

What Were the Results of Allotment?

On February 8, 1887, Congress completed passage of [the Dawes Act, or General Allotment Act](#), which codified for most American Indians the idea of dividing Indian lands into individual holdings to promote assimilation by deliberately destroying tribal relations.

Allotment was far from a new idea in 1887. According to the 1886 report of the commissioner of Indian affairs, 7,673 allotments had already been made by the year before the Dawes Act became law.¹

The allotment process mandated by the Dawes Act differed from earlier approaches through treaties, special acts, and informal arrangements mainly in that it was compulsory at the discretion of the president. The Dawes Act also provided a general purpose process for reduction of Indian lands. The act authorized negotiations for the sale of unallotted land "at any time after lands have been allotted to all the Indians of any tribe as herein provided, or sooner if in the opinion of the President it shall be for the best interests of such tribe."²

Students of U.S. Indian policy have long taken the Dawes Act as a watershed of that policy as it developed until 1933, when John Collier set the Indian New Deal in motion. Historian Francis Paul Prucha, for example, quoted the contemporary declaration of the Indian Rights Association that the Dawes Act was "the beginning of a new order of things."³ Another prominent historian of Indian policy, Wilcomb E. Washburn, has written that the act "did not simply rearrange the landholding system of the Indians" but involved "all aspects of the relationship between white men and red," although "sometimes only in a tentative or partial way."⁴ Leonard A. Carlson, an economist whose 1981 book *Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land: the Dawes Act and the Decline of Indian Farming* raises provocative questions about allotment, argued that the Dawes Act "mandated a fundamental change in Indian-white relationships."⁵

The Dawes Act has also been seen as a profound failure. Prucha stated the conventional view succinctly and directly when he said, "The allotment policy was a failure. The Indians, for the most part, did not become self-supporting farmers or ranchers."⁶ Another historian, Brian W. Dippie, quoted John Collier's argument that allotment as "the principal tool" of the old policy of destruction of tribal life and the cause of "poverty bordering on starvation in many areas, a 30 percent illiteracy rate, a death rate twice that of the white population, and the loss of more than 90 million acres of Indian land."⁷

Leonard A. Carlson contended that "Indians had made and were making progress in self-sufficient agriculture before allotment,"⁸ a conclusion supported by a quantitative study of 33 reservations.⁹ Carlson constructed a mathematical model of Indian economic activity¹⁰ that "predicted" that allotment would lead to "an increase in the amount of Indian land leased and sold to whites, a decrease in the rate of capital accumulation by Indian farmers, a decrease in the rate at which Indians learned farming, and a reduction in group cooperation in economic matters that would further retard Indian agriculture."¹¹ Carlson's conclusions, based on the Meriam Report of 1928¹² and Census Bureau figures for the period from 1900 until 1930, amply supported his model's prediction. Carlson said, "Allotment as a means of promoting self-sufficient farming among Indians was a failure."¹³

The careful conclusions of historians and the bountiful data collected by Carlson notwithstanding, their conclusion that Indian agriculture was made a failure by allotment does not explain all the evidence.

In 1887, the commissioner of Indian affairs reported that Indians were cultivating 237,265 acres.¹⁴ Seventeen years later in 1904, the last year in which the annual report provided comprehensive statistics for Indian agriculture, 365,469 acres were reported being cultivated by Indians.¹⁵ In 1920, the commissioner reported a total of 890,700 acres cultivated by Indians, 739,708 allotted and 150,992 unallotted.¹⁶

In 1887, Indian farmers (exclusive of members of the Five Nations of the South in Oklahoma) raised 2,222,067 bushels of grains (about 9.13 bushels per person) and owned 8,265 head of cattle, according to the annual report.¹⁷ The comparable figures for 1904 were 2,947,563 bushels (about 15.44 bushels per person) and 297,611 head of cattle.¹⁸

Indian Office statistics cannot be accepted with complete confidence. Different agents obviously did not

apply themselves with uniform diligence to fulfilling their responsibility to gather this data. Sometimes they did not trouble themselves to collect the data at all and reported the figures from the previous year, or made no report at all. Moreover, numbers cannot sweep away the accounts of agricultural failure uncovered by historians studying specific reservations. Nonetheless, the numbers suggest that we have not quite entirely understood what took place in Indian agriculture in the first three decades after the Dawes Act.

A compilation of yet more statistics based on Indian Office data may offer at least a partial answer to this puzzle, but first it is necessary to deal with what appear to be misconceptions regarding the motivations for the Dawes Act.

