



The reformation of American Indian policy and the Flathead Confederation, 1877-1893
by Jay William Spehar

A thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of MASTER OF ARTS in
History

Montana State University

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Abstract:

During the late nineteenth century, eastern philanthropists led a reform movement in American Indian policy that aimed at converting the Indians' status from one of wardship to one of citizenship. Fearing that frontier settlement would drive the Indians into extinction, the reformers developed theories and programs designed to promote their assimilation. When Congress passed the General Allotment Act in 1887, the reformers' efforts reached their culmination. The so-called Dawes Act provided for allotting the reservations in severalty and for opening them to white settlement.

The implementation of this policy on any particular reservation rested upon the assumption that the Indians there were ready for assimilation. The Dawes Act made citizens of the Indian allottees and anticipated the eventual disappearance of the Indian reservations.

Within the context of the national reform movement, this thesis focuses upon the administration of United States Indian Agent Peter Ronan. Between 1877 and 1893, Agent Ronan served the Flat-head Confederation, and during his extraordinarily long tenure, he initiated the reformers' programs for the Indians' assimilation. Although the confederation did not complete its allotment schedule until 1909, it was primarily during Agent Ronan's administration that they were prepared for assimilation.

Peter Ronan was an unusually competent Indian agent, and this study examines his administrative policies as well as his political connections. Agent Ronan managed to increase the general welfare of the tribes, but because they induced tribal factionalism many of his specific accomplishments tended to be somewhat counter productive. Although he agreed in principle with the assimilative process, Agent Ronan advised the government against forcing the issue on the Flathead Reservation.

Agricultural productivity and education were Ronan's two outstanding areas of success. But his successes were dampened by a paralyzed legal system, friction in Indian and white relations, Indian conservatism, insufficient medical facilities, and a host of other problems that revolved around the government's desire to confine the Indians to their reservations. Yet on a relative basis, the Flathead Confederation was considered to be advanced far beyond the accomplishments of most Indian tribes. Consequently they were considered to be prime candidates for assimilation.

When the allotment process did take place, the tribes utterly failed to assimilate. Fallacious assumptions, haste, and inadequate funding and preparation all contributed to the reformed Indian policy's ultimate failure. These serious obstacles aside, perhaps the most damaging factor was an inability on the part of both the government and the public to appreciate the magnitude of the task that they faced. The reformers boasted that the Indians could be assimilated and civilized within the course of a single generation, and beyond all others, it may well have been this attitude that doomed their program to failure.

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Signature Jay W. Speker
Date May 28, 1980

DEDICATION

This thesis is dedicated to Dr. Richard Brian Landis, 1930-1980. A devoted scholar and educator, Dr. Landis served on the faculty at Montana State University from 1961 until his early retirement in 1979. His devotion to his students and to his community remains as an inspiration to the profession.

