transmitted to Sioux people through an acculturation plan imposed upon reservation societies by federal officials during the nineteenth century. The latter has been modified by changing circumstances, but it has survived as a component in the economy of every reservation in the state down to the present. Although the three legacies have evolved through a continuous effort by Indian people to thrive on the fruits of

Mother Earth and have been closely intertwined as elements in that perpetual process, each has been a movement by itself. Hence, each will be described as a discrete episode in the history of the state.

Riverine agriculture—the first of these three—evidently began to flourish in Arikara communities sometime during the seventeenth century. Kindred of northward migrating Caddoan Pawnees bearing a distinguished agricultural heritage, the Rees entered the upper Missouri basin and turned to garden crop farming as an obvious means of survival in a fertile river valley near the center of a semiarid region. When first encountered by Frenchmen during 1743, they lived in villages near present-day Pierre, where they planted varieties of beans and squash and depended heavily upon Ree corn, a type adapted to northern Great Plains soil and climatic conditions.¹ Supplementing these crops with fish and products of the hunt, they produced food supplies sufficient at one point to sustain populations in as many as thirty-two villages. Following early intrusions by non-Indians, successive smallpox epidemics left just a few scattered remnants of this once flourishing people. The Arikaras survived as only two village groups by the time John Baptiste Truteau encountered them in 1796, and no more than three communities remained when Meriwether Lewis and William Clark arrived in 1804. Because of their weakened condition, they lived as vassals of powerful neighbors for half a century or more before joining the Mandans and Hidatsas of North Dakota by the mid-1830s.²

Before their retreat, the Arikaras' influence extended far beyond the boundaries of their own aboriginal land. At fortified, earth-lodge village sites, they developed crop production to include beans, pumpkins, squash, tobacco, and three types of corn in at least eleven varieties. Flint corn yielded a hard kernel, which was valuable for its high protein content; flour corn was

1. George F. Will and George E. Hyde, *Corn among the Indians of the Upper Missouri* (1917; reprint ed., Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1964), pp. 20, 35. Mandans and Hidatsas produced crops in what is now South Dakota for brief periods in recorded history, but, because they dwelled mainly in what became North Dakota, they are not included in this essay. Cheyennes also farmed briefly near the Rees along the Missouri, and later in the Black Hills, during their migration from eastern North Dakota to the Rocky Mountains in the eighteenth century. Because they also resided in this state for only a short time, they are likewise excluded from this discussion. Will and Hyde, *Corn*, pp. 43-44.

2. *Ibid.*, pp. 46-47.

starchy and far less nourishing, but it could be ground into powder for general use; sweet corn contained high sugar content and was harvested in the milk as a delicacy. Even though many Rees died from the epidemics of the late eighteenth century, the survivors continued to raise these crops in quantities sufficient to sustain themselves and to create surplus for external trade.³

Crop production was in the province of women, who looked after gardens with great care. Veteran missionary John P. Williamson later described techniques that he probably witnessed at Ree villages while traveling up and down the Missouri basin. Arikara women would be seen, he recalled:

in some nook of the Missouri river valley, clearing off the tall weeds from some loamy piece of land. Each woman would then mark off a patch of ground containing an acre, more or less, which was to be her farm for the summer. With a hoe made from the fork of a tree she would dig up each day a part of her lot and plant it in corn. This was continued every day until it was done. Some time in June, when the corn was a few inches high, the woman would give her corn a complete hoeing, killing every weed and pulling the dirt around every hill till the tops of the corn were just sticking out of little peaks of dirt. This was the only hoeing the corn got. The corn was an early variety, which commenced to ear in the first days of July. As soon as the corn was in the milk flocks of blackbirds would appear to feed upon it. So each woman would erect a scaffold in the center of her lot, about as high as her head, and at day-light each morning she would mount the scaffold and when a blackbird appeared commence screeching at the top of her voice, and if that was not sufficient to scare away the birds, she would accompany her voice with a drum, horse fiddle or some other instrument. This was continued until the sun went down. As soon as the corn was out of the milk the woman would snap the ears off, and with a few husks that were left on each ear, weave them into strings, ten or twelve feet long, which were hung up to dry. When dry the corn was shelled and put in sacks made of the whole skin of buffalo calves, the legs answering for handles.⁴

Other accounts tell the same story with minor variations. Arikara women accompanied by young girls cultivated gardens that contained approximately one acre per family member. As geese appeared for springtime migration up the Missouri flyway, the women began to burn stalks left from the previous year or to clear trees and brush in new garden patches. Evidently few, if any, ever practiced crop rotation or fertilization. Instead, they moved from site to site, leaving depleted soil behind to lie fallow

3. *Ibid.*, pp. 59-70, 299-300.

4. John P. Williamson, "The Outlook for South Dakota," *South Dakota Historical Collections* 3 (1906): 52-53.

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To protect the corn from blackbirds, a woman and four young children occupy a scaffold in the center of a field.

for several years. Working fresh garden plots separated from each other by brush rows, grassy strips, or flimsy willow fences, the women cleared ground with rakes made either of deer antlers or of willow shoots bound together by rawhide thongs. They softened the soil with digging sticks made of ash poles three or four feet long, sharpened at one end and hardened by fire, and they cultivated their crops with hoes manufactured from the shoulder blades of elk and buffalo. They planted in "hills" a foot to eighteen inches in diameter and situated three or four feet apart, placing seven to twelve seeds in a hill, and they interspersed corn with other vegetables throughout their gardens. Ordinarily, Ree

women hoed the crops twice (not once, as Reverend Williamson thought). Unlike nomadic neighbors to the south, they usually stayed home to protect their crops in the growing season, and to gather and cache them during harvest time, before leaving on the hunt or for distant tribal gatherings.

Harvest time was laborious. In August, the women gathered, sliced, and dried squash on scaffolds for winter use and initiated the green corn harvest, which lasted several weeks. Through this season, families were free to fill up on tender ears of sweet corn, boiled or roasted on glowing coals, while women cured the surplus in the husk over smoldering fires for storage. Late in summertime, the beans were gathered, and after first frost, the harvest of mature corn began. The best ears were plaited into braids for preservation and hung on scaffolds to dry. The rest were cured on drying platforms on the scaffolds, threshed with beating sticks, winnowed by sifting from vessel to robe in strong winds, and stashed in caches with other durable produce.

