

# TALKING WITH THE PLOW: AGRICULTURAL POLICY AND INDIAN FARMING IN THE CANADIAN AND U.S. PRAIRIES

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## **Abstract / Résumé**

This paper compares agricultural policy in late 19th century Canada and the United States, and its effect on the development of agriculture among Native peoples of the northern and southern plains. The argument made is that the attitudes and preconceived ideas about Indians held by government officials in both countries--rather than any inherent shortcomings in Native peoples' ability and willingness to farm--impeded the advancement of agriculture among Plains peoples, and prevented them from adapting farming to Aboriginal patterns of cooperative labor and sharing.

Cet article compare la politique agricole du Canada et des Etats Unis au 19ième siècle ainsi que son impact sur le développement de l'agriculture chez les peuples autochtones des plaines septentrionales et méridionales. Mon exposé démontre que les attitudes et les idées préconçues à propos des Indiens des officiers gouvernementaux des deux pays ont empêché l'avancement de l'agriculture chez les peuples des plaines. Ces attitudes, plutôt que des défauts intrinsèques dans l'habileté à cultiver, ont empêché les Indiens d'adapter la culture aux modes autochtones de travail coopératif et de partage.

Ever Since the white man made the Treaty, the white man always talks of how they are to make their living. I am striving to work on my farm that my children may benefit but, I am not accustomed to work on a farm and am short of implements. I mean the same thing used by the white man. A reaper, mower, that is what we want...We cannot work in the winter. It is cold and we are naked. There is much sickness on my reserve and I would like a Doctor there.

Poundmaker, Cree chief, 1881

We have not enough mowing machines. They are so limited that they cannot get around, by the time they reach one [field]...it is too late to cut hay. We do not want to put in small grain because we cannot get binding and threshing machines... With old men like me the only way we can do to get Indians to work is to talk with the youth. We cannot catch hold the plow and show how. These young men can not only talk, but they can catch hold of the plow and talk that way also.

Young Whirlwind, Cheyenne leader, 1895

We must have wagons, harness, teams and other things; but without money we cannot purchase them. These Indians are poor and at the point of starvation, and we are told that we must work for their bread as white people do... While I am here [i.e., in Washington, D.C.] I have better food than the folks at home; a good many of them have nothing to eat this morning.

Row-of-Lodges, Arapaho leader, 1895

## **Introduction**

Three Plains Indian leaders, two countries, similar pleas. In both the United States and Canada, initial governmental interest in and enthusiasm for encouraging agriculture among Plains peoples eventually gave way to disinterest and skepticism. While some Native leaders had the foresight to see that agriculture was their peoples' future, government leaders in both countries lacked that prescience, and instituted policies that ensured failure rather than encouraged success. In this paper, I look comparatively at Canadian and U.S. Indian policy as it related to the development of agriculture among Native nations in the northern and southern Great Plains, particularly in the latter case, the Cheyenne and Arapaho of what is now western Oklahoma. My objective is to illustrate that, while government officials in both countries assumed--as they always have--that they knew

what was best for Indian people, their preconceived assumptions about Indians gave shape to a policy that undermined Native peoples' ability to adapt successfully to an agrarian life.

### **Now that the buffalo are gone...**

By the mid-1870s, the beginnings of the disappearance of the buffalo from the northern and southern plains were evident, especially to the Native populations who depended upon them. Reserves for Plains Indians were being established in both the U.S. and Canada, and Indian leaders were involved in negotiating treaties with government officials that specifically addressed the leaders' concern for the future of their people. Among the demands northern Plains leaders brought to the bargaining table were suitable arable land on their Reserves, promises for government provision of seed, implements, oxen, and instruction in agriculture, and sufficient rations to sustain their people until they could get farms established. "We want cattle, tools, agricultural implements, and assistance in everything when we come to settle--our country is no longer able to support us," said Sweet Grass, a spokesman for the Cree Chiefs of the northern plains (Carter, 1990:49, 55).

In 1869, Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders rejected lands north of the Cimarron River as unsuitable for a Reservation, in part because of the salinity of waters in the region, but also based upon a specific agricultural appraisal. The Indians stated that the soil often took on a "snow-like" quality, caused by the "drifting" of upland soils in western Oklahoma, a problem unrecognized by non-Indian farmers until 1896, and not taken seriously by them until 1901. From the very first, then, Cheyenne and Arapaho leaders were concerned about the agricultural potential of any future Reservation (Nespor, 1984:189). The Cheyennes, in fact, had never completely severed ties with their agrarian heritage. Some groups of Cheyennes continued seasonal planting up to 1865, and though the Cheyenne and Arapaho had long been mounted buffalo-hunting peoples, they continued a tradition of agricultural skills that could be drawn upon once again when their nomadic existence as hunters became increasingly risky, and eventually impossible (*Ibid*:124-125).

