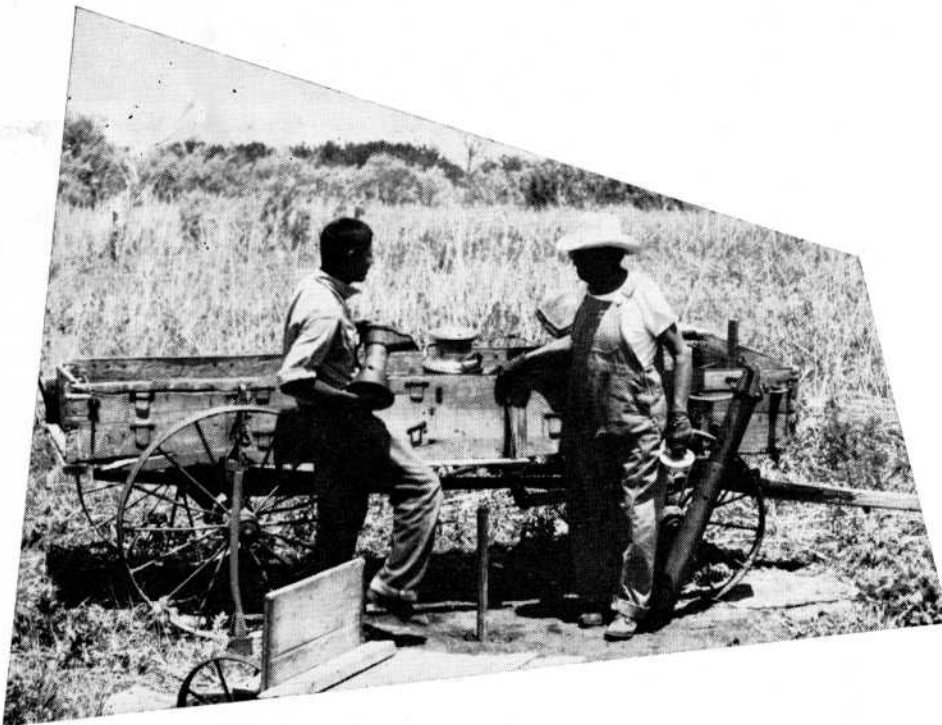




Poverty and the Oklahoma Indian

By LESLIE TOWLE



ABOUT THE AUTHOR—Leslie P. Towle is area director for the Bureau of Indian Affairs with offices in Anadarko. This article was presented originally as an address at a seminar on poverty held at the Oklahoma Center for Continuing Education at OU. It has been modified slightly for Sooner Magazine. Photographs are furnished by the Concho Indian Agency.

It is paradoxical that Poverty in Plenty should exist in the affluent society. But this is not a new experience in America. From the beginning the poor have always been with us. The interest that has been generated by the President's declaration of war on poverty arises from a new awareness of an historical reality. It arises too from a knowledge by men of good will that outside the circles in which they move and have their social contacts, there exists a considerable number of people who are in want and in need. Among these are many of the Indian population of the United States. Poverty among Indians is not just a temporary circumstance. It is a chronic condition which in many instances has become a way of life. Especially is this true of Indians who live on reservations in some of the 24 states in which Indian people are located. But it is equally true for some of the Indians in Oklahoma and thus becomes a matter of local concern. It has been said that the situation as concerns Indians is different in Oklahoma than in other states. Some evidence of this is apparent in the many special laws and statutes passed specifically for Oklahoma tribes. Moreover, the State of Oklahoma was fashioned out of the combined areas of Indian territory and Oklahoma territory—two areas and two populations merging together. Many of the Indian tribes were relocated to Oklahoma from other states and territories. At one time Indians represented a significant proportion of the total population.