Upper Missouri caches were jug-shaped pits nearly eight feet deep with apertures large enough for persons to enter. Into these were placed braided corn, shelled corn (either loose or in skin bags), beans, dried squash sections, jerked meat in parfleches, fat, pelts, extra clothing, ceremonial regalia, and other possessions for seasonal use. Braced inside by posts and lined with grass, the caches were secure and dry under all but the harshest climatic conditions. Covered with thick mats and camouflage, they were fairly safe from discovery by outsiders. The construction was so refined, and the disguise so successful, that white trappers and traders adopted the design almost without alterations. The amount of produce stored in these caches depended on garden production, which varied from year to year and place to place according to rainfall, grasshopper invasions, soil depletion, and plunder. The trader Edwin Denig estimated average corn yield at about twenty bushels to the acre, which was enough to meet domestic needs and to leave a surplus for use as currency in external trade.⁵

To these riverine dwellers, caches of garden produce were their hedge against famine and their main staple. The preserved vegetables were prepared in various ways. Dried green corn was

5. Will and Hyde, *Corn*, pp. 77-141; Edwin Thomas Denig, *Five Indian Tribes of the Upper Missouri*, ed. John C. Ewers (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1961), pp. 44-46.

boiled and eaten by itself, made into hominy, or cooked with beans and possibly fresh meat as succotash. Whole-kernel ripe corn was parched and eaten as soup or pounded into meal. This pulverized corn was used to make pudding and cakes, or it was combined with grease, meat, and other ingredients to produce pemmican. Several seasonings were available: salt from scattered deposits on the prairies and plains, sugar from box-elder trees, and spices from various herbs and plants. Arikaras processed and cooked food mainly in unglazed baked-clay mortars, porringers, pots, and dishes until metallic vessels were brought in by white merchants. They carried and stored food in baskets woven from the inner barks of box-elder and willow and ate from dishes carved out of wood available on the upper Missouri and tributary streams.⁶

Some produce was not eaten but was spent as currency in a trade that affected occupants of a vast region across the middle of the continent. Commerce began with neighboring tribes and federations. Even though Arikaras were linked commercially to Canadians through Mandans and Hidatsas and to southern plainsmen by way of Nebraska tribes, they carried on their heaviest exchanges through Sioux networks for more than half a century after the American Revolution. This Sioux connection evolved partly as a result of geographic location, but it stemmed more from the Sioux need for vegetables. Arikaras and other farming peoples along the upper Missouri had the only agricultural surplus available in ample supply between the upper Mississippi and the upper Rio Grande. Accordingly, hunters of the prairies and plains appeared frequently, seeking garden produce, especially corn. In exchange, Teton Sioux and other plains hunters bartered horses, robes, dressed skins, fresh meat, pemmican, and bows and arrows. From the east, Yanktons, Yanktonai, and Sissetons brought surplus horses and hides and as many trade goods as they could spare. Once a year, roughly through the period 1795-1830, these three Sioux tribes met white merchants bearing goods in and around historic Armadale, near present Mellette in the upper James River Valley, for a major trade fair. European firearms, ammunition, and wares were exchanged for hides, furs, and horses. Using surplus goods from this white trade, plus additional products of the hunt, the three Sioux tribes then bartered

6. Will and Hyde, *Corn*, pp. 144-70; Roy W. Meyer, *The Village Indians of the Upper Missouri: The Mandans, Hidatsas, and Arikaras* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1977), p. 66; Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, p. 46.

at riverine villages for agricultural foods. Through approximately half a century, the Arikaras were central to these intertribal exchanges. At times, they suffered because of their military inferiority; whenever game was scarce, the Tetons and Yanktonai, and possibly the Yanktons and Sissetons, held them in subjection, plundering their stores at will. Nevertheless, the Rees obtained useful wares and some luxuries through the trade network.⁷

As merchants extended fur trade from Saint Louis up the Missouri basin at the outset of the nineteenth century, Arikaras drew additional European goods from whites, who also were eager to acquire garden products. Ree women prepared containers of corn and strings of dried squash for trade. In return, they received iron hoes, knives, combs, beads, paints, cloth goods, and kitchen utensils for themselves, plus ammunition, guns, tobacco, and other items useful to their husbands.⁸

Due to the central place it held in both the domestic economy and outside trade, agriculture was a focal point in the Arikaras' religion. Corn was part of their creation story, and Mother Corn was revered. She had brought them from a great flood into the valley of the Missouri for safety, presented them with corn in four colors, and distributed sacred bundles throughout the villages before returning whence she came. Understandably, they held ceremonies in her honor when planting, during the growing season, at harvest time, and on a special occasion when they symbolically placed Mother Corn into the Missouri and asked that she beg the Creator to give abundant harvests and long lives to the Arikaras.⁹

Like the Rees, Sioux people had an agricultural tradition of their own long before their initial dealings with non-Indians. Indeed, earliest contact records suggest that all members of the original seven council fires of Sioux in Minnesota supplemented foods acquired by hunting, fishing, and gathering with slash and burn horticulture to one degree or another. Seventeenth-century chroniclers saw Mdewakantons planting at Rice Creek and on the

7. Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, pp. 47-48; Will and Hyde, *Corn*, pp. 186-91; Doane Robinson, *History of the Dakota or Sioux Indians* (reprint ed., Minneapolis: Ross & Haines, 1956), pp. 80-85; Mrs. H. T. Beauregard, trans., "Journal of Jean Baptiste Trudeau among the Arikara Indians in 1795," *Missouri Historical Society Collections* 4, no. 1 (1912): 32; Pierre-Antoine Tabeau, *Tabeau's Narrative of Loisel's Expedition to the Upper Missouri*, ed. Annie H. Abel (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1939), pp. 120-22.

8. Denig, *Five Indian Tribes*, p. 46.

9. Will and Hyde, *Corn*, pp. 203-17, 240, 250, 258.

banks of the Saint Peter's (Minnesota) River. These and members of other eastern Sioux tribes continued to produce corn, pumpkins, cucumbers, and other crops by traditional methods down to the time of their concentration on a tiny reserve between Morton and Big Stone Lake in the mid-1850s.¹⁰

Early observers of Yankton people in eastern South Dakota reported similar activities. About the year 1805, Pierre-Antoine Tabeau noted that some Yanktons were "already tillers of the soil," as well as hunters.¹¹ Using pointed sticks and hoes made of bone, they cultivated many crops to supplement the meat of buffalo and small game and the succulent wild fruits and vegetables they gathered across the prairie. Various observers reported that the flood plains of the Missouri, Big Sioux, Vermillion, and James rivers were favorite garden sites of Yankton women, who raised corn, squash, and beans with methods much like those of the Arikaras (from whom they were probably borrowed in some degree).¹²

To a lesser extent, the wives and daughters of Teton hunters evidently carried on farming from earliest contact, too. Writing about *Mini-Kanye-Waju*, translated "Those who Plant by the Water," interpreter-trader James W. Lynd noted: "Throughout the entire Sioux country are to be found old planting grounds of the Sioux, and many of them apparently of great age—at least as old as the trade among them. It is more than probable, indeed, that some families, or perhaps small bands, of the Sioux, have planted at intervals for many centuries."¹³ This statement and other chronicles bear evidence that women in all of the Sioux tribes doubtless cultivated vegetables at various times to supplement foods acquired by hunting, fishing, and gathering. Surely they were not committed as thoroughly to gardening as were the Rees, but from appearances they all had a traditional agriculture in their backgrounds. In South Dakota, this was especially true of

10. James H. Howard, *The Dakota or Sioux Indians: A Study in Human Ecology*, Dakota Museum, Anthropological Papers, no. 2 (Vermillion, S.Dak., 1966), p. 2; *Minnesota Democrat*, 15 July 1851; Henry R. Schoolcraft, *Summary Narrative of an Expedition to the Source of the Mississippi River* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, Grambo, & Co., 1853), pp. 159-61.

