

US Development and Struggles in the West, Industrialization, Immigration, and Urbanization – Dawes Act Newsletter

The arrival of Europeans in America heralded a sea of change in life of Native people. In the nineteenth century tribes in the Pacific Northwest fell victim to the crushing force of America's expansion West. The sovereignty, community, hunting and fishing grounds, and customs of the Native people were continually threatened. The conflict between American settler's beliefs in "ownership" of the land and Indian's sovereign right to the lands they occupied continually threatened the survival of tribes, including those in the Pacific Northwest.

Senator Henry L. Dawes (1816-1903) of Massachusetts was the author of the Dawes Act. He once expressed his faith in the,

"civilizing power of private property with the claim that to be civilized was to wear civilized clothes...cultivate the ground, live in houses, ride in Studebaker wagons, send children to school, drink whiskey [and] own property." (U. S. Statutes at Large, Vol. XXIV, p. 388 ff.)

In the mid nineteenth century, one of the most prominent forces in stripping Native people of their sovereign rights was the General Allotment Act, commonly known as the Dawes Act. The original intentions of the Dawes Act,

"was to make the Indian conform to the social and economic structure of rural American by vesting him with private property. If, it was thought, the Indian had his own piece of land, he would forsake his tribal way and become just like the white homesteaders who were then flooding...areas of the western United States." (Vine Deloria, Custer Died for Your Sins, pp. 52-53)

The Dawes Act divided reservation lands into parcels with each family owning shares on which to farm, thus "civilizing" the Indian tribes. Families receiving land allotments were not allowed to sell their plots until they received title to that land.

The Dawes Act continued the destruction of Indian tribes. Much of the land on reservations was unsuitable for agriculture and families often sold their parcel as soon as allowed. Land on the reservation not deeded to tribal members was frequently sold to white settlers, often through coercion, or taken by fraud. Thus, the Dawes Act continued the disintegration of tribal lands and resources. In Washington State, by the time the Dawes Act was

repealed in 1934, over 30 percent of the Colville and Spokane reservation lands were owned by non-Indians (Greene, Carlson, Myers 2005).

Another product of the Dawes Act was the establishment of Indian boarding schools. Whites saw little value in the culture and traditions of the tribes they encountered and most believed it was in the best interest of Indians to be assimilated. The difficulty of assimilating Indians was often known as the "Indian problem."

The first of these schools was founded by Richard Pratt, a US Army Officer who offered up the idea that one must "Kill the Indian in him, and save the man" (*Official Report of the Nineteenth Annual Conference of Charities and Correction* (1892), 46–59). Pratt believed that Indians were without culture only because they had not been exposed to "civilized" customs. It was thought that like African slaves forced to come to America who were isolated from their native language and culture and then exposed to European customs, Indians educated in boarding schools would assimilate into American society.

The United States government may have operated as many as 100 Indian boarding schools. In the Pacific Northwest, there were several Indian boarding schools. These boarding schools were run by the Bureau of Indian Affairs and others were run by the church. Indian children were also sent to boarding schools in Oklahoma. Indian children were often taken from their families by force and brought to Indian schools. Here, long hair was cut short, Indian names were replaced with Anglo names, and the speaking of their own language was punished. The expectation was that the schools would train Indian children to be productive and civilized members of American society. Those who returned to their tribes had often forgotten their language and culture.

In 1924 the United States government passed the Indian Citizenship Act. This act granted citizenship to Indians as a continuation of the assimilation of Indians into American society. By this time Indians had fought in World War 1 alongside white soldiers, unlike Black soldiers who were segregated in to their own units.

Today, Indian people continue to struggle with the legacy of the Dawes Act.