Whatever may have happened to Indian agriculture after 1887, there is no question that enormous amounts of land were lost by Indian communities through the government land purchases that were made part of the allotment process, and through the sale of allotted land.

The Indian estate amounted in 1887 to 136,394,985 acres.[19](#)

By 1920 it had shrunk to 72,660,316 acres, of which 17,575,033 acres were leased to whites.[20](#)

This loss of land has led historians to ask whether the Dawes Act was in any honest sense a reform measure, and their answer has been that it was. Francis Paul Prucha decided that the Dawes Act was "pushed through Congress, not by western interests greedy for Indian lands, but by eastern humanitarians who deeply believed that communal landholding was an obstacle to the civilization they wanted the Indians to acquire," and who feared that the inability of the government "to protect the tribal reservations from the onslaught of the whites" would leave the Indians with nothing at all if they were not given individual holdings.[21](#)

Frederick E. Hoxie, in his 1984 book *A Final Promise*, argued that neither land-hungry westerners nor reformers were capable by themselves of pushing through a new Indian land policy. "It is no more accurate to concentrate on western venality than on the reformers' sweet promises," Hoxie said. "Self-interest meshed with idealism, for public policy makers seized on a plan they felt would reconcile the goals of Native Americans and whites."[22](#)

Leonard A. Carlson approached this question by constructing two statistical models which he called the guardianship model and the demand for allotment model. He determined that the demand for allotment model, which assumed "that reservations were chosen for allotment based on the potential benefits to non-Indian settlers, speculators, and merchants," was a better fit than the guardianship model.

He was no more willing than Hoxie, however, to question the good intentions of the reformers, saying, "The notion that the implementation of the program of allotting lands in severalty was shaped by non-Indian interests does not necessarily mean that the policy was a thinly-disguised scheme for expropriating Indians lands, although in fact it did lead to a large transfer of land from Indians to non-Indians. The argument is that the general program of allotting land in severalty was bent, pulled, and shaped by non-Indian economic interests."[23](#)

The idea that promotion of Indian agriculture was a serious goal of reformers of Indian policy has been widely accepted. Francis Paul Prucha's definition of the failure of allotment in terms of the failure of Indians to become self-supporting farmers and ranchers has already been mentioned.

Frederick E. Hoxie contended that the Dawes act "was an assertion that the gap between the two races would be overcome and that Indians would be incorporated into American society. They would farm, participate in government, and adopt 'higher' standards of behavior."[24](#)

According to Leonard A. Carlson, who obviously put considerable stress on the role of agriculture, reformers hoped the Dawes Act would accomplish six specific goals, "break up the tribe as a social unit, encourage individual initiative, further the progress of Indian farmers, reduce the cost of Indian administration, secure at least part of the reservation as Indian land, and open unused lands to white settlers."[25](#)

The views of reformers on the eve of the adoption of the Dawes Act may be inferred from the minutes of the fourth annual Lake Mohonk conference in 1886. The conferences held during period at Lake Mohonk, in upstate New York, brought together prominent churchmen, politicians other whites professing concern for the situation of the Indians. The Dawes bill was discussed during the second day of the 1886 conference. Senator Dawes explained that his objective was simply absorption of the Indian people into "this body politic" as self-

supporting citizens.[26](#)

The only mention of agriculture in this discussion came when Dawes was asked whether Indians given allotments would be provided seed and implements. Dawes responded, "Whether Congress will be liberal enough to set him up, I don't know."[27](#) There is no other mention of the promotion of agriculture anywhere in the 48 pages of the minutes of this conference, and there are few other mentions of agriculture in any form.

When the fifth annual Lake Mohonk Conference was convened in September of 1887, General Clinton B. Fisk opened the first session by declaring that the Dawes Act meant "the beginning of a new epoch in Indian affairs."[28](#) Senator Dawes wanted the government to "put [the Indian] on his own land, furnish him with a little habitation, with a plow, and a rake, and show him how to go to work to use them ... The only way is to lead him out into the sunshine, and tell him what the sunshine is for, and what the rain comes for, and when to put his seed in the ground." Prof. C.C. Painter of the Indian Rights Association noted that Dawes had failed to specify who would do the leading and teaching and began talking about the management of the money that would be made from the sale of Indian property.[29](#)

The minutes of this conference filled 68 printed pages but no other mention was made of the promotion of Indian agriculture unless we count a comment by former commissioner of Indian affairs Hiram Price that the government was "giving these simple people pruning hooks instead of spears, and plowshares instead of swords."[30](#)

