

Relocation and Urbanization

American Indians in Uptown Chicago

After the end of World War II, the migration of American Indians from rural reservations to urban centers began as some 25,000 American Indian veterans found few employment opportunities upon returning to their home communities and moved to cities across the United States for improved livelihood. In addition to the many American Indian veterans who moved to cities, an estimated 40,000 American Indians who served the war effort in off-reservation defense plants also found the economic conditions of reservations deplorable as they returned with little hope for continuous work. Those American Indians who sought to move from rural reservations and begin new lives in urban areas did so largely because of the allure of a better life afforded by urban employment. By 1950, the number of American Indians living in cities was 56,000 or 13.4 percent of the total American Indian population. Economic conditions, however, were not the only catalyst for this internal migration.

The American Indians who served their country—whether in the theaters of World War II or wartime production plants—experienced in many instances life beyond their reservations for the first time. As such, they often found a greater level of confidence moving to areas beyond their accustomed tribal societies and cultural environments. Furthermore, a dominant post-World War II mindset viewed American Indian segregation on reservations as being in conflict with the American ideals of assimilation and individual prosperity. A growing consensus that federal Indian-trust status was un-American mounted throughout the 1940s and early 1950s and changed the course of federal Indian policy.¹

A substantial turning point for Indian federal policy in the United States was underway and began reversing the policies of the Indian New Deal. Led by John Collier, who served as Commissioner of Indian Affairs from 1933 to 1945, the Indian New Deal had resolved to end the land

allotment policy, return land to tribal ownership, restore tribal sovereignty through Indian self-government, and preserve Indian culture through BIA educational programs.² Most Indian New Deal reforms ended with Collier's resignation in 1945, and critics viewed him as a sentimentalist who attempted to restore an American Indian way of life in opposition with modern conceptions of progress. It should be noted that criticism of the Indian Reorganization Act, considered the most indicative legislation of the Indian New Deal, came from American Indians, too. Collier largely ignored input and resisted direct consultation with the American Indians over the legislation that imposed structures for self-government. Consequently, some historians have marked the era as being nothing more than another form of BIA paternalism. Viewed in its historical context, however, the Indian New Deal undoubtedly ushered in a reversal of long-held federal policy measures constructed to end tribal sovereignty and promote the full assimilation of American Indians. Once Collier resigned in 1945, American Indian affairs began to return to the policy of promoting assimilation and ending tribal sovereignty.³

The Relocation Program

With the appointment of Dillon S. Myer as Commissioner of Indian Affairs in 1950, a new era of federal Indian policy was fully initiated. Myer had previously served as the director of the War Relocation Authority (WRA) from 1942 to 1946, overseeing the relocation and internment of Japanese Americans and Japanese nationals.⁴ Under his leadership, the BIA began its official relocation program in 1951 as an outgrowth of the relocation efforts it already provided for American Indians in six states.⁵ Through the relocation program, the BIA offered modest financial assistance, transportation costs, and vocational training as incentives for American Indians to move to urban centers in twenty different states. Between 1951 and 1952, BIA relocation offices opened in Los Angeles, Denver, and Chicago to increase the efficiency and efficacy of the program.⁶ Referred to as "Operation Relocation" by Myer, the relocation program sought to reduce and ultimately end the federal government's treaty-based obligations and role in Indian affairs by drawing American Indians away from reservations to urban centers.

When Glenn Emmons replaced Dillon S. Myer in 1953, the relocation program began to take hold with more vigor as another strong supporter of ending tribal sovereignty pushed for the expansion of the BIA's plan. By the mid-1950s, additional offices opened in Oakland, San Francisco, San Jose, and St. Louis with more offices established soon there-

after in urban centers in Texas, Oklahoma, and Ohio. Funding for the relocation program tripled by 1956 as the BIA convinced Congress that the program was succeeding.⁷

Part of the reason the relocation program attracted thousands of American Indians was the BIA's recruitment efforts that promised increased livelihood in cities and contrasted life on largely poor rural reservations with the prosperity available in cities. The BIA, however, cloaked the realities of urban life, and its plan lacked the adequate support and structural foundation for a successful transition for most American Indians.⁸ As former Commissioner of Indian Affairs Philleo Nash noted, "Myer's relocation program was essentially a one-way bus ticket from rural to urban poverty. Relocation was an underfunded, ill-conceived program."⁹ Under the veil of benevolence, the BIA formed an "imagined landscape" of urban life that was nothing short of propaganda.¹⁰ From 1951 to 1973, more than one hundred thousand American Indians moved from rural reservations to urban centers through this federal program, with even more relocating on their own without federal support.¹¹

