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COMMENTARY

Sources for Research on Tribal History in the National Archives Regional System

KENT CARTER

In September 1899, Crow Dog submitted a claim to the United States Army for fifty dollars, for a horse killed at Wounded Knee. He stated that he had served as a scout for Lieutenant Colonel Smith of the 8th Infantry and that Indian agent Major Wright had promised him he would be paid. The commissioner of Indian affairs asked J. George Wright, who was then serving as the United States Indian inspector for Indian Territory, to verify the claim. In the National Archives–Southwest Region, buried among thousands of pages of records relating to Wright’s accounts, is his reply, which gives some interesting background on Crow Dog and his claim.

According to Wright, “[I]t seems highly improbable that Crow Dog, always recognized as a leader in the hostile element would have been engaged as a scout.” Wright noted that Crow Dog had been sentenced to hang for killing Chief Spotted Tail in 1882 but was eventually released and “was always considered a disturbing

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element and was the leader in all troubles." Like a good federal bureaucrat, Wright closes by passing the buck and suggesting that the commissioner contact Lieutenant Colonel Smith.

Wright's letter is typical of hundreds of thousands of documents that go unused by genealogists or researchers interested in tribal history, because they are not aware of the wealth of material that exists in the regional archives system of the National Archives. Unfortunately, many researchers think of the National Archives only as an imposing gray granite building in Washington, D.C. that houses the Declaration of Independence, the Constitution, and other priceless "Charters of Freedom." Most of them do not know that, in 1969, the National Archives established regional archives in cities across the United States to preserve original records created by field offices of federal agencies and microfilm copies of records kept in Washington. There are now twelve of these regional archives, and many of them have millions of pages of original records such as the Wright letter that would be useful to anyone interested in relations between Native Americans and the federal government. The following may enable these potential researchers to find and make use of this virtually untapped resource.

Responsibility for managing relations between the federal government and recognized tribes has been exercised by thousands of Indian agents, school superintendents, special commissioners, teachers, inspectors, purchasing and disbursing agents, enrolling and allotting agents, extension agents, field matrons, and other employees of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. They have administered programs dealing with health, education, employment, land ownership, finances, and legal rights that have had an impact on the lives of millions of individual Native Americans. In the course of carrying out their duties, they created literally mountains of paper records.

Some of that paper was sent back to the headquarters of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and is now in the main National Archives Building in Washington, D.C. This is the material that is most often used by researchers, and it is well described in the *Guide to Records in the National Archives of the United States Relating to American Indians* and a *Preliminary Inventory of Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs*, both of which were compiled by Edward E. Hill. The *Guide* is available for purchase from the Government Printing Office. Some of the records have been reproduced on microfilm, described in *American*

Indians: A Select Catalog of National Archives Microfilm Publications, which can be purchased from the National Archives (NEPS), Washington, D.C. 20408.

For every page that an Indian agent sent to Washington, the commissioner seems to have sent dozens back to the field; this material stayed in the files of the individual agents, along with records—about individual Indians and local conditions—that never went to Washington. Unfortunately, some of these files were lost over time through neglect or various natural disasters, but many of them survived and are now being preserved in the regional archives system. The volume of records held by the regions is almost three times what can be found in Washington. The best general description of this material can be found in *The Archives: A Guide to the National Archives Field Branches* by Loretto Dennis Szucs and Sandra Hargreaves Luebking (Ancestry Publishing, 1988). In addition, each region has compiled a detailed guide to its holdings, which can be obtained by writing to the appropriate regional director.

The type and content of records that can be found for any particular agency vary, and there are often gaps in the chronological coverage. Most agencies, however, possess files that contain the correspondence between the agent and his superiors, officials of other federal agencies and local government, owners of businesses, individual Indians, and many non-Indians. These letters, telegrams, and other narrative items, such as activity reports, provide extensive information about tribal economic, political, and social life and the agent's perceptions about his duties and the Indians for whom he was responsible.

Many agents appear to have been concerned primarily with accounting for every penny they spent; therefore, there are numerous financial records, such as vouchers, cash reports, property returns, and ledgers of receipts and disbursements. Often, there are records relating to annuity payments and disbursements of other funds to recognized tribal members as a result of treaties or congressional legislation. In many cases, these records contain only an Indian's name and the amount of money or type of goods he or she received, but they can be used in conjunction with tribal census rolls or other enrollment records for genealogy or studies of tribal demographics.