The summary report of the commissioner of Indian affairs for 1887 is similarly devoid of discussion of the promotion of agriculture saving the statement that agriculture and education would gradually do the work of civilizing the Indians "and finally enable the Government to leave the Indian to stand alone." The commissioner made his understanding of "the full import of the allotment act" clear and simple: it was meant "ultimately to dissolve all tribal relations and put each adult Indian upon the broad platform of American citizenship."[31](#)

The idea of allotments implies farming, but the lack of interest in that subject shown by the Lake Mohonk reformers and the commissioner of Indian affairs even as the Dawes Act was being implemented suggests that improvement of Indian agriculture was not a serious goal of the supporters of the act.

Simple arithmetic should have suggested to the reformers and bureaucrats that allotment with agriculture in mind was an absurdity on many reservations. They had the statistical tables included in the annual reports of the commissioner, which listed the estimated amount of tillable land on each reservation and its population. The numbers clearly show that on a majority of reservations, the amount of land required for allotment under the Dawes Act far exceeded the amount of tillable land.

This collection includes compilations of 1887 and 1904 land and agriculture statistics for 113 reservations, agencies and tribal units -- all that could be traced from one report to the other. See [Table 1](#), and [statistics of individual reservations](#).

Forty-eight of the 113 units had been allotted by 1904. (That number does not include the Five Nations of the South in Oklahoma. No statistics were reported for them in 1904, three years before Oklahoma became a state. Acts passed in 1893 and 1896 pushed the nations into allotment as a part of the process of changing Oklahoma from an indigenous enclave into a state dominated by non-natives.[32](#))

On 13 of those units, allotted land was less than the estimate of tillable land in 1887. Between 1887 and 1904, these units as a group almost doubled the land being farmed, more than tripled their grain production, and more than doubled their cattle. See [Table 3](#)

On the 28 units which were allotted by 1904 on which land allotted was greater than tillable land, allotted land was about triple the amount of tillable land. Land farmed dropped by more than one-sixth during the 17 years in question and grain production dropped by almost one-half. The number of cattle increased by half, however, which suggests that some people given land unsuitable for farming made the best of the situation by turning to stock raising. See [Table 4](#).

Forty-seven units were still unallotted in 1904. Unallotted units also showed an increase in land farmed and grain production, and more than quadrupled their cattle, as a whole, although some of the increase was due to the fact that some of these reservations did not exist in 1887.

See [Table 5](#).

In the case of one reservation which had less tillable land than was allotted, the Siletz Reservation in Oregon, a sample of 29 allotments including approximately 2,320 acres was compared with current country zoning maps.

On the basis of current zoning standards, only about 340 acres was considered suitable for agriculture. Another 120 acres was zoned rural residential, and 240 acres were within the city limits of Lincoln City. The rest of the land, about 1,620 acres, was zoned for forestry.³³

Virtually no crops are grown for market on the former Siletz Reservation. Raising cattle has for many years been the only paying proposition in the county from an agrarian point of view.

(See the [index of Rogue River War and Siletz documents](#) for a selection of documents concerning allotment on the Siletz Reservation.)

Supporters of the Dawes Act either knew or should have known that in many cases it would mean allotting land that could not be farmed. While they occasionally trotted out the Jeffersonian concept of the independent farmer as window dressing, they failed to take even the most basic steps to bring it about.

To the extent that allotment may be said to have failed as a means of improving Indian agriculture, the cause is clear, and it does not lie, as some historians have suggested, in any inability of Indian people generally to adjust to farm life. As Leonard A. Carlson's model of Indian economic activity suggests from a different angle, the cause was that Indians made rational decisions not to farm unprofitable land.

Moreover, the argument can be made that Indian allottees were roughly as successful as white homesteaders. See the file [Comparing Allotment with Homesteading](#) for an explanation and links to a related tables.

As we have seen, however, the improvement of agriculture was not an important consideration. The question that remains is whether the more significant goals of the supporters of the Dawes Act were realized. As stated by Henry Dawes in 1886 and the commissioner of Indian affairs in 1887, those goals can be summed up as absorption of Indian people into the general population as individuals, implying a significant reduction in both Indian lands and government support.

If absorption can be measured in cultural terms, as the Indian Office attempted to measure it, then allotment can at least be said not to have retarded absorption.