As one of the initial cities selected for the relocation program, Chicago represented the industrial might of a post-World War II America, and the BIA promoted Chicago as a city of abundant opportunity. On reservations across the United States, the words "Chicago Welcomes American Indians" prominently appeared on posters advertising "steady jobs," "further education," and "good living conditions."¹² In addition to posters, the BIA highlighted the wide range of benefits Chicago had to offer in its publications. A November 18, 1954, issue of the *Fort Berthold Agency News Bulletin*, for instance, explained that Chicago had 13,500 factories, 168 public parks, 340 elementary schools, and 39 high schools. Furthermore, an explanation of why Chicago was termed the "Nation's Bread Basket" conveyed how the city was a land of plenty.¹³ At 608 South Dearborn, the Chicago Relocation Office sent promotional flyers to reservations to further recruit American Indians. One flyer dated September 30, 1954, was included in an issue of the *Fort Berthold News Bulletin* with the message "329 STEADY JOBS were found for Indians in Chicago in the last six months."¹⁴ The flyer showed sketches of workers with the titles "Office," "Welders," "Television and Radio," "Hospital," "Steel," "Book Binders," and others.¹⁵ BIA agencies and area offices also published newsletters specific to the relocation program. In a September 16, 1954, issue of the *Rosebud Relocator*, a description of the array of support through the Chicago Relocation Office and cultural activities at the All-Tribes American Indian Center at 411 North LaSalle presented Chicago as a welcoming and hospitable place.¹⁶

The BIA and its Chicago Relocation Office falsely promoted the opportunities available in Chicago for the sake of the success of the pro-

gram and disregarded the well-being of American Indians. At the same time that the BIA was publicizing the economic opportunities available in Chicago across reservations, the Chicago Relocation Office knew that the job market in the city was waning. In a report from October 1953, Kurt Dreifuss, the Chicago placement and relocation officer, wrote, "There have been no field trips to interpret the job resources in Chicago for a good many months."¹⁷ In the same report, Dreifuss reported that one of the major problems affecting the relocation program was the "tightening of the job market."¹⁸ The next month, Dreifuss sent a letter to American Indians who relocated to Chicago that said,

We want to take this opportunity to share with you our own knowledge of changing conditions in the job market because we think it will be of help to you to have this information.

During the past few months, there has been a definite tightening of employment, not only in Chicago but even more so in many other parts of the country. It is more difficult to find employment than some months ago. For this reason, we want to pass on a little advice to everyone who is working: Hold on to your present job if at all possible. You may have real trouble finding another one.¹⁹

The BIA, however, did not communicate this information in publicizing the relocation program on reservations. Instead, the BIA persisted that "splendid opportunities" existed in Chicago and, moreover, that "[o]ffices maintained by the government render unlimited services to people who are entering a different phase of life."²⁰ The support for American Indian relocatees, however, was minimal.

The lack of BIA support for American Indians relocating to Chicago caused many hardships. In the early 1950s, Sol Tax, professor of anthropology at the University of Chicago, emerged as an advocate for American Indians and presented concerns to Kurt Dreifuss.²¹ As the BIA continued to promote the relocation program in the in the late 1950s amidst a recession, Tax made it clear that the lack of employment, substandard housing, and deficient support by the BIA led to "urgent and prominent problems."²² Tax criticized the true intent and structure of the entire relocation program.²³ In his view, the relocation program was "a one-way ticket situation where bureaucrats filled their quotas."²⁴ As someone who witnessed the effects of the relocation program, Tax wrote,

When Indians came to Chicago, they received relocation assistance for about six weeks. Indian families came on a train with

a one-way ticket. Once they arrived, they had no place to go. They were met by somebody in the Bureau of Indian Affairs who took them to a rental house and found them a job. When Indians returned to the relocation office to say they had a problem, which they all did, they were told we do not have any more jurisdiction over you. We have rented you a home; if you want to move to another one, that is your problem. If you do not like your job, that is also your problem.²⁵

