



# SOUTHWEST DETROIT AUTO HERITAGE GUIDE

Highlighting a Century of Auto History in a Neighborhood that Built the Car

## Native Americans in Detroit

### *A Survey of Scholarship Highlighting the Period of 1950 – 1965*

**Aimee Shulman**

*Wayne State University History Doctoral Student and Humanities Clinic Intern*

In 1950, Wayne State anthropology and sociology student Ralph L. West, himself a Cheyenne tribal member who had lived on a reservation in Oklahoma, completed his master's thesis on the subject of "The Adjustment of the American Indian in Detroit." In the thesis, West wrote that, contrary to "the usual assumption" of white people that the government supported reservation inhabitants, "the reservation Indian has little economic opportunity" and insufficient resources to "sustain an adequate level of rural life on most reservations." He also noted that the younger generations were more likely to see a departure from the reservation as a release from "regulation by the Indian Agent" [government oversight] and/or a chance for independence away from parents and the old home. In addition, West, explained, those who left the reservation for urban employment sometimes recommended that their fellows follow suit, telling friends and family of the opportunities to be found in the city.<sup>1</sup> Edmund Jefferson Danziger, writing 41 years later, concurred with the primarily economic explanation, noting that when the 1928 Meriam Report on the condition of Native Americans was being created, investigators repeatedly heard "in one form or another, from every migrated Indian man questioned: 'No way to make a living on the reservation.'" Danziger also observed that the government had both directly and indirectly contributed to such migration – indirectly, by "neglecting reservation economic development," as West had pointed out, and directly, by actively encouraging Native Americans to seek relocation.<sup>2</sup>

Kenneth R. Philp believed that much of the early-mid twentieth century poverty on reservations was related to the Dawes General Allotment Act of 1887, which had subdivided some communal reservation lands into much smaller individual land plots assigned to households. This "permanently shattered their reservation land base," and many Native Americans were unable to adequately support themselves as

---

<sup>1</sup> West, Ralph L., "The Adjustment of the American Indian in Detroit: A Descriptive Study." (Wayne State University ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1950), 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Danziger, Edmund Jefferson *Survival and Regeneration: Detroit's American Indian Community*. (Wayne State University Press, 1991), 19-20.

farmers on their allotted plots. There was a lack of existing infrastructure to support them in starting businesses, and the natural resources available on the reservations were not always sufficient for the existing population. Native Americans living on reservations were one of the very poorest demographics in the United States; the government decided that it would be beneficial – and cost-efficient – to encourage Native Americans to leave their reservations and make the switch to urban living.<sup>3</sup> Postwar conservative politicians wanted to cut federal spending on programs and services provided to Native Americans, but financial reasons were not the only ones the government was working from. There was also a desire to force Native assimilation into the mainstream of American society, and to weaken tribal sovereignty and traditional social structures so that tribal loyalties, and the special status related to tribal membership and governments, could likewise be weakened. This approach came to be known as “termination,” and terminationists were influential in the creation and execution of relocation policies through the 1950s. At least some of the terminationists were convinced that their efforts would be to the benefit of the Native Americans affected. They saw themselves as liberating those people from government oversight and allowing them to, as they saw it, escape a communal identity for what the terminationists considered a better, more prosperity-friendly one as individuals in the free market. Little thought was given to a Native perspective or preference, or Native-specific needs, when creating these policies.<sup>4</sup>

Upon arrival at the urban centers, such as Detroit, where they were to look for work, Native Americans often discovered that the road ahead was going to be a bumpy one. Danziger states that the Bureau of Indian Affairs did not fully consider whether the reservation inhabitants it relocated were prepared for the new environment in which they were to live and work. The lack of opportunities they had had for education and the development of technical skills, as well as the fact that some were not especially fluent in English, meant that many of those relocated found themselves far out of their depth upon reaching their destinations. Furthermore, many were “scattered” about in cities far away from their home turf, rather than being sent to cities near enough that they could maintain ties to their communities without undue difficulty.<sup>5</sup> (Whether this latter practice was intentional, as an aspect of terminationism, or whether it was simply a matter of disregard, may be argued.) Burt observes that government agents recruited anyone who was willing (or desperate enough) to agree to go, while offering “only a bare minimum of assistance” in preparing for the new life. Relocates were given “limited counseling” in the practicalities of urban living, like using a city map or shopping at a large grocery store, and, in the case of the very poorest, were

---

<sup>3</sup> Philp, Kenneth R., “Stride toward Freedom: The Relocation of Indians to Cities, 1952-1960.” *Western Historical Quarterly*, 16(2), April 1985, 176-178.

<sup>4</sup> Burt, Larry W., “Roots of the Native American Urban Experience: Relocation Policy in the 1950s.” *American Indian Quarterly*, 10(2), Spring 1986, 86-87.