Both northern and southern Plains peoples knew a great deal about their environments--vegetation, rainfall and frost patterns, availability of water, care of horses, and knowledge of summer pasturage and winter forage requirements--and this intimacy with their surroundings had the potential to make them better suited than White settlers to become farmers and stock raisers in the harsh conditions of the plains, given sufficient

support and instruction. However, in Canada, though the government officially proclaimed a policy to help Indians adopt agriculture, and federal officials made eloquent statements about mounting a Reserve agricultural program to make prairie Indians self-sufficient, not enough was actually done to put this course into effect. There was a great deal of reluctance among Canadian politicians during the latter part of the 19th century to provide support of any kind to needy people, and the supplying of rations to starving Indians was seen as a way of staving off armed rebellion rather than a charitable responsibility of government. Government officials sought to reassure themselves and the public by repeatedly insisting that Indians would not get handouts, but would be made to work for every pound of rations they received (Carter, 1990:ix, 49; Dyck, 1986:125).

In the U.S., the Department of the Interior, which encompassed the Bureau of Indian Affairs, was not very interested in the promotion of any kind of farming among any group in the 1800s. It fought against the establishment of a department of agriculture, or the creation of any subdivision of itself that did anything more than collect statistics relating to land valuation. In the 19th century, the Interior Department was primarily concerned with the sale of land. Farming led to private claims on land, and such provisions threatened anticipated federal revenues from western land sales. Indians were not necessarily being singled out by the U.S. government's land policies: all agrarian communities and sovereign groups west of the original thirteen states were affected (Nespor, 1984:5, 14). The Canadian government, by contrast, acted to provide an optimum environment for immigrant White farmers, while simultaneously ensuring that Indian farmers did not compete with Whites for markets, and enacted policies that combined to undermine and atrophy agricultural development on Reserves (Carter, 1990:234).

### **"Damned if we do..."**

Though many White farmers failed just as miserably as did their Indian neighbors, rarely, if ever, were those failures blamed upon the personal shortcomings or cultural traditions of those farmers. In addition, Whites could and did move on to more favorable lands and climates, an option not available to Native farmers confined to Reserves. Along with all of the difficulties encountered by non-Indians, Indian farmers also faced a Euro-Canadian and American belief system that attributed their failure at farming not to the hardships they faced, but to an inherent incompatibility between Indians (savagery) and agriculture (civilization).<sup>2</sup>

Canadian federal leaders, from the beginning of the agricultural program in the prairies, expressed fundamental misgivings about the possibility of suddenly (in evolutionary terms) converting nomadic, hunting people to a sedentary, agrarian existence. Indians, according to this view, were inherently "restless," and unaccustomed to the hard work required by an agricultural way of life (Dyck, 1986:125-127). Indian people were too rooted in "traditional" values: they socialized, travelled, and shared too much, and men, especially, were averse to labor.<sup>3</sup> A White farmer in the Cantonment district of what had been the Cheyenne/Arapaho Reservation stated in 1917 that he found that "the greatest draw back to [the Indians] working besides being naturally lazy, is that they haven't any thing to work with" (Nespor, 1984:64). Note that in this observation, Indian laziness took precedence over the obvious lack of implements needed in order to perform any work at all.

Of the above shortcomings, "sharing too much" was an attribute of Indian culture that was especially seen as anathema both to agriculture and to Indian attainment of civilization, as Whites defined it. Perhaps Henry Dawes, Massachusetts senator and architect of the 1887 General Allotment Act (universally known as the Dawes Act) put it most succinctly when he stated that, "Selfishness... is at the bottom of civilization" (Debo, 1940:22). Communal use of land, cooperative labor practices, the sharing of farm machinery and capital--these were all things that needed to be eradicated before Indians could hope to be truly civilized. Unfortunately, they were also the very attributes that enabled Indian peoples to achieve any measure of success in farming whatsoever.