The BIA—despite criticism—continued to move forward with the relocation program.²⁶ By 1953, more than one thousand American Indians had relocated to Chicago.²⁷ The number of American Indians who came to Chicago by 1955 reached between three thousand and 3,500.²⁸ In 1957, the number of American Indians relocating to Chicago reached approximately four thousand.²⁹ This internal migration—from reservations to Chicago—was concomitant with the end of the postwar boom in Chicago. In an era of deindustrialization and urban decline, the BIA's promises of a better life rarely materialized, and American Indians often experienced the worst Chicago had to offer.³⁰

Even as American Indians struggled to subsist in Chicago throughout the 1950s, the BIA continued to romanticize the benefits of the city in the 1960s. In one promotional pamphlet, the BIA shared,

Mr. and Mrs. Sam and their family came to Chicago on August 27, 1963. . . . The Sam family is representative of many Mississippi Choctaw families in Chicago. They have found Chicago to be a friendly place in which to live and work. Their children are all receiving good educations. . . . [They] live on Chicago's Northside and their apartment is located in a good neighborhood just a few blocks from the city's attractive lake shore parks and beaches.³¹

Such descriptive vignettes were often fictitious or—if true—certainly an anomaly considering that the majority of American Indians relocating to Chicago moved to the Uptown neighborhood, one of the most depressed areas of the city, located on the North Side.³² Throughout the 1960s, Chicago's American Indian population continued to grow and concentrate in Uptown. In the late 1960s, the American Indian population in Chicago, according to BIA estimates, was twelve thousand.³³ Social service agencies and American Indian residents, however, believed the population to be between sixteen and twenty thousand by the late 1960s and early 1970s, with the highest concentration in Uptown.³⁴ As American Indians

relocated in considerable numbers through the BIA's relocation program and through their own devices, the harsh realities of life in Chicago offered little hope that hopes could be realized.³⁵

Uptown Chicago

The Uptown neighborhood becomes important in understanding the urbanization experience for American Indians who relocated to Chicago. Drawn by low-rent housing in an ethnically diverse area, American Indians primarily relocated to Uptown by the late 1950s as a port of entry neighborhood, and the population of American Indians in Uptown continued to grow during the 1960s through the mid-1970s. As a defined urban space six miles north of the "Loop," Uptown has Foster Avenue as its northern border, Irving Park Road as its southern border, Clark Street as its western border, and Lake Michigan as its eastern border.³⁶ Uptown, however, in the minds of residents expanded beyond these prescribed boundaries and included sections of adjacent neighborhoods that included Edgewater north of Foster Avenue and Ravenswood west of Clark Street.³⁷

Once a thriving entertainment destination with prominent ballrooms, theaters, and a commercial center in the early to mid-twentieth century, the severe need for affordable housing after World War II for returning GIs and those lured to Chicago for employment led to the conversion of Uptown's once stately homes to kitchenettes, small apartments, rooming houses, and boarding hotels. With the subsequent growth of the Chicago suburbs in the 1950s, vacancy rates in Uptown increased and attracted a new and largely low-income population of Appalachian whites, American Indians, Hispanics, African Americans, and Asians.³⁸ By the early 1960s, the euphemism "inner city" was applied to the Uptown neighborhood.³⁹ In 1964, the Chicago Department of Urban Renewal listed Uptown in its Far North Zone as the area with the densest population and most substandard and overcrowded housing units.⁴⁰ Uptown became a "Conservation Area" and "Study Area" in 1966.⁴¹ By 1967, the Chicago Department of Development and Planning considered Uptown one of "most serious problems" in the North Development Area that also included Lakeview, Edgewater, and Lincoln Park.⁴²

The social problems that persisted in many low-income, urban neighborhoods were prevalent in Uptown. Uptown had the highest level of transiency, one of the highest crime rates, a high rate of drug and alcohol abuse, and some of the most overcrowded public schools.⁴³ Furthermore, Uptown became a "dumping grounds" by the State of Illinois for thousands of deinstitutionalized mental patients in the 1960s and 1970s.⁴⁴ Within this

bleak context, a high level of unemployment led to the proliferation of day-labor agencies. By 1970, some twenty-six day-labor agencies existed in Uptown. Often referred to as “slave shops,” day-labor agencies exploited workers by paying them less than minimum wage and charging contracting businesses twice the minimum wage for the labor.