11. Tabeau, *Tabeau's Narrative*, p. 169.

12. James H. Howard, "Notes on the Ethnogeography of the Yankton Dakota," *Plains Anthropologist* 17 (Nov. 1972): 290-92.

13. James W. Lynd, "The History of Religion, Legends, Language, and General Conditions of the Dakota Nation," James W. Lynd Collection, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

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the Yanktons. After migration from the woodlands in the eighteenth century, they spread out across some eleven million acres on the lush prairie between the upper Des Moines and Missouri rivers. Until their concentration on 430,000 acres upstream from Choteau Creek in 1859, Yankton women produced limited supplies of nearly all crops available: several types of corn, at least two kinds of squash, beans, and pumpkins. The reliance of central and western Sioux upon Arikara village trade for produce indicates that they did not raise enough to satisfy tribal needs, but they all had the practice of agriculture within their traditions.



Traditional American Indian produce, including several varieties of corn, was displayed at the 1913 fair on the Rosebud reservation. This photograph also contains some vegetables and grains introduced by non-Indian farmers.

With successful agrarian production in progress from the upper Mississippi Valley to the Black Hills, representatives of the federal government did not presume to introduce farming as they entered Sioux villages to offer agricultural instruction during the second quarter of the nineteenth century. Rather, they attempted to alter Sioux attitudes toward farming and to institute techniques that could make agriculture a sole means of subsistence and an acculturating device. This attempt was a central element in the five-point program—labeled condescendingly the

"civilization plan"—set up during the Age of Jackson. Special instructors entered band communities to supplant an Indian tradition of garden-crop cultivation by women with the Anglo-American ideal of subsistence farming by families. Urge them "to live in houses," wrote United States Superintendent of Indian Affairs William Clark from his Saint Louis office in 1826, and "to raise grain and stock, to plant orchards, to set up land marks," and "to divide their possessions."¹⁴ Thus, instruction was designed to effect social as well as economic change and to cause the replacement of communal land assignments with individually owned and operated farms. The transformation of Indian men into subsistence farmers was one of several changes to be imposed as preparation for the incorporation of Indian people into mainstream society as citizens.

For Sioux country, this scheme was introduced in 1829 at Eatonville, on the southeast shore of Lake Calhoun in present-day Minneapolis. With authority from Saint Peter's Agent Lawrence Taliaferro and implements from Fort Snelling, trader-interpreter Philander Prescott went into a Mdewakanton village to teach by example the subsistence agricultural methods of non-Indians.¹⁵ His experiment began inauspiciously with two families, but it grew into a colony of forty-five within a few years. Given this exemplary farm station to entice them, other Mdewakanton communities accepted instruction, using their own treaty benefits as well as allocations from a congressional "civilization fund" to meet the costs. By 1838, five former missionaries had signed on as "Government Farmers," at salaries of \$500 each per year, to offer instruction on five sites; Gideon Pond had gone to lake Harriet, J. D. Stevens to the base of Lake Pepin, and three others to villages along the west bank of the Mississippi River from present-day Red Wing to Saint Paul.

By 1846, the government paid six "Farmers" annual salaries of \$600 each to serve six Mdewakanton band communities. In 1853, after the surrender of aboriginal land by Minnesota Sioux in exchange for a small reserve along the upper Saint Peter's River, the original instructor, Philander Prescott, was appointed Super-

14. William Clark to the Secretary of War, 21 Mar. 1826, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C., Microfilm ed., M234, Roll 474 (hereafter cited NA, M234).

15. Claude Edwin Stipe, "Eastern Dakota Acculturation: The Roles of Agents of Culture Change" (Ph.D. diss., University of Minnesota, 1968), p. 142.

intendent of Farming, or "Head Farmer," and seven subordinate Farmers were placed in communities to give instruction and assistance. Four of these eight men drew \$600 each, and four received \$400 each, per year. Six members of the team served Mdewakantons and Wahpekutes at Redwood Agency, while two lingered on the banks of the Mississippi to help Wabasha's people until they could move onto the new reservation. As the migration neared completion in 1854, Government Farmer Andrew Robertson moved from Redwood to Yellow Medicine Agency upstream, where he became Superintendent of Farming, or Head Farmer, for the Sissetons and Wahpetons of southwestern Minnesota and eastern Dakota. From that time until the Minnesota Sioux War began in 1862, a full complement of farm instructors drew salaries from treaty benefits and the special federal fund for the purpose of transforming family heads in each of the four Minnesota Sioux tribes into sedentary, subsistence farmers. Until the war broke out, their assignment was the preparation of these Indian people for assimilation into a white society that was taking

Young people at a government school on the Pine Ridge reservation learn to cultivate corn the white man's way (about 1890).



shape around them through rapid infusions of Scandinavian and German immigrants.¹⁶

The Minnesota experiment demonstrated a major obstacle to the success of the plan for agrarian instruction. Men did not take readily to subsistence farming. By and large, their wives and daughters continued to raise crops on communal field assignments, and the men engaged in activities less demeaning and laborious, according to Sioux tradition. Government Farmers brought out supplies and plowed garden plots; Sioux women planted, cultivated, and harvested crops; Sioux men looked on with amusement.