Indians were not alone in this: ethnic farming communities in the U.S. prairies and plains, be they Czech, German, or of whatever European background, generally exhibited greater stability and economic success than did non-immigrant farmers. The establishment of nucleated communities with strong networks of mutual support was the reason behind the immigrants' greater success. Many of them had emigrated from countries that had already established policies of allotment and enclosure, thus resulting in large-scale displacements of their farming populations. Upon settlement upon the U.S. public domain, European immigrants went about re-establishing the kinds of community networks that they had previously known but that had become impossible in the countries from which they came (Nespor, 1984:52). Unlike Indians, such ethnic communities were not subjected to policies that sought to break-up such communal arrangements in the name of advancing civilization.

Government officials often found, to their dismay, that the "wrong" Indians were actually the ones who showed the most interest in agriculture.

Leonard Carlson has argued that it was not uncommon on Indian Reservations in the U.S. for the less "acculturated" Indians to have undertaken most of whatever farm work was actually going on. His explanation, basically, is that more traditional people might be among those most likely to place a high value on their economic independence as the only guarantee of some degree of autonomy, socioeconomic and political, from White authorities (Carlson, 1981:103-104; Nespor, 1984:50).

Among the Cheyenne, the first commitment to agriculture was by a Cheyenne camp, or village, as a whole, and was primarily a reaction to the termination in 1875 of licensing that allowed hunters to seek game off Reservation. One of the Bands of Cheyenne "hostiles," confined to the Darlington area upon surrender in 1875, quickly settled into a village, led by Big Horse. The adoption of farming by these people who, having been furnished no implements, had to resort to using butcher knives and tree branches for their implements, clearly shows that the village intended to retain its integrity as a social unit in the face of dire circumstances. Unfortunately, U.S. land policy was not compatible with the commitment of this type to sedentary village-based subsistence, nor were communal attempts at any kind of cooperative farming approved of (Nespor, 1984:5, 12).

The Cheyenne and Arapaho were briefly allowed to conduct farm operations in "farm companies" or "farm bands" between 1896 and 1901, but this policy was halted because "company" leadership had not remained in the hands of those Indians defined as "progressive" by authorities, but rather had tended to be taken on by more traditionally-established leaders. Some farm Bands were becoming reorganized along kinship lines in terms of their recruitment, and this kind of "reversion" to traditional ways of doing things was not thought proper by BIA agents. The destruction of the basic elements of Indian community life, which was the explicit aim of promoters of allotment in severalty in the U.S. (and Canada, I would add), was a profound hindrance to agricultural progress, rather than a step forward, as its supporters believed. What success there was in Cheyenne farming after allotment was related to their success in resisting the undermining of the basic elements of community (*Ibid.*:51-52).

In both the U.S. and Canada, Indian bands combined their funds to purchase mowers, hay rakes, binders, threshing machines, and other relatively expensive farm machinery and then shared it among themselves (*Ibid.*:400; Carter, 1990:98). In Cheyenne country, cooperation among Indian farmers was not encouraged by the authorities, but White Horse, the leader of the Cheyennes around Cantonment, enforced it. The men of his group attempted wheat and barley farming in the fall of 1894, but their agent

would not give them any help, arguing that they were too far away from the railhead to market their grain. When in 1896 the market for grain began to revive, White Horse's farmers plowed land for other Cheyennes who wanted to farm. Those who were helping others in plowing asked for extra rations for themselves, but were told by the agent that that would be "against regulations." Despite this lack of encouragement in their endeavors, the Cantonment Cheyennes went on to become the most independent farmers among the Southern Cheyenne by sharing implements and labor, but individualizing their farming business (Nespor, 1984:424-425).

In the Qu'Appelle region of southern Saskatchewan, Indian farmers made progress in the 1880s, despite frost, fire, drought, and hail. More gristing and threshing facilities were available, better techniques of dry-land farming had been developed by then, and the Indians were acquiring the machinery essential to prairie farming. They were moving in the direction of commercial farming with a specialization in wheat. Bands pooled resources for purchase of implements, and on many Reserves, tilled the fields in common. Agents and instructors actually found this system to be preferable to the cultivation of small, individual tracts. However, these farmers were to run afoul of Canadian Indian policy as it developed in the late 1880s.

In his annual report of 1888, Indian Commissioner Hayter Reed announced that North-West Reserves were to be subdivided into separate farms, and individualism and self-reliance, not cooperation, were to be the guiding light of Indian farmers. Reed was not pleased that Indians tended to purchase implements together, an action that reinforced the Band unit. A farmer on his own could probably never afford to purchase farm machinery, and Reed's implementation of the policies of allotment, peasant farming, and the permit system served to ensure that was the case (Carter, 1990:192-193). The permit system, in particular, which required that a department agent authorize any transaction between a merchant or buyer and an Indian, placed severe restraints on Indian farmers. The system controlled both Indian debt and credit, which were necessary if an individual was to attempt to purchase farm machinery. Indian farmers who went in together to purchase machinery were prevented from doing so, since farm instructors and agents were ordered to refuse authorization for such sales (*Ibid.*:211-212).