<sup>5</sup> Danziger, 21.

sometimes given a small amount of money to assist them in moving. The BIA did assist in finding initial housing, but often such housing was less than desirable – relocatees complained about being put into “skid row sections.” In addition, the kind of work available was not always what the relocatees had been led to expect. Often the only positions they were able to find were low-paying or insecure, and since the BIA left relocatees to their own devices as soon as housing and a job had been obtained, many found themselves in a precarious position.<sup>6</sup>

West, observing conditions in Detroit in 1950, also noted that when it came to finding work there, “the Indian is more ‘on his own’ than are representatives of other groups.” There had been no “organized solicitation” of Native American workers by employers, as, he said, had been aimed at other demographics “in times of labor shortage.” He also spoke briefly but disparagingly of the “half-hearted” and soon abandoned efforts of the BIA to establish some kind of Detroit employment agency for Native Americans.<sup>7</sup> West believed there were two major root causes of most of the difficulties that former reservation inhabitants experienced in integrating themselves into Detroit life. The first issue was lack of education: the lower quality of schooling available on the reservation, combined with the depressed and defeated attitudes (and poor English skills) of the adults around them, he thought, left the younger generations – those most likely to relocate – undereducated. These things also instilled in them a sense of inferiority which made it hard for them to view themselves as capable of competing successfully with better-educated white people in a white-dominant society.<sup>8</sup> The second issue was the retention of “old patterns of reservation behavior” which existed as a response to the long-term poverty and instability of rural reservation life, but which proved a serious handicap to success upon sudden transplant to a modern urban environment. The overwhelming culture shock relocatees experienced, West stated, often caused them to “shirk” their “personal responsibility” in adjusting themselves to their new situation (though he gave no suggestions as to how this adjustment might be better facilitated), and remain poor.<sup>9</sup> West was convinced that there was “no racial discrimination” against Native Americans in Detroit. By this he seems to have meant that there were no anti-Native American Jim Crow-type laws, and that he had not observed any widespread white refusal to associate with Native Americans – at least, those who dressed and behaved in ways considered proper by white society.<sup>10</sup> Given that West was writing in 1950, it may be that his definition of racial discrimination was limited to more overt practices and behaviors, overlooking the more subtle and individual-level aspects that a modern definition might also include. Given also that he was a college-educated person whose writing gives the impression of an assimilated, perhaps middle-

---

<sup>6</sup> Burt, 90-91.

<sup>7</sup> West, 10.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>9</sup> West, 35-36.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid., 49, 65.

class, worldview, it is possible as well that he found it difficult to see or understand the complexities of racial issues in the experiences of the more socioeconomically-disadvantaged Native Americans in Detroit. It is interesting to note West's awareness of multiple serious issues affecting Native Americans as a demographic in Detroit, combined with his firm belief that any inability to fully overcome these issues – without help – was to be blamed on the individual's "shirking responsibility."

Danziger states that prejudice against Native Americans did exist, although he explains that it is difficult to estimate exactly how common this was, in part due to a lack of resources. He also notes that the Native American Detroiters he interviewed reported a wide variety of experiences in terms of their own encounters, or lack thereof, with such racial discrimination. The dearth of studies or written reports on the topic make it difficult to know whose experiences might have been more representative of the majority. Danziger also mentioned the culture clash that West spoke of, though he believed there were other major factors involved as well in the difficulties that relocatees faced in Detroit, and hesitated to name it as the primary issue affecting their success levels. He did note that it could be difficult for those used to reservation life to adhere to the kind of strict schedule required by many jobs. He also noted that some relocatees were able to find economic success in Detroit, whether immediate or gradual, in one specific industry or across several – but that lower-paying jobs tended to be more common for them.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of such jobs, Danziger mentioned auto industry employment a few times, including giving examples of individuals he spoke to who had worked in it, but did not go into much detail on this point. West observed that of the Native American Detroiters he had surveyed, many of the men were employed in the auto industry. Most of them were classed as unskilled or semi-skilled workers, due to lack of vocational training and pre-existing mechanical skills, but some had made it to the skilled worker classification. As well, at least among those surveyed, West said, Native Americans who were able to land a job at an auto factory tended to enjoy "relatively stable" employment – half of the male heads of household he surveyed had been at their auto industry jobs for at least eleven years. He believed that Native Americans who worked at auto plants had "merged so thoroughly into the typical 'Detroit' picture that the 'Indian' factor is lost," and were to be viewed "like any other Detroit worker."<sup>12</sup>

### **Works Cited**

Burt, Larry W. "Roots of the Native American Urban Experience: Relocation Policy in the 1950s." *American Indian Quarterly*, 10(2), Spring 1986, pp. 85-99. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/1183982>

---

<sup>11</sup> Danziger, 73-74, 85-87.

<sup>12</sup> West, 10, 13-14.

Danziger, Edmund Jefferson. *Survival and Regeneration: Detroit's American Indian Community*. Wayne State University Press, 1991.

[https://digital.library.wayne.edu/item/wayne:WayneStateUniversityPress4260/file/PDF\\_FULL](https://digital.library.wayne.edu/item/wayne:WayneStateUniversityPress4260/file/PDF_FULL)

Philp, Kenneth R. "Stride toward Freedom: The Relocation of Indians to Cities, 1952-1960." *Western Historical Quarterly*, 16(2), April 1985, pp. 175-190. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/969660>

West, Ralph L. "The Adjustment of the American Indian in Detroit: A Descriptive Study." Wayne State University ProQuest Dissertations Publishing, 1950.  
[https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as\\_sdt=0%2C23&q=The+Adjustment+of+the+American+Indian+in+Detroit%3A+A+Descriptive+Study&btnG=](https://scholar.google.com/scholar?hl=en&as_sdt=0%2C23&q=The+Adjustment+of+the+American+Indian+in+Detroit%3A+A+Descriptive+Study&btnG=)