Missionaries offered various explanations for the failure of Farmers to engender subsistence family agriculture. Congregationalist Stephen Return Riggs thought that "instead of being teachers" of crop production among the Sioux, Government Farmers "became their servants—fenced and plowed the fields for the women to plant—built houses to store their corn in—cut the hay and kept the cattle. . . . In short, as the Farmer got the pay, his duty was to perform the labor; and thus the Dakota men were relieved from what little work they formerly did in this direction." The system thus became an obstacle to agrarian progress, for Government Farmers found it "easier to do a thing for an Indian than to teach him how to do the same."¹⁷

Presbyterian Thomas Williamson remembered other reasons. The men had a commitment to conduct war and to hunt for food and materials, and they feared that sole dependence on farm products would lead to famine in periods of drought. Most of all, they objected on religious grounds. When asked to farm, a man of Sioux society was likely to reply: "White men were made wearing clothes to work. It is proper for them to plough, build houses, etc. But we were made naked to dance, hunt, and go to war. If we should abandon the customs of our ancestors, the *Wakan* would be angry at us, and we would die."¹⁸ Though put crudely by Rev-

16. Stipe, "Eastern Dakota Acculturation," pp. 144-47; Gideon Pond to Rush Pond, 17 Sept. 1837, and Gideon H. Pond to Col. H. J. Bruce, 14 Aug. 1845, Pond Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul; "Statement of Persons Employed with the Saint Peters Agency," 31 Aug. 1846, Roll 760, and 30 June 1853, Roll 761, NA, M234; S. R. Riggs to S. B. Treat, 11 Jan. 1855, and T. S. Williamson to S. B. Treat, 13 Jan. 1855, American Board of Commissioners for Foreign Missions, MSS #244, nos. 320 and 427, Minnesota Historical Society.

17. "The Indian Question," *New Englander* 15 (May 1857): 258.

18. "Sioux: Letter from Doct. Williamson dated Lac qui Parle, Aug. 15, 1839," *Missionary Herald* 35 (Dec. 1839): 475.

erend Williamson, this impression of Sioux attitudes contained some truth. As time went on, "the aversion to manual labor" abated somewhat, wrote another observer. "Even some of the high chiefs engaged in profitable labor."¹⁹ Nevertheless, the government farming activities failed to achieve the intended purpose. Some families adapted culturally and economically once they moved onto the reserve, but their accomplishments were limited, and the whole experiment collapsed with the coming of the war in 1862, followed by the removal of Minnesota Sioux to the upper Missouri Valley after the war's end.

Although it did little to change Sioux people on the Saint Peter's, the Minnesota experiment was an exercise in acculturation that doubtless had an impact upon the greater success of the first Government Farmers employed in present-day South Dakota. Following preliminary efforts by Alexander Redfield with an experimental farm on the Yankton reservation, Agent Walter Burleigh introduced the instructional program at Greenwood in 1860. On a roster of fourteen regular employees hired that year, the first bona fide Government Farmer appointed in the state appeared. High regard for his importance was reflected in his \$800 annual stipend—an amount equal to that paid the physician and second only to the salary earned by the agent himself.²⁰

For nearly three quarters of a century, Government Farmers worked as principal forces of acculturation on all South Dakota reservations. Writing about Rosebud near the end of the era, United States Board of Indian Commissioners Chairman George Vaux, Jr., recognized their central importance to Indian people: "The day school teachers and Government farmers, who are the intimate associates of the Indians and who, in a great measure, are to them our government in their localities, are in a position to sway a tremendous influence if with tact, determination and sympathy they attack the problems that the Indians have to meet."²¹

19. "Sioux," *Missionary Herald* 40 (Jan. 1844): 12.

20. Agent W. A. Burleigh to Commissioner of Indian Affairs William P. Dole, 8 Aug. 1862, NA, M234, Roll 959. One previous attempt to place a Government Farmer among Yankton bands failed completely. Subagent Joshua Pilcher placed a Farmer at Fort Vermillion in 1835 and reported that he did "tolerably well" teaching corn culture to some twenty-five families. For four years, traders used "Vermillion Farm" as an address, as a result, but the endeavor collapsed by the year 1840. Joshua Pilcher to William Clark, 18 July 1835, NA, M234, Roll 883; Jacob Halsey to Pratt, Chouteau and Company, 6 Oct. 1839, and Sanford to Pierre Chouteau, Jr., 6 May 1839, Pierre Chouteau, Jr., Company Papers, Missouri Historical Society, St. Louis.

21. George Vaux, Jr., Chairman, Board of Indian Commissioners, to "Gentlemen" of Rosebud, 23 June 1923, Indian Central Classified File, Records of the Bureau of

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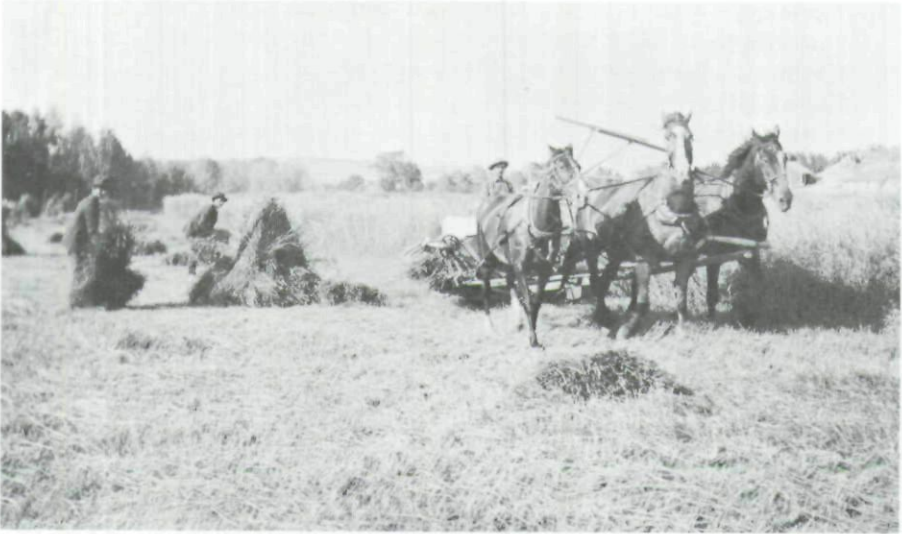
On eight reservations, these government employees served under various titles—four included in the regular official nomenclature used by the Indian Field Service, and a fifth used occasionally to identify men that were hired to resolve local problems. With variations dictated by local circumstances, contingents of these officials appeared at the South Dakota agencies soon after their establishments. First to be appointed were agency Head Farmers (with rare exceptions non-Indians), who, like Philander Prescott, assumed responsibility for the general supervision of all functions attached to Government Farmers across the reservations from central vantage points at agency headquarters. In the 1870s and early 1880s, Assistant Farmers (usually, though not always, acculturated mixed-bloods) were added on all South



Farmer Given and his family stand before their house at Cannonball substation on the Standing Rock reservation in 1886.

Dakota reserves. Teaching non-Indian social habits as well as agricultural skills to family heads, Assistant Farmers provided instruction, assistance, and personal example from their homes in band community centers. In 1884, a federal appropriation bill instituted and outlined the functions of Additional Farmers, so called in federal nomenclature because of the need to add groups of mid-level employees. These officials (on most reserves white men) appeared at Rosebud in 1884 and at Pine Ridge in 1885, and at other reserves in succeeding years. They supervised farming operations wherever they served and worked as subagents in dis-

Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives, Washington, D.C. (hereafter cited RG 75, NA).