In the southern plains, the flow of funds among Cheyennes and Arapahos was also vital to success in farming, but BIA management of the trust accounts of Indian individuals made certain that this could not happen. The system of individual trust accounting impeded efforts at cooperation, and prevented the ready flow of funds through interest-free loans of cash among family members and friends (Nespor, 1984:226,231). Canadian and

American Indian farmers found themselves unable to dispose of their crops or their capital as they saw fit, and most were unable to secure the credit, available to White farmers, with which to purchase farm machinery, or just to see them through rough times.

In both countries, "good" or "loyal" Indians were rewarded by the authorities, while "bad" or "rebellious" Indians were often penalized. Hayter Reed, as assistant commissioner, issued a memo in 1885 that divided Indian bands into "loyal" and "disloyal" and instituted a system of rewards and punishments. "Loyal bands"--those that had remained on their Reserves during the 1885 North-West Rebellion, had sown their crops, and had obeyed their agents and instructors--were rewarded with cows, oxen, sheep, or a payment toward a piece of machinery, while "rebel" Bands had blankets, cattle, and ponies confiscated and distributed to the "loyal" groups. Reed also recommended that the tribal system be abolished and Indians' movements and activities be more rigidly supervised. These recommendations became entrenched aspects of Canadian Indian policy for all Bands, not just "rebels." The federal officials' zeal for bringing recalcitrant Indian bands under control figured significantly in the failure of the Reserve agricultural program to measure up to government expectations in the years prior to 1885 (Carter, 1990:145-146; Dyck, 1986:133).

Cheyenne and Arapaho farmers were also subject to the inconsistencies of a policy that tended to reward individuals based on agents' idiosyncratic assessments of "badness" or "goodness." Between 1883 and 1900, the Cheyenne and Arapaho had made remarkable progress--they had consolidated acreage and had control of about 5000 acres by 1900. This is not to say that they were successful farmers--they had consolidated only about two acres per capita by then. But the rate of growth of agriculture among them was admirable, given the severe capital rationing to which they were subjected. Perhaps the biggest tragedy of all is that for the most part capital was not rationed in an economically viable manner. Agents, in keeping with BIA policy, were encouraged to withhold agricultural incentives from Indians who did not conform to "civilized" standards. This usually meant that a farmer who was polygynous, wore his hair in long braids, and attended tribal ceremonies, but who may in fact have been an industrious worker, would be passed over in favor of a man who was monogamous, short-haired, and a nominal Christian, however poor a farmer he might have been (Nespor, 1984:219, 262-263). Economic rationality, then, played second fiddle to the encouragement of the outward trappings of "civilization," as the official representatives of White society defined them.

As serious as these impediments were, the major blow to Indian farming in both countries was the policy of breaking Reservations up into individual



plots of land: allotment in severalty. This practice, which had wide support in both the US. and Canada, even among people who considered themselves "friends of the Indian," had devastating effects for Indian people, and brought about the stagnation and eventual decline of Indian farming both north and south of the border.

**Severalty:** Separateness, as, lands in severalty, i.e., lands held individually, not in joint ownership. Certain tribes of Indians are believed now to be sufficiently civilized to have in severalty the lands that they have hitherto held as tribal organizations, and could not sell to the Whites for waxen beads and potato whiskey (Ambrose Bierce, *The Devil's Dictionary*).

The answer to the "problem" of tribalism in all of its manifestations was seen to lie in teaching Indian people the advantages of individualism (selfishness) and private ownership of land as the only path to self-sufficiency. In both the U.S. and Canada, the break-up of Reserves into individually-owned parcels of land, usually 160 acres in size, was accomplished through implementation of policies that had virtually identical rationales in each country. In the rhetoric of its supporters, allotment would create stable, sedentary farmers and would prove the shortest path to the enfranchisement of all Indian people. The ultimate goal was also the same--the disappearance altogether of Reserves. In both countries, allotment would clearly demarcate the used and "unused" portions of reserved lands, and surplus land could be ascertained. Officials in both countries believed that Indians would never need all their land, and that they should not be in possession of "unused" land that could be more profitably used by White settlers (Carter, 1900:200-201).