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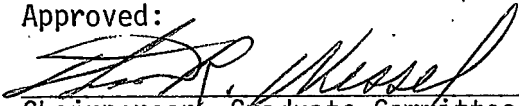
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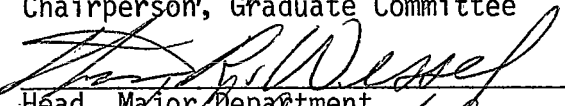
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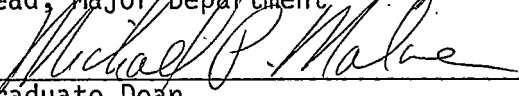
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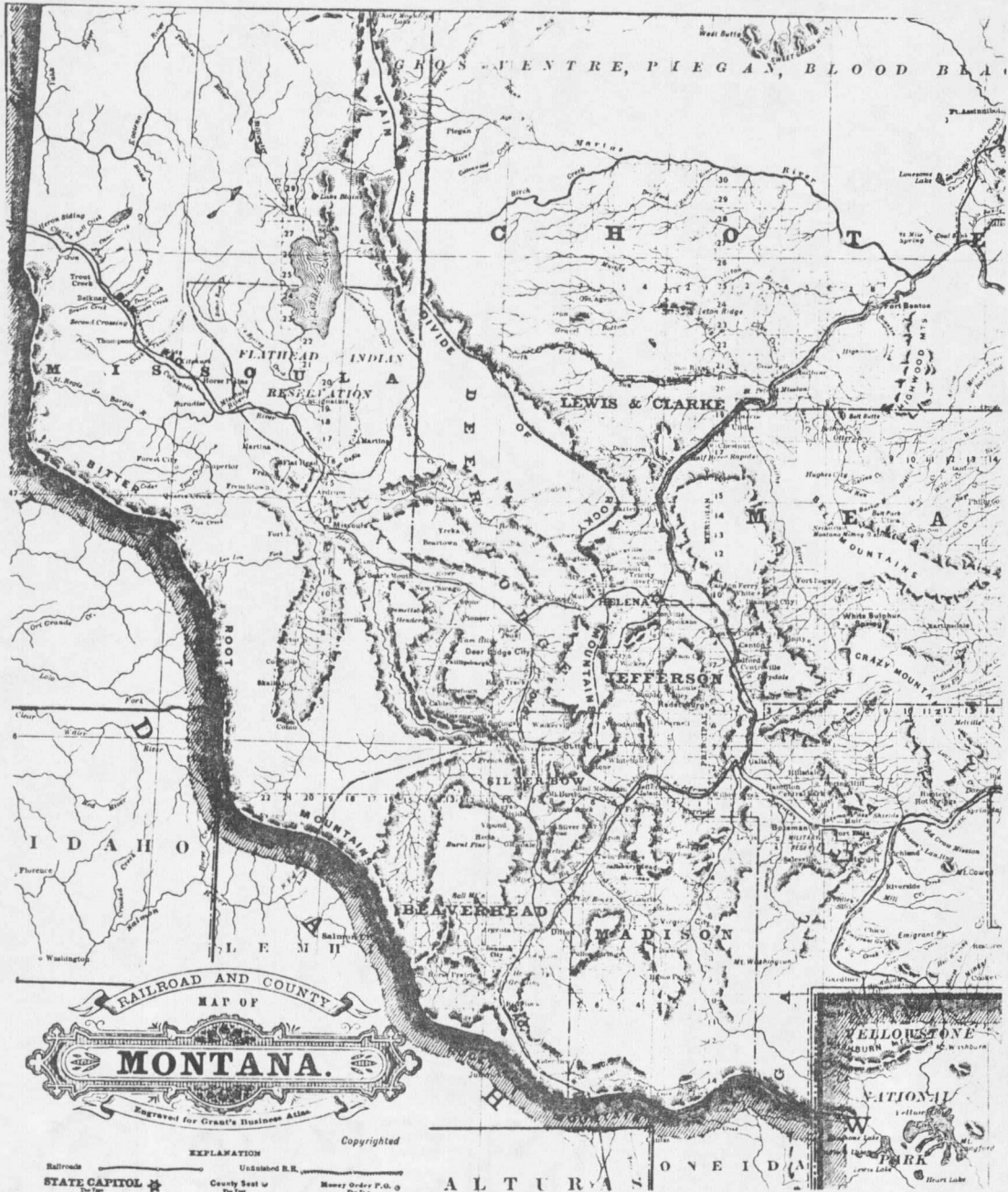
The Department of History and Philosophy at Montana State University has always supported me to the greatest extent possible. While I am deeply indebted to the entire staff and faculty, I am particularly grateful for the guidance of my undergraduate advisor, Dr. Richard B. Landis, and for the encouragement and support of my graduate committee.

The completion of this thesis depended most upon the cooperation of Dr. Thomas Wessel, and to him I owe a great debt for his enduring patience, sagacious advice, and financial support. In one way or another Dr. Larry Bishop, Dr. Michael Malone, and Dr. Jeffrey Safford were all instrumental to the completion of my graduate education, and I am deeply appreciative for all their unselfish and generous efforts.

I would like to make my special appreciation known to the staffs of the Special Collections Room at Montana State University, the Montana Historical Society archives in Helena, and the National Archives in Washington, D. C. I would also like to thank the following people for their hospitality and cordial accommodations: Mr. Douglas Helms of Washington, D.C.; Dr. Harkness Gaines of Dillon, Montana; William Forrester of Billings, Montana, and Katie Weddle and Renee Sipple of Bozeman, Montana.