Some agencies kept copies of records relating to the activities of tribal governments, such as the agendas, minutes, and resolutions

of business committees or other elected groups. These can often provide insights into internal tribal politics and the reactions of tribal leaders to various federal programs and policies. Some material shows how elected tribal officials tried to deal with controversial legislation such as the Wheeler-Howard Act and termination.

At some point, most tribes were enrolled, and each individual member was allotted land. These enrollment and allotment records generally include lists of eligible members, applications for specific tracts of land, plat maps showing the location of selections, and transcripts of hearings on contested allotments. In some cases, there are letters from individual Indians to their agents, many in the native language, protesting the entire allotment process. Other material on the subsequent sale or leasing of the land provides extensive detail about the dispersal of the tribal domain and the use of tribal resources. In addition to documenting individual land ownership, these records can be used in bulk to reconstruct the physical character and use of the land prior to 1900.

In many cases, the agency exercised control over the financial affairs of individual Indians considered "restricted" because of their age, degree of Indian blood, or other factors. Files on these persons document the collection and disbursement of funds and often include application forms and correspondence pertaining to requests by the Indian for permission to buy automobiles, clothing, furniture, pianos, groceries, livestock, farming equipment, and other items. The letters from the individual Indians can provide a unique view of their daily living conditions and the frustrations of dealing with a paternalistic and often unresponsive bureaucracy. Probate and guardianship files may be included, providing information about management of funds and the determination of the heirs of deceased tribal members.

The records of most agencies include material on agricultural extension projects, home demonstration programs, irrigation and land management activities, construction of homes and roads, and health programs. Reports and project files on activities of the Civilian Conservation Corps-Indian Division and other emergency relief programs conducted in the 1930s document the struggle of Native Americans to deal with the Great Depression. There may be reports of physicians, field matrons, and others involved in health care programs, as well as records of special

agents dealing with liquor control, suppression of peyote, and other law enforcement activities on reservations. These reports often contain extensive detail about living conditions, health status, income, housing conditions, and recreational activities of individual Indian families and the impact of changing economic and social conditions on them.

Some agencies maintained records created by schools operating on the reservation or by education field agents who were responsible for keeping track of the attendance and progress of Indian children in public schools. These often include narrative and statistical reports on school enrollment and correspondence about the planning and implementation of specific educational programs. Files on individual students may contain applications for admission, grades, photographs, and correspondence with parents and guardians about admission and attendance. Some regions have records of nonreservation boarding schools, such as the Chilocco Indian School in Oklahoma.

The commissioner of Indian affairs set policy in Washington, D.C., but the hundreds of agents and other employees in the field were the ones who tried to implement it in their daily contacts with individual Indians. Thus, their records provide the best and most detailed evidence about the lives of Native Americans as they struggled to maintain their culture and sense of identity. It is a shame that this valuable resource has been so little used by researchers. Perhaps as people learn of the existence of the regional archives system of the National Archives they will make more use of this unique source of documentation about the heritage of Native Americans.

Persons interested in detailed information about the holdings of each region and their use should contact the director of the appropriate region:

National Archives–Southeast Region

1557 St. Joseph Ave.

East Point, GA 30344

404-763-7477

Records from Alabama, Georgia, Florida, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee

National Archives–Great Lakes Region

7358 South Pulaski Rd.

Chicago, IL 60629

312-581-7816

Records from Illinois, Indiana, Michigan, Minnesota, Ohio, and Wisconsin

National Archives–Central Plains Region

2312 East Bannister Rd.

Kansas City, MO 64131

816-926-6272

Records from Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, and Nebraska

National Archives–Southwest Region

P.O. Box 6216

Fort Worth, TX 76115

817-334-5525

Records from Arkansas, Louisiana, Oklahoma, and Texas

National Archives–Rocky Mountain Region

Building 48, Denver Federal Center

Denver, CO 80225-0307

303-236-0817

Records from Colorado, Montana, New Mexico, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming

National Archives–Pacific Sierra Region

1000 Commodore Dr.

San Bruno, CA 94066

415-876-9009

Records from northern California, Hawaii, parts of Nevada, American Samoa, and the Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands

National Archives–Pacific Southwest Region

P.O. Box 6719

Laguna Niguel, CA 92607-6719

714-643-4241

Records from southern California, Arizona, and Clark County, Nevada

National Archives–Pacific Northwest Region

6125 Sand Point Way, N.E.

Seattle, WA 98115

206-526-6507

Records from Idaho, Oregon, and Washington

National Archives–Alaska Region

654 West Third Ave.

Anchorage, AK 99501

907-271-2441

Records from Alaska