The idea of breaking up Reserves was not new in Canada--it had its antecedents in provisions of the 1857 Gradual Civilization Act; the 1869 Enfranchisement Act; and the 1876 Indian Act location ticket system. By 1887, the year the U.S. Congress passed the General Allotment Act, the Saskatchewan Herald of Battleford extolled the virtues of individual land tenure for Indians, and expressed its admiration for the American policy. Hayter Reed, under whose administration the plan to subdivide Reserves in western Canada came to fruition, visited and consulted with American officials in 1888 and 1889 when optimism about the value of allotment was high (Ibid.:194-197, 201).

### **They must crawl before they can walk**

Coupled with the survey and subdivision of Reserves in Canada was a policy of converting Reserve farmers, some of whom had become quite

successful competitors with their White neighbors, into small-scale peasant farmers. Policies of the Department of Indian Affairs beginning in the late 1880s were designed to answer the growing numbers of complaints by White farmers of unfair competition by dividing Indian and White farmers into non-competing groups. The peasant farming system was geared to protect and maintain the incomes of White farmers, ensure their contentment, and if possible, to allow them to become prosperous, thus attracting more immigrants to the western prairies. Reserve agriculture suffered as a result. Between 1889 and 1897, Reserve populations were subjected to unprecedented administrative involvement in their lives, and extreme limitations on their agricultural activity (*Ibid.*:193).

Like allotment, the peasant farming policy (again, the brainchild of Hayter Reed) had supposedly humanitarian goals: self-sufficiency was, once again, trotted out as the ultimate aim, as were the evolutionary arguments that Indians should not have to make an unnatural leap from barbarism to civilization, but should be brought up to 19th century standards gradually. Indians had to first experience farming with crude and simple implements before they could use labor-saving machinery. Reed believed that Indians had not reached the stage at which they were ready to compete with White settlers, so they should not be equipped with the machinery that would allow them to do so. He also argued that Indians had a naturally brutal disposition toward their domestic animals, though agents and others reported otherwise, and that they could be taught proper care of their animals if every family kept just one cow, but that Indians were unprepared to make the leap to large herds (*Ibid.*:212-213).

Of course, Indian farmers had been using farm machinery quite efficiently prior to 1889, and agents and instructors knew that many Indian farmers took good care of and knew how to handle and repair farm machinery. In addition, many Indians owned large herds of stock, and besides, traditionally, Plains peoples had kept herds of ponies that they managed quite well without any White instruction whatsoever. The hidden agenda behind the restrictions on herd size had much more to do with the fact that White stock-raisers at places like Battleford, who supplied beef to the Indian Department, feared Indian competition for the scarce cattle markets that existed (*Ibid.*:287, 220).

Government provision of reapers, binders, and other machinery necessary for successful prairie farming was rare prior to this time, though local agents and farm instructors argued for their necessity and were totally in favor of their acquisition. The Indian Department's policy was that if individuals could afford to buy farm machinery, then they should be allowed to do so, but in fact, machinery was generally purchased by a Band, or a

number of farmers together (*ibid.*:164). It was this group ownership of machinery that particularly irritated Reed, along with other communal farming activities, and his peasant farming policy was designed to stamp out such noxious "tribalistic" activity once and for all by denying any machinery whatsoever to the majority of Reserve farmers.

Under the terms of the peasant farming policy, Indians were to cultivate only small acreages, using only hand tools. They were to bind their grain by hand, thresh it with flails, and grind it with hand mills. Indians were required to manufacture at home other items they needed, such as harrows, hay forks, carts, ox yokes, and even door hinges. Agents and inspectors were to cancel sales of machinery to Indians, even though it was purchased by them, not the Indian Department. Reed's policy was objected to by agents throughout the North-West, who all agreed that the growing seasons in the prairies were simply too short for the use of hand implements. Reed wanted the policy to be applied so stringently that even if Bands had purchased reapers and self-binders before the policy was adopted, Indian farmers were to use only hand implements (*ibid.*:210-211,219).

