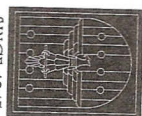


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SINCE 1945

4

A NATIONAL TRAGEDY



IT IS A SOBERING experience to consider the intractable nature of poverty and reflect upon its tragic consequences for Native Americans. In spite of decades of federal programs designed to eradicate poverty from the nation's reservations and urban slums, Indians continued throughout the twentieth century to be the most disadvantaged group of Americans. A report on the United States' compliance with international human rights accords found in 1979 that

Native Americans, on the average, have the lowest per capita income, the highest unemployment rate, the lowest level of educational attainment, the shortest lives, the worst health and housing conditions, and the highest suicide rate in the United States. The poverty among Indian families is nearly three times greater than the rate for non-Indian families, and Native people collectively rank at the bottom of every social and economic statistical indicator.

This dismal assessment of Native American poverty stands as a dreadful epitaph to a half century of enormous change and evolution in federal Indian policy. Temporary relief was provided by the expansion of public welfare programs during the New Deal of the 1930s, the boom of employment opportunities during World War II, the dispersal of awards from the Indian Claims Commission, and the resolute War on Poverty during the Great Society of the 1960s, but the underlying conditions of poverty for many Native Americans remained unaltered. The median income for reservation Indians in 1939 was less

than one-third that of European Americans; thirty years later the gap was virtually unchanged. In 1969 half of all Native families on reservations were living in poverty, as were one-fifth of all urban Indians.

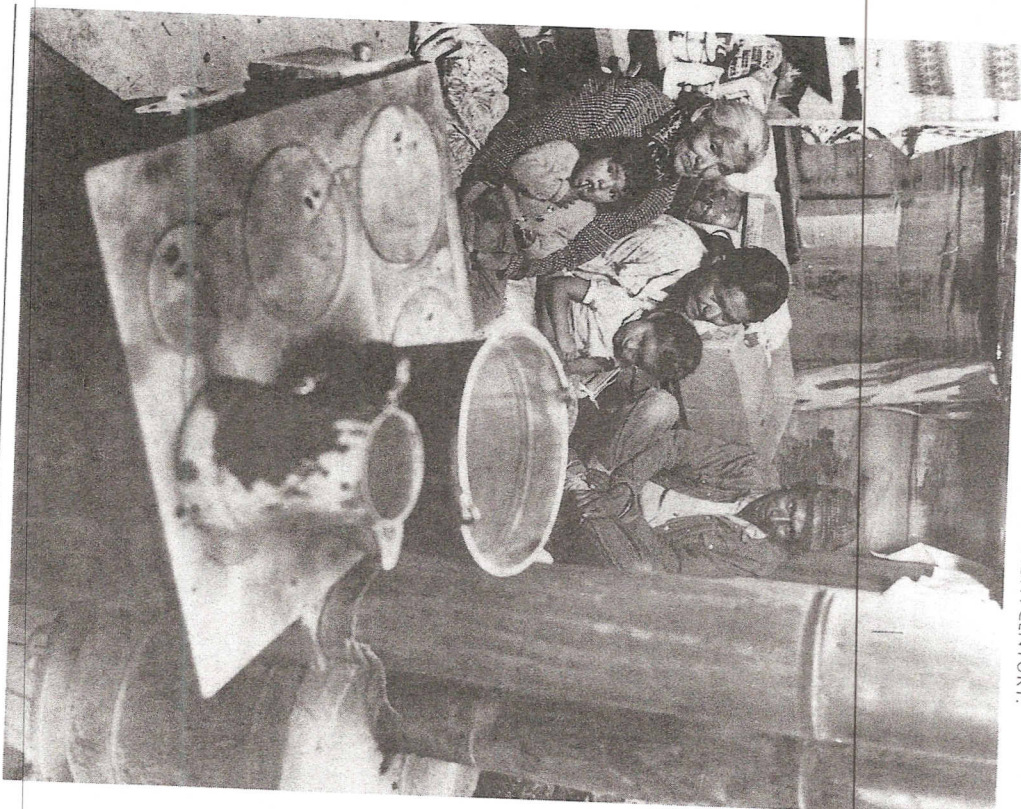
NATIVE AMERICAN POVERTY

What is especially striking—and distressing—is the bleak consistency in surveys of the social and economic conditions of Native Americans in the twentieth century. The landmark study by anthropologist Lewis Meriam in 1928, commissioned by the Department of the Interior, presented a portrait of Native America that was filled with gloom. Economic conditions, in general, were deplorable. Ranching and farming were barely meeting the subsistence needs of Indian families, and employment opportunities were practically nonexistent. The income level of the typical Indian family was incredibly low: Only 2 percent had annual incomes over \$500. Housing was appalling, sanitary provisions were grossly inadequate, and diets were woefully deficient. On reservations across America, Indian families lived in homes with dirt floors and had no running water or sewage disposal facilities. As a consequence, the health of Indians was markedly inferior to the rest of the population. Infant mortality rates were high and life expectancy was low. Diseases closely associated with poverty, especially tuberculosis and trachoma, were widespread.

Decade after decade, the tragic dimensions of Native American poverty were repeated in countless surveys and reports. The familiar refrain of desperate social and economic conditions became a litany of disaster. In 1957 the Fund for the Republic commissioned a private investigation of general conditions of the nation's Indian population. Not surprisingly, the fund's investigation found that conditions among Indians were far worse than among any other group of Americans. Employment opportunities were inadequate and unstable, median income was scandalously low, housing conditions were substandard, health was poor in comparison to the general population, and education was ill-preparing Indian youth for success either on or off the reservation.

Nearly a decade later, the California State Advisory Commission on Indian Affairs issued a strongly worded report on the conditions of the state's Native people. The commission reported in 1966 that by all standards of economic and social well-being—employment, income level, housing, health, and education—the Indians of California ranked below the European American population and significantly below other

THE INTERIOR OF A HOME IN NORTHEASTERN ARIZONA ON THE VAST RESERVATION OF THE NAVAJO NATION. POVERTY AND SUBSTANDARD HOUSING ON RESERVATIONS PERSISTED THROUGHOUT THE TWENTIETH CENTURY.



ethnic minorities. The unemployment rate among California Indians was more than 25 percent, four times that of the general population. Those who were employed were concentrated in low-skilled and