In 1887, the Indian Office reported that slightly more than 24 percent of Indians wore "citizens' dress," that is, the kind of clothing worn by whites. Only a little more than 10 percent spoke English.³⁴

In 1920, the comparable figures were almost 59 percent wearing "citizens' clothing" and almost 40 percent speaking English. Between 1913 and 1920, the number of Indians considered self-supporting increased by a little more than 15 percent and the number drawing rations from the government decreased by almost 31 percent.³⁵

Nonetheless, the Indian affairs establishment did not wither away, nor has it withered away to this day.

As a means of reducing Indian lands and putting them in the hands of whites, the process of purchasing "surplus" property provided by the Dawes Act apparently was quite efficient. Even reservations that were still unallotted by 1904 lost land, however. Even with the addition of new reservations after 1887, statistics for 47 unallotted reservations, agencies and tribal units shows that more than 37 percent of their land was alienated between 1887 and 1904. See [Table 5](#).

In other words, the Dawes Act was not the only source of pressure on Indian lands.

Struck by the irony of disaster arising out of a notable "reform," we may have overemphasized its importance. What was most significant about Indian policy after the Dawes Act was not that it forced more Indians to become assimilated nor that Indian agriculture went into decline in certain circumstances.

Perhaps what was most significant was what precisely what had been most significant during the four centuries before the Dawes Act: the continuing loss of Indian lands.

(An [1891 amendment](#) modified the amount of land to be allotted and set conditions for leasing allotments. Then, in 1906, another amendment, usually called the [Burke Act](#) gave the secretary of the interior the power to remove allotments from trust before the time set by the Dawes Act, by declaring that the holders had "adopted the habits of civilized life." The Burke Act also changed the point at which the government would award citizenship from the granting of the allotment to the granting of the title. The 1910 [Act to Provide for](#)

[Determining the Heirs of Deceased Indians](#) ("and other purposes") deals with inheritance and leasing of allotments and with the allotment of land that could be used for irrigated farming, among many other things.)

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NOTES

1. United States, Interior Department, *Report of the Secretary of the Interior*, v. 1 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1886), 692.
2. See *United States Statutes at Large* 24:388-91, or United States, Interior Department, *Report of the Secretary of the Interior*, v. 2 (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1887), 356-59.
3. Francis Paul Prucha, *Indian Policy in the United States* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1981), 39.
4. Wilcomb E. Washburn, *The Assault on Tribalism: The General Allotment Law (Dawes Act) of 1887* (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1975), 3.
5. Leonard A. Carlson, *Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land: The Dawes Act and the Decline of Indian Farming* (Westport, Connecticut: Greenwood Press, 1981), 3.
6. Francis Paul Prucha, *The Indians in American Society* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985), 48.
7. Brian W. Dippie, *The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy* (Middletown, Connecticut: Wesleyan University Press, 1982), 308.
8. Carlson, *Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land*, 133.
9. Carlson, *Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land*, 127.
10. Carlson, *Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land*, 92-102.
11. Carlson, *Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land*, 136.
12. Lewis Meriam, *The Problem of Indian Administration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1928).
13. Carlson, *Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land*, 159.
14. Interior Department, *Report* (1887), 460.
15. United States, Interior Department, *Annual Reports of the Interior Department for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1904: Indian Affairs, Part I* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1905), 630.
16. United States, Interior Department, *Report of the Commissioner of Indians Affairs to the Secretary of the Interior for the Fiscal Year Ended June 30, 1920* (Washington: Government Printing Office, 1920), 118.
17. Interior Department, *Report* (1887), 446, 466, 474-75.
18. Interior Department, *Annual Reports 1904*, 614, 630.
19. Interior Department, *Report* (1887), 460.
20. Interior Department, *Annual Reports 1904*, 82, 118, 123.
21. Prucha, Francis Paul, *The Great Father* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984), 669.
22. Hoxie, Frederick E., *A Final Promise: The Campaign to Assimilate the Indians, 1880-1920* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1984) 44.
23. Carlson, *Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land*, 43-54.
24. Hoxie, *Final Promise*, 77.
25. Carlson, *Indians, Bureaucrats, and Land*, 79.
26. Interior Department, *Report* (1886), 992.
27. Interior Department, *Report* (1886), 996.
28. Interior Department, *Report* (1887), 957.
29. Interior Department, *Report* (1887), 994.
30. Interior Department, *Report* (1887), 1001.
31. Interior Department, *Report* (1887), 6-7.
32. See Prucha, *Great Father*, 748-57.

33. Lincoln County, Oregon, Property Records and Zoning Map, Newport, Oregon.
34. Interior Department, *Report* (1887), 446.
35. Interior Department, *Annual Reports 1920*, 64, 77.