A white Farmer runs the machinery as Indian workers shock the grain on the boarding school farm on the Pine Ridge reservation.

trict stations on larger reservations. Near the outset of the twentieth century, a select group of Expert Farmers were also assigned. Examples of their duties included the instruction of people at Standing Rock about small grain culture in 1910 and the creation of a "demonstration" unit to teach "dry farming" and other scientific methods at Crow Creek in 1912. These four types of Government Farmers functioned on South Dakota reserves until 1913, when the titles Additional Farmer and Expert Farmer were dropped. Men with the titles Farmer and Assistant Farmer were left to carry on the work.

In addition to the four types identified in official nomenclature, there were District Farmers (all mixed- or full-blooded Indians). This title was sometimes used colloquially to refer to Assistant Farmers and Additional Farmers serving in reservation farm districts, but it was more appropriately employed to identify men who performed specific functions to suit local conditions at given times. In 1879, for example, Sisseton Agent Charles Crissey hired ten Indian District Farmers, instead of one white Head Farmer, both to perform functions normally accomplished by a single

Farmer and to encourage acculturation by example in isolated communities. In 1892, using all titles except that of Expert Farmer, Standing Rock Agent James McLaughlin planned to use Indian District Farmers to maintain machinery, to teach mechanized farming techniques, and to assure that every adult male gave the periodic road service required around his agency.²²

Working with livestock herders and other agency employees whose efforts were channeled in some degree toward agrarian progress, these various Government Farmers performed a wide variety of jobs—from issuing treaty annuities, tribal benefits, and federal gratuities to serving as appellate magistrates over tribal judges and rounding up children for school.²³ Incompetence and negligence were sometimes impediments to sound performance. In 1885, Pine Ridge Agent V. T. McGillicuddy complained that Additional Farmers came without agricultural experience only to use their offices as stepping stones to better positions.²⁴ In 1889, Rosebud Agent George Wright charged that Farmer R. P. Whitfield was brash, insubordinate, and incompetent:

He was appointed from North Carolina, and entered upon his duties Aug. 2, '85 acknowledging to the then Agent that he had "seen peanuts grow,"

22. "Report of Employees in the Cheyenne River Agency," 1871, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, Federal Archives and Record Center, Kansas City, Mo. (hereafter cited RG 75, KC FARC); Agent Charles Crissey to Indian Commissioner E. A. Hayt, 4 Aug. 1879, NA, M234, Roll 830; Commissioner H. Price to Agent James G. Wright, 19 July 1884, Letters Received by Rosebud Agency, RG 75, KC FARC; Agent V. T. McGillicuddy to the Indian Commissioner, 7 June 1885, Letters Sent from Pine Ridge Agency, RG 75, KC FARC; Agent James McLaughlin to Indian Commissioner Morgan, 22 Apr. 1892, Letter Press Copy Books, Standing Rock, RG 75, KC FARC; Superintendent Standing Rock to the Indian Commissioner, 30 Aug. 1910, Standing Rock File, RG 75, KC FARC; Annual Report, Crow Creek, 1912, Subject Correspondence Files, Crow Creek, RG 75, KC FARC; Anonymous to the Indian Commissioner, 16 Jan. 1913, and Assistant Secretary of the Interior Louis C. Laylin to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 5 Mar. 1913, Superintendent's General File, Pine Ridge, 1907-1926, RG 75, KC FARC.

23. For examples of duties, see Rosebud Agent George Wright to James A. McCorkle, 19 Oct. 1895, Letters to Farmers, Letter Press Copy Books, RG 75, KC FARC. In the districts, Government Farmers were responsible for all issues of foods and goods, for cattle roundups and brand management, for supervision of school attendance, for the management of freighting and other irregular employee services, for the operation of the slaughter houses, for the census, and for the supervision of cultural practices, among other things. Central to all of their performances, however, was supervision and instruction in agriculture.

24. Agent V. T. McGillicuddy to the Indian Commissioner, 7 June 1885, Letters Sent from Pine Ridge Agency, RG 75, KC FARC.

which had been the extent of his farming experience. When first assigned to duty he requested to be informed which were breaking or stubble plows, and still condemns and discourages the use of the cultivator as being worthless.²⁵

Spoilsmanship was an obvious cause for the selection of incompetents. At Pine Ridge, a successor of Agent McGillicuddy, Doctor D. F. Royer, appeased a man named Gleason, who had lost the competition with Royer for appointment as agent, by making him clerk. When Gleason proved incapable of performing his duties, Royer rehired a former clerk and, as a "consolation prize," made Gleason an Additional Farmer. Wrote Francis Leupp, Gleason "made about as poor a record at the agricultural end of the concern as he had at the clerical end; but he was, at any rate, where he could do less harm with his ignorance and general inefficiency."²⁶

The distraction of extraneous functions was another deterrent to the sound performance of these officials as farm instructors. Writing generally on the deficiencies of Government Farmers across the West in 1899, George Bird Grinnell complained:

Agency farmers, whose immediate duty it was to instruct the people in the pursuit of civilization, do anything rather than that. They potter about the agency, or they are stablemen, or they work in the blacksmith shop, or put up new buildings, or paint and whitewash old ones, or spend much of their time at the butchering and the issue — do anything, in fact, except to teach the Indians farming and overseeing their work. . . . They should not pass their time . . . about the agency. They should spend seed-time and harvest out at the camps and settlements, teaching the Indians how to perform the various operations of farming. The farmers on reservations where Indians are stock-raisers should be practical cattlemen.²⁷

As demands for some of these extraneous services diminished early in the 1900s (because there was less need to control traditional ceremonies and practices, less concern about law and order, and so forth) and preoccupation about the Indians' uses of allotments increased in official circles, Government Farmers were instructed to devote more attention to the responsibilities

25. Agent George Wright to the Indian Commissioner, 18 Sept. 1889, Letters Sent from Rosebud Agency, RG 75, KC FARC.

26. Francis E. Leupp, *Civil Service Reform Essential to a Successful Indian Administration* (Philadelphia: Indian Rights Association, 1895), pp. 5-9.