In 1885, seven years before the allotment of the Cheyenne/Arapaho Reservation, Agent Capt. J.M. Lee tried to obtain a threshing machine at a cost of eight hundred dollars for the Indian farmers. The machine had been requested by his predecessor, D.B. Dyer. In August of 1885, Lee pressed for the early purchase and delivery of a steam-driven rig with stacker and all fixtures to be moved from place to place on the Reservation as needed. The commissioner of Indian affairs denied Dyer's original request, stating that the Department would not approve the purchase of labor-saving machines for Indians, but that estimates for flails would receive favorable attention. Outraged, Lee commented, "I am not aware that the present head of the Bureau entertains favorably a plan to render industry among these Indians most difficult." Lee finally got his steam thresher in October of 1885, in time to thresh out seed to plant a winter wheat crop (Berthrong, 1976:120; Nespor, 1984:196, 205).

While the Bureau of Indian Affairs did not specifically enunciate a peasant farming policy such as Canada's, there appears to have been a de facto policy of either denial of permission to purchase farm machinery altogether, or at least a great reluctance to provide it and other supplies in sufficient quantities to support Indian farmers. By 1881, for example, Agent John D. Miles charged the government with failure to fulfill its obligations under the 1867 Medicine Lodge Treaty, which allocated \$20,000 for the purchase of agricultural machinery and equipment for the Cheyennes and Arapahos. To date, Miles wrote, he had been permitted to spend only \$165.50 for two corn planters and two mowers (Berthrong, 1976:73).

Nor were the Cheyennes and Arapahos exempt from restrictions on the size of their herds during the 1880s. Agent Miles was convinced that the Indians would be better off turning their attention to grazing than to extensive farming, in part because the agent simply received too little assistance and funds with which to encourage the Indians in their first farming attempts in the mid-1870s. Miles also believed that if the tribes were to become self-supporting, pastoral pursuits would have to be combined with agriculture, especially since much of the Reservation was primarily grazing country. The agent pointed out that attempts to confine the Cheyennes and Arapahos solely to agriculture were hopeless, especially since White farmers, with all of their education and agricultural skills, would starve in an effort to earn a livelihood in western Indian Territory by relying on grain crops alone. Unlike Hayter Reed, it was Miles's opinion that "the Indian is in his natural element more nearly when taking care of stock than in any other civilized pursuit" (*Ibid.*:58-61, 73; Nespor, 1984:135).

Miles received support in his views from John H. Seger, the superintendent of the Cheyenne-Arapaho Manual Training and Labor School, who began in the late 1870s to emphasize animal husbandry among the Indian schoolboys. By the late summer of 1879, Miles estimated the market value of the school herd at \$9,181.40, representing a total of 973 head of cattle. No sooner had the school herd attained significant size than the commissioner of Indian affairs ordered it distributed among the tribal members. By retaining the herd's natural increase and purchasing young heifers over a five-year period, Miles and Seger had more than 1500 head of cattle in the "mission herd," as it was called. Miles protested the commissioner's order by pointing out that among so many Indians, the per capita share would be so small that little incentive would exist for the Indians to properly care for three or four cattle. Miles feared that the cattle would be sold or eaten when subsistence rations ran short during the year. He also maintained that the experiment with the mission herd had demonstrated the benefits to be derived from stock raising and the advantages to be gained from encouraging an interest in the pursuit on the part of the Indians. Miles's predictions largely came true, as some Arapaho schoolboys sold their cattle for cash so they could attend Carlisle Institute, while many Cheyennes sold, gambled away, presented as gifts, or killed for food the few head they owned (Nespor, 1984:61,66).

With the breakup of the mission herd, a potential opportunity for the Cheyenne and Arapaho tribes to become self-supporting was ruined. Initially, the school herd was approved by Washington officials, and Secretary of the Interior Schurz authorized the purchase of 400 head at a cost of \$3,200. Why, then, was the herd ordered dispersed? Miles claimed that the

Indian Office was suspicious because the herd was growing rapidly, apparently meaning that officials feared that the Indians were stealing cattle in order to augment their herd (*Ibid.*:74). But there may have been more to it than Miles knew. Indian policy reformers argued that the supposedly immutable laws that would require a slow, painful evolutionary transition from savagery to civilization would have to be "speeded up." Secretary Schurz was one of those people. "It is true," he wrote, "that the transition from the savage state to the pastoral is less violent than that from the savage stage directly to the agricultural, but this does not prove that the latter is impossible" (Dippie, 1982:171). Given this general attitude, which prevailed in the BIA at the time, and the fact that debate was underway in Congress over a general policy of allotment in severalty, Schurz and the commissioner probably determined that the extensive use of land required by a large cattle herd was incompatible both with the policy of converting the Indians to farmers, and a federal land policy that favored enclosure, allotment, and sale of surplus lands.<sup>4</sup>