A NOTE TO THE READER

Certain Indian terms and colloquial expressions that are referred to in this study are subject to a wide variety of spellings. Although "Bitterroot" is a more popular spelling, I have adopted the more traditional spelling of "Bitter Root." I have also utilized the spellings "Kutenais" and "Pend d'Oreilles" rather than a number of other possible variations. As a standard practice in the cases of direct quotations, or formal citations, I have used either the signatories' full first names or their first initials, depending upon how they signed their names. In all cases I have cited the complete signatures just as they appear in the primary sources.



RAILROAD AND COUNTY
MAP OF
MONTANA.
Engraved for Grant's Business Atlas

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EXPLANATION
 Railroads ————
 State Capitol ★
 County Seat ☆
 Money Order P.O. ○

YELLOWSTONE
NATIONAL PARK

ALTURA S O N E I D A

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ABSTRACT

During the late nineteenth century, eastern philanthropists led a reform movement in American Indian policy that aimed at converting the Indians' status from one of wardship to one of citizenship. Fearing that frontier settlement would drive the Indians into extinction, the reformers developed theories and programs designed to promote their assimilation. When Congress passed the General Allotment Act in 1887, the reformers' efforts reached their culmination. The so-called Dawes Act provided for allotting the reservations in severalty and for opening them to white settlement. The implementation of this policy on any particular reservation rested upon the assumption that the Indians there were ready for assimilation. The Dawes Act made citizens of the Indian allottees and anticipated the eventual disappearance of the Indian reservations.

Within the context of the national reform movement, this thesis focuses upon the administration of United States Indian Agent Peter Ronan. Between 1877 and 1893, Agent Ronan served the Flathead Confederation, and during his extraordinarily long tenure, he initiated the reformers' programs for the Indians' assimilation. Although the confederation did not complete its allotment schedule until 1909, it was primarily during Agent Ronan's administration that they were prepared for assimilation.

Peter Ronan was an unusually competent Indian agent, and this study examines his administrative policies as well as his political connections. Agent Ronan managed to increase the general welfare of the tribes, but because they induced tribal factionalism many of his specific accomplishments tended to be somewhat counter productive. Although he agreed in principle with the assimilative process, Agent Ronan advised the government against forcing the issue on the Flathead Reservation.

Agricultural productivity and education were Ronan's two outstanding areas of success. But his successes were dampened by a paralyzed legal system, friction in Indian and white relations, Indian conservatism, insufficient medical facilities, and a host of other problems that revolved around the government's desire to confine the Indians to their reservations. Yet on a relative basis, the Flathead Confederation was considered to be advanced far beyond the accomplishments of most Indian tribes. Consequently they were considered to be prime candidates for assimilation.

When the allotment process did take place, the tribes utterly failed to assimilate. Fallacious assumptions, haste, and inadequate funding and preparation all contributed to the reformed Indian policy's ultimate failure. These serious obstacles aside, perhaps the most damaging factor was an inability on the part of both the government and the public to appreciate the magnitude of the task that they faced. The reformers boasted that the Indians could be assimilated and civilized within the course of a single generation, and beyond all others, it may well have been this attitude that doomed their program to failure.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout the nineteenth century, American Indian policy was continuously plagued by the rapid development of the TransMississippi frontier. Reacting to the immediate demands posed by the frontier's advance, Indian policy developed in a pell-mell fashion that resulted often in lurching and radical policy changes. In very general terms, American Indian policy sought primarily to clear the frontier of Indians and to confine them to areas supposedly safe from its advance. These areas were known as reservations, and they functioned not only as living space, but also as controlled environments under the immediate supervision of the local United States Indian Agents.

This policy, which required that the Indian treaties be satisfied by the United States Senate, provided annuity payments as compensation to the Indians for the surrender of their traditional lands. This policy also readily threatened military force when confronted with serious Indian resistance or disobedience. By the closing quarter of the nineteenth century, the policy of clearing and of confining had become an obvious failure. In 1876, while Americans celebrated their first one hundred years of nationhood and progress, the massacre at the Little Big Horn of Lieutenant Colonel George Custer and his troops brutally symbolized the failure of the first one hundred years of American Indian policy.