Over the years Indians and non-Indians have rubbed elbows and been in social contact with each other. In Oklahoma today there are no reservations, as such, set aside for Indian populations. The non-Indian influx into Oklahoma has outdistanced the numbers of Indian population until today the number of Indians listed in the 1960 census is 64,700, but a small proportion of the total population of the state. Today, Indians live in small concentrations adjacent to or within various communities scattered over a large number of Oklahoma counties. To get a true picture of the conditions under which Indian populations live we need to examine briefly the history and background of the various Indian tribes. Generally, the eastern half of Oklahoma was populated by the Five Civilized Tribes. The western half of the state was largely pop-

ulated by what may be described as the Plains and Woodland Indians although there were some small agricultural groups among them. The Five Tribes developed their own institutions, their schools of higher learning, their own form of government, and they have produced for Oklahoma some of its finest modern leadership. While the western tribes and bands were not without esteemed tribal leadership, the fact remains that the Plains Indians were primarily hunters and gatherers, developing few if any resources, dependent on the bounty of nature, with a weak system of tribal government, frequently divided by factions. Thus, some members of the western tribes, by reason of their customs and experiences, have been disadvantaged in their ability to adjust to the requirements and demands of the society that surrounds them. Suffice it to say that there are areas in western Oklahoma that may accurately be described as "pockets of poverty" where Indian Americans are living in isolation and segregation, separated from the larger community, rarely a part of it. These Indian people are desperately deprived. But penury is not the most devastating aspect of Indian poverty. Rather it is the inability of some Indians to understand and accept the opportunities of American society open to them, so that poverty begets poverty in a self-perpetuating cycle. We must ask ourselves why it is that so many Indian people fail to find a place in our American society. This phenomenon has been the subject of much investigation.

Vernon Malan, in his study of the Kyle, South Dakota, community, has classified Indian families in accordance with the degree of acculturation they have attained. He points out that usually the biological and sociological fullblood families adhere to the traditional ways of Indian life and are influenced by the Indian value system in their social reactions and behavior. He then points to a segment of the population that he calls transitional; these are Indians, usually of mixed blood, who are clinging to a part of the old Indian ways but are also accepting some of the manners and customs of western European society. A third group he calls transpositional families; these are the people who largely renounce the Indian ways and customs and have accepted wholeheartedly the values of American

society. Almost invariably in such families there is a non-Indian parent. There is a correlation between the economic well-being of Indians in the second and third categories as compared to the traditional Indians who cling to their ancient customs. The cultural lag in this latter group of Indians is probably largely responsible for their present condition.

To understand this cultural lag we must ask ourselves what characteristics of Indian culture contribute to this inability to fit themselves into the American way of life. One of the important characteristics is that Indians are not future-oriented. In our American way of life we think in terms of what the future will bring and so we plan and prepare for it. We establish goals and strive toward reaching them. But in Indian culture the Indian life is oriented to the present. Let us live for today and tomorrow will take care of itself. The non-Indian life is one of conquest of nature as against the Indian way of harmony in nature.

A second characteristic of Indian culture is the lack of a sense of time. Time in the sense of measuring duration by clock and days of the week calendar is not important to the person caught in the Indian way of life. In many of the early languages of the Plains Indians there is no word for time as we know and measure it. Anthropologists tell us that the language of a society will reflect the things the people feel most important, and the fact that the language of the Plains Indians in many instances contains no word for time is an indication of their feeling that time was unimportant. In the simple life of the hunter and gatherer there is not the same necessity for budgeting daily hours and so it is only natural that Indians would have less consideration for time than we do in our fast-moving industrial society.

Still another characteristic of Indian culture is lack of habituation to hard work. While it was not an easy task for the hunter and the warrior to brave the dangers of the trail in fulfilling his social and economic role, it is true that the work of gathering the food and keeping the camp comfortable was left to the women. The hunter and warrior could not lower his status in society by working.

In the Indian way of life saving as a means to achieve economic development
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has not been a part of the life of the Indian in his nomadic state. Thus it is that he rarely thinks of accumulating a capital sum that could be invested to provide an economic opportunity. His is not an acquisitive society. The Indian we are talking about is the unacculturated, who has found it particularly difficult, if not impossible, to fit himself into the stream of modern life. He is unable to cope with his environment, and his problems multiply as he attempts without understanding and without the essential keys to open the door into the social and economic life of the community.

Some of the disabilities that unacculturated Indians suffer may be enumerated:

Lack of adequate education: Average educational attainment as measured by number of grades of school completed is between 11 and 12 for the American population as a whole. For Indians as a whole the grade is presently between 5 and 6, although this average is increasing as ever larger numbers of young Indians people are staying in school. Locally, the average grade completion would be somewhat higher than the national Indian average but still below the total of the country at large. Recently, a superintendent of one of our western Oklahoma public schools reported that students of Indian blood represented approximately 25 per cent of the total school enrollment of 400. Yet in the last 40 years since 1924 there have been a grand total of 11 Indian youngsters who have graduated from high school. In the world of the uneducated and untrained there is little opportunity for improvement.