For American Indians living in Uptown, day labor represented a hand-to-mouth existence for 21 percent of the population in 1964 and 29 percent in 1970.⁴⁵ During the 1960s and 1970s, Uptown became known as a neighborhood for the poorest of the poor. The Kenmore-Winthrop Corridor, named after two streets running north and south through the heart of Uptown, was a “skid row” scattered with bars, vacant buildings, and substandard housing.⁴⁶

For American Indians relocating to urban centers, conditions such as those in Uptown were not unique. American Indians who relocated to Los Angeles, Detroit, and Minneapolis, for instance, experienced—in terms of conditions—similar urban environments as they often located to the poorest sections of cities. Along with Chicago, Los Angeles was a leading urban destination for American Indians during the 1950s through the 1970s. As Donald Fixico noted in comparing Chicago to Los Angeles,



Figure 1.1. Day-Labor Agency on North Broadway Street in Uptown. (Courtesy of NAES College and Dorene Wiese)

Federal officials hoped that relocation would assimilate Indians into urban neighborhoods of the dominant society. Instead, Indian ghettos soon resulted. Chicago's Uptown neighborhood is indicative of the Indians' substandard living conditions. Bell and Bell Gardens in Los Angeles are other examples. Such areas fostered feelings of isolation, loneliness, and estrangement for Native Americans.⁴⁷

In Detroit, American Indians moved primarily to the Michigan Avenue and Cass Corridor neighborhoods. Like many other port of entry neighborhoods, these areas had fewer than half of all of their housing units categorized as satisfactory for living. Furthermore, the Michigan and Cass Corridor neighborhoods were considered Detroit's "dumping ground" populated by down-and-outers and families unable to afford living in better areas of the city.⁴⁸ American Indians moving to Minneapolis concentrated in the Elliot Park and Phillips neighborhoods south of the downtown area, characterized by substandard and overcrowded housing conditions.⁴⁹ For American Indians relocating to cities, the reality that—in many cases—such conditions were improvements to living on reservations speaks not as much to the benefits of relocation but rather to the hardships American Indians faced in both contexts.

Conclusion

The relocation program and a general migration of American Indians to urban centers brought thousands Indians to Chicago by the 1950s. The relocation program was an ill-conceived and poorly funded plan offering short-term assistance that, once severed, often left American Indians in bleak circumstances. Under the guise of benevolence, the BIA promised a better life ultimately to separate American Indians from their home reservations in an effort to sever Indian federal-trust status. American Indians in Chicago often faced the worst the city had to offer as they concentrated in the Uptown neighborhood. Separated from traditional supports such as family and tribe, American Indians looked to each other and found support in a small but stable community.

As American Indians came together in Chicago, an ethos of community permeated the community. Chicago had become a tribal world as those who came to Chicago during the relocation period relied on a network of American Indians who had already made the city their home. Among those who came to Chicago prior to relocation was Susan Kelly Power (Standing Rock Sioux). When she arrived in Chicago in 1942 from

Fort Yates, North Dakota, she held strong to her tribal values. Her belief in putting the community's interests ahead of her own paralleled the values honored by her tribe and other American Indians already living in Chicago.⁵⁰ As the American Indian community continued to grow, it became a giving and welcoming one. Those who already lived in Chicago such as Eli Powless (Oneida), Edith Johns (Ho-Chunk-Nez Perce), Clara Pemberton Kraus (Ojibwe), William Skenadore (Oneida), Al Cobe (Ojibwe), Annie Pleets Harris (Sioux), Ernest Naquayouma (Hopi), Tom Greenwood (Cherokee), Ethel Frazier Walker (Santee Sioux), Susan Kelly Power (Standing Rock Sioux), Benjamin Bearskin Sr. (Ho-Chunk-Sioux), Willard LaMere (Ho-Chunk) promoted intertribal ties as new individuals and families from around the country arrived.⁵¹

The convergence of American Indian families already part of Chicago's vast mosaic of peoples and the influx of new arrivals coming from reservations and rural areas across the country established a more extensive intertribal community in Chicago. The bleak realities that American Indians faced upon coming to Chicago led to destitute conditions for many. Within this context, American Indians expressed central aspects of tribal approaches to community as they formed fellowships and support. Despite the BIA's best efforts to sever community, American Indians proved that community could exist beyond the geographical borders of reservations and homelands. The power to control their lives in the urban sphere of Chicago expressed itself in intertribal networks that helped maintain cultural identity and offered assistance to the struggling and alienated. From this base community, the foundation necessary to develop the then largest initiative in the form of a center was possible. That the American Indian community used the available channels of influence to direct the course of a center of their own design speaks to the agency this early Native community possessed. The American Indian Center, founded in 1953, would become a beacon for the growing community and evidence of the community self-determination that began to make Chicago a Native space.