27. George Bird Grinnell, "The Indian on the Reservation," *Atlantic Monthly* 83 (Feb. 1899): 257, 266. Soon the need for special expertise in livestock management led to the appointment of Stockmen instead of Farmers on the Crow Creek and west-river reserves. For example, see reports of Stockman Michael O'Shea, Crow Creek Farmers Files, 1910-1915, RG 75, KC FARC.

they had been hired to assume. By 1908, two Additional Farmers at Fort Totten in neighboring North Dakota worked full time with agricultural supervision and machinery maintenance, while a third took care of heirship land sales and lease agreements.²⁸ At Crow Creek Reservation in 1910, the school superintendent wrote the school farmer:

You will be expected to lay aside any and all ideas of your own, generally speaking, relative to the impracticability of this being an agricultural country, and make an earnest effort to carry out the wishes of the Indian Office by using every inducement possible and get the Indians to FARM their tillable land, and to make their homes upon their own allotments. . . . Think farm and talk farm to everyone for whose benefit you are supposed to be working.

Distribute agricultural experiment station bulletins, he concluded, about both farming and livestock production.²⁹

28. Fort Totten Superintendent to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 6 July 1908, Outgoing Correspondence from Fort Totten Agency, RG 75, KC FARC.

29. Crow Creek Indian School Superintendent to Crow Creek Indian School Farmer, 12 Sept. 1910, Letters Sent to Agency Employees, Crow Creek, RG 75, KC FARC.

A dairy herd stands patiently as students learn to milk cows on the Pine Ridge reservation.



Government Farmers continued to perform many nonagrarian functions after the reorganization of their system in 1913, to be sure, yet they concentrated more and more upon agriculture. Since it was no longer necessary to teach basic techniques or even machinery maintenance skills, they worked instead to transmit business techniques necessary to successful farm management. Indeed, the standard examination for employment as a Government Farmer by that time required demonstrations of proficiency in penmanship, spelling, farm economy, bookkeeping, and technical skills as well as capacities to deal with practical problems characteristic of the region. In addition, by 1916 they were expected to hold "Farmers' Meetings" in the districts, where they arranged or delivered lectures on the responsibilities of patriotism and on such topics as corn culture, livestock growing, and alfalfa production—inspiring their charges to keep pace with the latest information on scientific farming.³⁰ Working mainly to guide family heads in business methods, modern farming techniques, and land management, Government Farmers continued to serve people at the grass roots level into the mid-1930s, when they were finally absorbed as team members in the Agricultural Extension Service.

Approximately a decade before this amalgamation occurred, Farmers and other Field Service personnel teamed up to conduct progress surveys on nearly all Indian reservation farm families, in response to instructions contained in a circular issued by Commissioner of Indian Affairs Charles Burke on 23 March 1922. Because agency reports had previously indicated limited effort by employees to get out on allotments and lend encouragement and assistance, Burke ordered an evaluation of conditions at each Indian home, to be documented by photographs.³¹ Out of this order grew important reservation "Industrial Surveys," which displayed in vivid detail how the system of agrarian instruction had worked among the Sioux. These surveys were intended to define the situation of each Indian on the land, outline a five-year plan for every family, encourage garden and food preservation efforts, and stimulate closer supervision by agency Farmers.³²

30. Superintendent to the Indian Commissioner, 19 May 1914, Pine Ridge Superintendent's General File, 1907-1926, RG 75, KC FARC; Circular, "Information for Applicants for Farmer Positions, 1913," Administrative Circular File, Crow Creek, RG 75, KC FARC; Sisseton Superintendent E. D. Mossman to the Indian Commissioner, 12 Apr. 1916, Indian Central Classified File, RG 75, NA.

31. Indian Office Circular #1774, 23 Mar. 1922, RG 75, NA.

32. Charles H. Burke to all Superintendents and Indian Service Farmers, 17 Mar. 1923, Reports of Industrial Surveys, Entry #762, RG 75, NA.

Clearly, the reports showed distinguished accomplishment by some allottees. A Rosebud enrollee had grown comfortably well-to-do on his ranch and had more than twenty thousand dollars deposited in local banks, plus ten thousand dollars invested in a packing house business. A Yankton man had, on lush prairie land south of Marty Mission, "a hundred acres of corn well tended," an ample variety of farm machinery, a successful hog business, and the reputation of being an "outstanding" farmer who was "always at home and at work. . . . The home clean and well kept which bespeaks of industry and thrift."³³

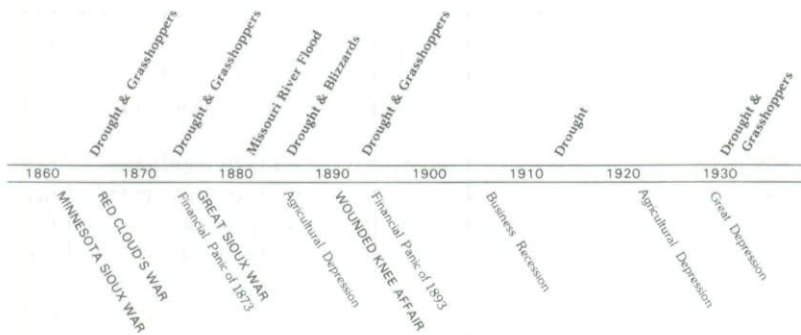
Unfortunately, entries on men such as these were the exception, not the rule. On the Sisseton reservation, there were many gardens, but arable land left under Indian control was limited because most Indian land had been leased for cash payments. Few members of this tribe were considered self-sufficient. On the Yankton reservation, where the agricultural experiment in South Dakota began during the early 1860s, the success story mentioned above was duplicated on fewer than a dozen allotments. More common was the story of a man living with his family on twenty acres near Greenwood who was characterized as "able bodied, speaks fairly good English, intelligent but not very industrious. Does not put in either crop or garden, support derived from inherited [allotment] interests." More typical still was a Yankton who had "no time for farming or any other work, as his time is spent looking after other Indians' business, holding councils. . . ."³⁴

By far, a majority of reports on South Dakota Sioux were of the latter type. Obviously, the effort to convert them into self-sufficient subsistence farmers through land allotment and individual instruction for more than half a century had in most instances failed. Reasons varied from report to report. In 1927, a member of the United States Board of Indian Commissioners concluded simply, "The Sioux is not a natural farmer."³⁵ Against the traditional legacy of garden-crop production described earlier, this statement amounted to naive speculation by an outsider. More qualified observers pointed to bureaucratic mismanagement, periodic droughts and depressions, and the need of Indian people to bargain away real estate for sustenance through a quarter century when treaty annuities, tribal benefits, and federal

33. Reports on Industrial Surveys, Entry #762, Rosebud, Yankton, RG 75, NA.

34. Reports on Industrial Surveys, Entry #762, Yankton, RG 75, NA.

35. John J. Sullivan, Report, 15 Oct. 1927, General Service File, RG 75, NA.

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gratuities were reduced to a trickle. In any event, the agrarian experiment did not turn out as intended by its nineteenth-century architects.