The Cheyenne/Arapaho Reservation was allotted in 1892. For the Indians this meant complete extinction of corporate property. Quarter-section sized plots (160 acres) were allotted to every individual, even babies. The problem was that a farm of such size was too large to be operated in full by the average farmer of the late 1800s. To make such a farm economically viable would have required a great deal of available capital, which most farmers did not have, and a ready market for the harvests (Nespor, 1984:260). Throughout the Reservation period (1875-92), the BIA had seriously impeded the development of a stable agrarian adaptation among the Cheyennes and Arapahos by enforcing a market-oriented approach to Indian agriculture. Early Indian attempts at agriculture had been undertaken at the level of the camp or small village, but government officials frowned upon this form of subsistence agriculture. Though there was little agricultural activity above the subsistence level in any community far removed from a railhead, the BIA nonetheless encouraged the production of crops for commercial markets. The plan had little to do with making successful commercial farmers out of the Indians, but instead was a pretence--a way of rationalizing the manipulation of ration issues, thereby shattering Indian solidarity, and reducing the Cheyennes to living in what amounted to a rural slum near Darlington. This was accomplished through the constant contentions by Indian agents that only the Red Bed Plains area in the vicinity of Darlington, the southeastern-most part of the Reservation, was fit for farming. This left the greatest part of the Reservation, including most of the river system, free from any Indian preemption or homesteading claims.

Agent Miles, that great believer in livestock husbandry, drew up contracts between 1882-83 that leased some nine-tenths of the Reservation to non-Indian cattle companies. The Cheyenne "chiefs" who signed these agreements almost all took their allotments in the Red Bed Plains area, and some had intimate involvement in beef ration issues, and aspirations toward becoming cattlemen themselves. Miles's successor, D.B. Dyer, characterized some of the non-signatory groups, most of whom were farmers and who settled in other parts of the Reservation, as "outlaw bands" who resented "getting on the white man's road." Dyers successor, Agent Capt. Lee, cleared the Reservation of all non-Indian cattle companies in 1886, along with their employees and illegally intermarried "squaw men" who had been engaging in lucrative ranching on Indian lands. Lee encouraged the Indians to disperse from the area near Darlington, and to settle as colonies to farm for their own support. This policy resulted in more acreage being cultivated in the non-Red Bed Plains areas of the Reservation than in the Darlington area, where the only earlier encouragement of farming had taken place.

Indian farming on the Cheyenne/Arapaho Reservation was never based on individual family farms producing for markets, and to the extent that any such pattern appeared anywhere on the Reservation, it was largely the result of distortions introduced into Native arrangements through the BIA's administration of federal land policy (*Ibid.*:13-18). In other words, Indian farming persisted in spite of, rather than because of, programs ostensibly aimed at encouraging agriculture among them.

On the arid plains of Canada, subsistence farming was a questionable model at best. Indian farmers there tended more toward commercial farming, like their White neighbors, and focused on wheat cultivation, acquired machinery to accommodate large acreages, and adopted techniques such as summer fallowing. Indian farmers were intimately linked to the larger economy, yet the peasant farming policy required them to attempt to function in isolation from the rest of western Canadian society (Carter, 1990:216-217). Reserves in western Canada were subdivided into forty acre lots, or one-quarter of a quarter section. Among the official reasons for choosing the forty-acre lot as the standard was that it afforded "compact settlement" and offered each Indian the opportunity to select a certain quantity of the choicest farmland on a Reserve. Forty-acre lots did not compel an Indian to take land "he did not want." In 1890, an amendment to the Indian Act (Section 16) stipulated that an Indian would be granted no more than four of the plots--160 acres (*Ibid.*:202-203).

The same amount of land that in the southern plains was excessive for subsistence agriculture was much too small for the kind of commercial

agricultural activity that characterized farming in the northern plains, thus the necessity of combining subdivision with a ban on mechanized farming. Prairie Indian nations objected strongly to the subdivision of their Reserves, particularly when they had no prior warning of the arrival of survey crews on their lands. After the early 1890s, the concerted program of subdividing Reserves ended. With the change of government in 1896, subdivisions were usually only surveyed after land was surrendered by a Band for purposes of sale. The earlier rationale that such subdivisions were in the interests of Indian farmers, was abandoned (*Ibid.*:209).