The policy of Indian removal and its close association with violent incidents such as the Custer Massacre fostered a reform movement in American Indian policy. During the latter nineteenth century, Indian policy makers began formulating a new federal Indian policy. The new policy developed in more particular and scientific terms, concentrating upon the Christianization, the civilization, and the assimilation of the Indians into the mainstreams of American thought and culture. This policy rested upon a comprehensive program designed to carry the Indians to the ultimate goal of American citizenship. The reformed Indian policy was totalitarian in its social scope, and in its pursuit the federal government provided the reservation tribes with the rudiments of religious, agricultural, educational, legal, political, and medical institutions. Informed citizens of the era believed commonly that these Anglo-American institutions were the progressive models to civilization. The reformers held that training and experience with these institutions would provide the Indians with a sure and quick path to total assimilation.

On the Jocko, or as it later became known, the Flathead Reservation in Montana Territory, the reformers' efforts to Americanize the native Americans failed ultimately in both theory and practice. Although the Flathead Agency became a model institution of its kind, the Indians there never completed the assimilative process. Despite significant advancements in literacy, productivity,

and their general welfare, a significant faction of Indians persisted in resisting assimilation and in encouraging conservative behavior.

Under the capable and judicious leadership of the United States Indian Agent Peter Ronan, the Flathead Confederation faced the perils of a cultural transition that influenced virtually all aspects of life. Although the Indians had been in contact with white explorers, traders, and missionaries since the early nineteenth century, it is no exaggeration to credit Agent Ronan with ushering the tribes across the threshold of Anglo-American civilization.

On the Flathead Reservation, the policy of assimilation faced several serious obstacles. While the reformers had hoped to eradicate all traditional tribal relations, they succeeded merely in crippling them. This situation left the typical Indian, whether progressive or conservative, somewhere adrift between his own suddenly anachronistic cultural heritage and the reformers' ideal of total assimilation.

Local settlers often adopted a belligerent attitude when dealing with the Indians, and the occasional indifference or ineptitude of governmental officials served only to compound the problem. Conservative Indian factions hoped to preserve their native cultures and ignored the fact that time and events had irrevocably altered their traditional environment. Ethnocentrism and bigotry prevailed in varying degrees on all sides of the Indian policy debate.

An unfortunate rigidity in the attitudes of all parties, whites and Indians alike, only hastened and heightened the crisis that they faced.

By the late nineteenth century, the tribes of the Flathead Confederation had experienced several decades of close contact with white people and the government of the United States. Although the government had made contact with the Flatheads as early as the Lewis and Clark expedition, no formal relations were established until the late 1850's. From the outset the federal government failed to fulfill faithfully its treaty obligations with the Flathead Confederation, and to date the so-called Hell Gate Treaty of 1855 remains a source of contention between the tribes and the government of the United States. During the early 1850's, Isaac I. Stevens, the Governor of Washington Territory, began negotiating with the various tribes living in the northwestern United States. Through negotiations, treaty making, and annuity payments, Governor Stevens hoped to acquire legal title to the Indians' traditional lands while restricting them to reservations. In 1853 he toured the Flatheads' country and returned to the Pacific coast quite impressed with the potential for development in the Bitter Root Valley, an area located to the South and West of present day Missoula, Montana.

Later the same year, Governor Stevens dispatched Lieutenant John Mullan to the Flatheads' country for the purpose of conducting surveys for possible rail routes through that area. Stevens directed Lieutenant Mullan to promise the Flatheads federal aid and protection from their traditional enemies, the powerful and well armed Blackfeet.

More importantly, Mullan suggested to the Flathead chiefs that the United States government might soon establish a United States Indian Agency with the tribe. Mullan further arranged for a conference between the Indians and Governor Stevens which transpired the following year, 1854. ¹

The Flatheads expressed a strong desire to secure the United States as an ally against their Blackfeet enemies. Hell Gate, the natural entrance way to the domain of the Flatheads, aptly implied the dangers of passing through the narrow and rugged defile and onto the plains. As Flathead hunting parties passed through the Hell Gate, Blackfeet raiders subjected them to bold and devastating attacks. Governor Stevens knew that the Flatheads lived "principally by the chase" and also that the headman wanted to acquire a knowledge of American agricultural techniques and implements.² Because of their long association with whites, the Indians had come to partially appreciate the advantages to be derived from a sedentary style of life.

In 1854 Governor Stevens recommended to the Indian Department that if the Flatheads' lands became a "throughfare of travel, they to some degree at least, should be protected from their enemies." As Stevens viewed the situation, he believed that the destruction of the buffalo and other game animals would eventually "render some new