There was hope, nevertheless, going into the 1930s, in spite of the protracted drought, the grasshopper invasions, and the Great Depression. Through more than half a century of experience, Sioux people had acquired the attitudes and skills necessary to farm successfully by white men's rules. For one thing, Indian people had gradually come to accept crop cultivation as appropriate work for men as well as women. Recognizing that traditional circumstances had dictated a distribution of responsibilities between the sexes that encumbered acceptance of farming as a primary occupation by Sioux men, federal officials who established the agencies enticed men into farming with bribes of various kinds. For Whetstone (Rosebud) Agency in 1871, Indian Commissioner Eli S. Parker approved prizes of fifty dollars each for "Thigh" and "Man Good Voice" as rewards for the production of the most valuable crops in their bands.³⁶ At Fort Totten two years later, Agent William Forbes admitted a "habit of paying" Indians "for plowing or 'grubbing' their fields, making fences, &c."³⁷ The same system was common practice at Yankton, Crow Creek, and other agencies because "irregular" Indian labor allocations, "civilization" funds, and various other budget items could be used legitimately to coax reluctant males into activities they

36. Commissioner Eli S. Parker to Whetstone Agent J. M. Washburn, 24 Apr. 1871, Letters Received by the Whetstone Agency, RG 75, KC FARC.

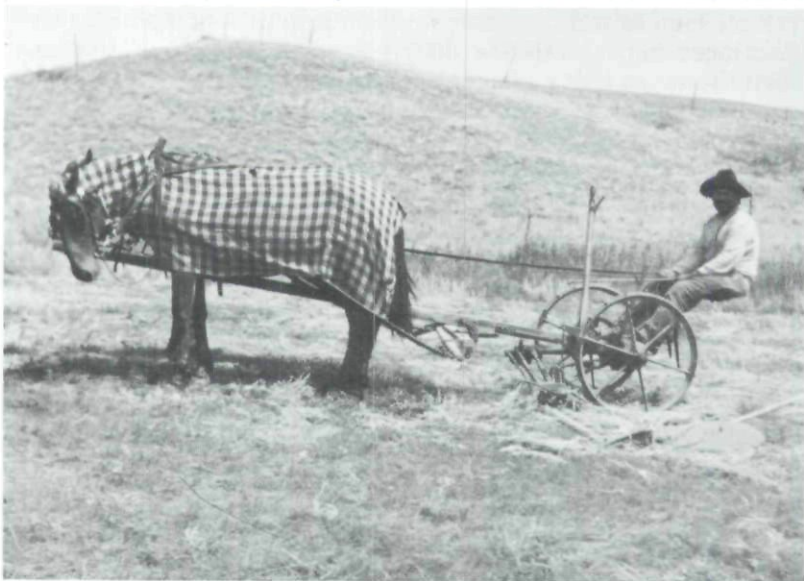
37. Agent William Forbes, Devil's Lake, to M. N. Adams, 18 Nov. 1873, Box 5, Moses N. Adams Papers, Minnesota Historical Society, St. Paul.

had previously shunned as women's work. By the second quarter of the twentieth century, most Sioux men had become adroit craftsmen of mechanized, subsistence agriculture—if not “natural farmers”—through long exposure to techniques under federal supervision.

Moreover, in the twentieth century, the higher-salaried posts among Government Farmers went more and more to tribal members. Race was not clearly recorded in many reports, but from appearances, more than half of the positions were held by tribal enrollees on Sioux reserves through the 1920s; hence, dozens of Sioux men had been instructors as well as practitioners of subsistence farming by non-Indian standards.

Expertise in family farming, therefore, was in place at the outset of the 1930s to help federal officials find means to bring tribal members through hard times. The philosophy of the commissioner of Indian affairs who took charge in 1933 called for maximum use of these skills. Blaming bureaucratic mismanagement for previous failure and striving to create rural “communities” among the Sioux, if not to restore ancient *tiospaye*, John Collier fostered and guided agrarian efforts of several types, using South

John Bear, a Yanktonai, runs a mower on the Crow Creek reservation.



Dakota reservations as experimental laboratories in the early years of his administration. He called a halt to further divestment of tribal land title with the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, supplied funds to support the acquisition of marginal land and some arable acreage by Indian groups, and ordered his staff to put forth maximum effort to reestablish the reliance of Sioux people upon the soil. To all of their reservations, he directed funds in support of projects run by the Civilian Conservation Corps—Indian Department (CCC-ID), which provided wage-labor employment, engendered community spirit, and improved acreages for productive use. On the Rosebud and Yankton reservations, he used Indian Relief and Rehabilitation (IRR) monies, supplemented by funds from other New Deal program resources, to facilitate “colonies”—communal, cooperative, irrigated-farming settlements—on the hope that enough interest in sharing had survived a century of free-enterprise brainwashing to build economies similar to those that had sustained prehistoric bands. On the depressed Lower Brule reservation, he endeavored to pool nearly all tribal energies and resources into one massive, Indian-owned livestock cooperative. To Collier’s staff members, the latter was to be a model, and they pushed its developments until tribal leaders began to pull out in protest against paternalism. At Fort Peck, higher up the Missouri, the plan was family river-lot reclamation farming; on the Sisseton Reservation, it was largely a truck-farm effort, plus one colony at Old Agency; in Flandreau, it was transformation of descendants from Santee homesteaders along the upper Big Sioux River into a recognized tribe through the use of CCC-ID, IRR, and other federal program funds. Drawing upon various resources, Indian New Dealers put forth great effort to help Sioux people achieve self-sufficiency through use of their land.³⁸

38. Books and articles published to date do not adequately describe the application of New Deal programs on Sioux reservations (or on any reservations, for that matter). Detailed information exists only as raw data in documentary collections at the National Archives: collections on the Civilian Conservation Corps—Indian Department; Indian Relief and Rehabilitation; Roads Division—Office of Indian Affairs; and so on. Superficial but reliable accounts of John Collier’s attitudes toward agricultural development and of the application of his policies on Sioux reservations are contained in the periodical publicity organ *Indians at Work*, published by the Office of Indian Affairs from 1933 to 1945. A review of lead editorials in all issues of this periodical provides a survey of Collier’s philosophies, and a perusal of numerous short articles and notices gives valuable information about the application of Indian New Deal programs in Sioux country.

In the course of these efforts, they absorbed Government Farmers and Assistant Farmers into a new Agricultural Extension Service team system that purported to nurture farm and livestock production according to the land resources available. The new scheme was different from the old. In the previous era, Government Farmers had worked in districts one-on-one to encourage greater production by allottees with little or no programmatic coordination. The new extension programs—drawn up by superintendents, Government Farmers, tribal representatives, and extension agents—coordinated team efforts under supervision by extension agents, farm agents, and various New Deal program directors.