Under the Laurier Liberals, Reserve agriculture was not a priority. In fact, budgets for Indian administration were slashed, and personnel were fired or their salaries reduced. While Hayter Reed's ban on farm machinery was no longer officially enforced, it was unofficially so. Indian farmers had been denied the opportunity to engage in commercial agriculture in the 1890s by not being allowed to raise and dispose of a surplus, nor to invest in methods of production that would have resulted in higher yields. As a result, they fell further and further behind non-Indian farmers, and by the turn of the century, agriculture did not form the basis of a stable economy on Reserves (*Ibid.*:237, 254-255). Indeed, after 1885, though farming on Reserves was still officially encouraged, it was no longer the achievement of Indians who were seeking on their own terms to become self-sufficient members of Canadian society; rather, they had involuntarily become the supervised wards of the government (Dyck, 1986:133).

## Conclusion

In both the U.S. and Canada, allotment and government policies of the late 1880s led to a marked decline in Indian farming. Rather than promoting and supporting agriculture among Native people, Indian policy in both countries discouraged and retarded it. But instead of blaming environmental conditions, depressions in farm markets, or themselves, governments and their agents looked for the causes of failure in the perceived personal weaknesses of Indian farmers. Indians, they concluded, were simply too shiftless and they did not like physical labor, and besides, they were not fully culturally evolved, making farming too big of an evolutionary step for them to be expected to take. Officials assumed that assimilationist policies—in tandem with their inevitable forced evolution—would result in the eventual cultural disappearance of Native people at any rate, rendering any permanent administration of their affairs ultimately unnecessary.

However, if the actions of Indian farmers in both the northern and southern plains demonstrate anything, it is the prescience of Indian leaders,

the willingness and ability of Indian people to farm, and their active resistance to policies that they saw were clearly not in their best interests, and that undermined everything they had accomplished. As they have done historically and as they continue to do today, Native peoples took from non-Indian culture those aspects that they saw as crucial to their very survival. As historian John Milloy wrote, "Revitalization of their traditional culture within an agricultural context, they would have. Assimilation, the total abandonment of their culture, they would not" (Milloy, 1983, cited in Carter, 1990:14). Poundmaker, Young Whirlwind, and Row of Lodges would have been in full agreement.

### Notes

1. The first quote is from Dyck, 1986:129; the last two are from Berthrong, 1976:237. I would like to thank Noel Dyck for his helpful comments on an earlier version of this article. I would also like to thank Dany Lacombe for her kind assistance in translating the abstract into French.
2. This explanation has been used not only by governments and their agents, but also extensively by scholars writing about Indian policy. Sarah Carter discusses this tendency in scholarship concerning Canadian Indian peoples in her introduction (1990:3-14), and also points out that other studies, including her own, have contradicted the notion that Indians found agriculture repugnant and culturally incompatible, instead showing that Indian peoples often not only embraced agriculture, but were required to convince officials of the wisdom of this course. American studies have also accepted Indian aversion to agriculture as an explanation for Indian failure at farming. Donald Berthrong, for example, a leading historian of the Cheyenne, stated that one of the reasons that an agricultural economy failed to develop on the Cheyenne/Arapaho Reservation was that agricultural labor was "repugnant" to adult male Indians (1976:328), while Robert Nespor's (1984) painstaking analysis of Cheyenne agriculture and settlement patterns clearly demonstrates that this attitude was by no means characteristic of all Cheyenne males. Brian Dippie (1982:108) makes an even more sweeping generalization that "[the] plains Indian had no agricultural experience, and exhibited a positive hostility toward farming for a living." Again, such views are clearly belied by studies such as those of Carter and Nespor.
3. Carter, 1990:4-5; see also Berthrong, 1976:328 for an example of this type of interpretation of Native behavior.
4. Miles himself had little faith in husbandry other than livestock-raising, and was of the opinion that agriculture could never be successful in northwestern Oklahoma. It is not unusual, then, that farming was not



greatly advanced under his direction, and most of his emphasis was placed on the development of herds (Nespor, 1984:186). Miles was in fact overly sanguine about the benefits of Indian cattle raising; his successor, Agent Dyer, recognized that as many as twenty acres of pasture per head of cattle needed to be provided for a viable herd, and that the Indians would have to become growers of feed crops on a large scale to maintain properly their cattle through the sometimes harsh winters of the region (*Ibid.*:193). Miles had originally estimated that the school herd should have been allowed to develop until it contained 15,000 head, to have any significant impact upon the tribes (Berthrong, 1976:66). This would have required some 300,000 acres of land for pasture and hundreds more committed to the raising of feed crops.

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