By the mid-1930s, the new programs were working efficiently because they drew benefits from previous Indian Field Service activities. Beginning about 1916, farming associations, 4-H clubs, and other local organizations had been established on all Sioux reservations to inspire community efforts. In 1923, the first agricultural extension agent had gone to Pine Ridge, not to work with individuals, but to instill general improvement across the reserve. The following year, a farm agent was assigned to Sisseton with similar purposes in mind, which he pursued until his office was abolished twenty years later.³⁹ Gradually, local extension clubs had emerged under guidance from farm agents. Through Agricultural Extension Service programs and the opportunities offered by CCC-ID, IRR, and other New Deal systems, the community efforts of Indian people had brought Sioux on most reservations close to a self-sufficiency from agriculture for the first time in their recorded history.

Unfortunately, the success of the New Deal group movement was short-lived. Due to the exigencies of World War II, the CCC-ID, IRR, and other helpful programs ground to a halt in the early 1940s for lack of funds. Some able-bodied Sioux enlisted in the armed forces, and others took employment in defense plants or in nearby war-related jobs at substantial wages. After the war, Collier's communalism fell into disrepute among federal officials. The price of mechanization, along with inflation, drove operational costs beyond the reach of some Indian communities. Nearly a century of acculturationist schooling brought reaction against Collierism among other communities. The increased fractionation

39. Assistant Commissioner E. B. Meritt to Superintendent Henry M. Tidwell, 20 Oct. 1923, Pine Ridge Decimal File, and V. E. Godfrey, Sisseton, to Stan Murray, Madison, Wis., 15 Oct. 1952, Sisseton Decimal File, RG 75, KC FARC.

of allotment holdings rapidly diminished interest among land owners, as well, despite tribal accomplishments in land-unit consolidation. The 1950s brought important federal policy changes: the effort to "terminate" government responsibility and assistance; the movement for relocation of Indians to industrial centers for employment under a 1952 act; and a push for educational assistance as the best means to self-sufficiency for Indian people.

From each reservation in the state in the 1950s, some tribal members moved to urban locations or went away to school. Those left behind were encouraged to supplement agrarian incomes with the development of light industries and, subsequently, with the establishment of various public-service programs. In the 1960s, resource evaluations prompted many small industrial experiments (about seventy-five in Sioux country, of which only half a dozen survived). From the early 1960s to the early 1970s, the Office of Economic Opportunity and other Great Society programs (dubbed by officials "make-work programs," or "grants relief") appeared. These government-sponsored movements brought temporary benefits but few lasting effects. In their wake came the federal policy of "Self-Determination," followed by official encouragement for elected tribal officials to use land and other natural resources to greater advantage.⁴⁰

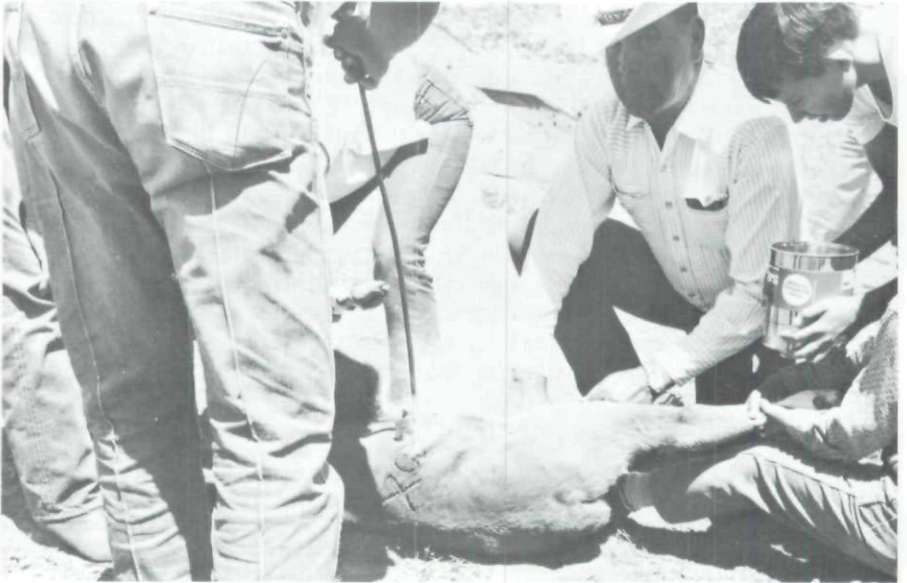
The light industrial experiments and public-service grants-relief activities sponsored by the federal government in the past quarter of a century have become historical curiosities, lingering mainly in oral traditions and dusty archives. Promise for economic survival on most of the reservations exists in the older agrarian legacies: in the agricultural finesse that evolved among Arikara and Sioux villages in precontact times; and in the intensive, subsistence agricultural, as well as the extensive ranching and farming, practices taught by Government Farmers in the period 1860-1933, which were improved by the Agricultural Extension Service and New Deal program activities of the 1930s.

Clear evidence of these agricultural legacies can be seen on South Dakota reservations by the informed traveler. Here and there are gardens that differ from those managed by Ree and

40. No books and articles covering agrarian activities on Sioux reservations since World War II exist. Works are in progress, but none have yet been published. Information to support generalizations in the text comes from a large volume of documents at the National Archives; at the Federal Archives in Kansas City, Denver, and Seattle; at the Bureau of Indian Affairs Area Offices in Aberdeen and Minneapolis; and at the oral history archive at the University of South Dakota in Vermillion.



Above, cowboys take time off for lunch on a 1968 cooperative cattle drive on the Cheyenne River reservation. Below, cattle are branded at the Rosebud tribal ranch in 1978.



Sioux women generations ago mainly in their cultivation by steel tools and in the varieties of foods they produce. Scattered on most of the reserves are family farming units owned by tribal members, which perpetuate the agrarian yeomanship taught by Government Farmers and New Deal representatives. There are signs of failure, too. Most obvious is the predominance of land owned or managed by non-Indians within the boundaries of the reservations. At Seven Mile Creek, on the Yankton reserve, stands a row of abandoned chalk-rock cabins that commemorates Collier's experiments in communal farming and ranching on the Yankton, Rosebud, and Pine Ridge reservations. On most reserves, there are untended and eroded dams, which were conservation projects designed to support diversified subsistence farming or collective efforts in livestock production and irrigated agriculture. Yet, the evidence of older successes remains, together with signs of recent improvements. Tribal enterprises in livestock production, as well as Indian family farming units, can be found on most reserves. Land consolidation programs and tribal leasing practices that give preferential treatment to enrollees are other recent developments. Altered by policies and conditions of the twentieth century, the threefold agrarian legacy of American Indians continues to be an important component of South Dakota's agricultural heritage.

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