Poor health: Indian health conditions are far below those of the general popula-

tion. At birth Indians have a life expectancy of 62 years but the poor health of the older Indian people brings the average age at death down to 42 years on the reservations. The situation is comparable among tribes of western Oklahoma Indians where living conditions contribute to incidence of morbidity. Infant mortality is high in homes where mothers are ignorant of common sanitary or hygienic practices, where water sources are contaminated and where diets are unbalanced, leading to malnutrition.

Inadequate housing: The standards of Indian housing are far below those of the large majority of rural non-Indian families. Comparable conditions may be found in the shack of the share-cropper, or the deteriorated city slums, where overcrowded, dilapidated, ill-kept structures serve as shelter to large numbers of people. Lack of desire for improved home conditions contribute to the apathetic attitude. Even when considerable sums of money are available to a family, repair of homes or upgrading of standards is too frequently not one of the purposes for which funds are expended. In such homes, the requirements of children for privacy or a place to do school work is sadly lacking. In fact the whole level of living frequently falls below acceptable community norms.

The language barrier: It is not surprising that many of the older Indians may not have a thorough understanding of the English language. Many of them had very little formal schooling and their tendency to retain their language as a part of their Indian identity has made communication difficult.

Low income: If the national poverty line is an annual income of \$3,000, Indians are poor indeed—desperately poor. For the average income of a reservation family in 1962 was \$1,500 and what is true for the reservation family is true for the unacculturated non-reservation family. Many Indian families in Oklahoma are trying to live off the unearned income from leased lands and finding that such income in most cases is woefully inadequate.

High unemployment: Accompanying and contributing to low income disability is a high unemployment rate. An adult with no more than an eighth grade education must generally content himself with a low-paying job which is rarely permanent. Most of such jobs are in agricul-

ture, seasonally required at planting and harvesting time. The rapid technological advances in farm machinery are making thousands of these jobs unnecessary each year. Soon even this meager opportunity to earn a small supplemental income will be closed to the unskilled and untrained.

Attitude of the community: It has been facetiously related that the Pilgrims who landed on these shores first fell upon their knees and then upon the aborigines. Certainly history recites that our emergent relationships with Indian Americans have been molded in the cauldrons of smoldering conflict. The treaties which marked the end of Indian wars provided not only for the destruction of Indian responsibility for obtaining his sustenance, but insured his complete dependency upon the paternalism of the Federal government. On the other hand the pioneers (usually of northern European stock) who settled the western territories in the latter half of the 19th century were rugged individualists. Through fierce determination, self-sufficiency and complete independence, they wrested their living from the soil, almost by physical force, to win recognition for those virtues so eloquently preserved in the literature of the period.

As these two segments of rural society, one independent and one dependent, crossed paths in frequent association, it was perhaps inevitable that their complete incompatibility should become increasingly obvious and should provide the basis upon which to build misunderstanding. I do not infer that there is anything vicious or even consciously discriminating in the attitude of the non-Indian community toward its Indian neighbors. There is simply lack of understanding, poor communication, and mutual absence of respect. The non-Indian community tends to stereotype all Indians. If one Indian does not conform to the behavior patterns of the non-Indian community, immediately all Indians are labeled as confirmed drunkards, law-breakers, dishonest, unreliable, undependable and a host of other undesirable character attributes designed to identify them as unwelcome liabilities in the social structure of the community. In these circumstances, Indians are not likely to initiate social interaction with non-Indians, seek out job opportunities, or try to improve their status. Rather, their normal reactions would result in

apathy, hostility, bitterness, and eventually hopelessness.

I would not have you believe that the overall dimensions of Indian poverty in Oklahoma are of huge magnitude. Indians represent only a small percentage of the population of an individual county but there is a significant concentrated number of them who are in difficulties that they become a matter of concern to each particular community. Indians generally represent a disproportionate number of people who manifest an inability to become a part of the local community and to fit into its social and economic structure. The extent of these inabilities is evidenced by the number of families seeking categorical assistance in State Welfare programs. In the 35 counties of western Oklahoma for the fiscal year ending June 30, 1963, there were 271 cases of old age assistance; 27 cases of aid to the blind; 93 cases of aid to the disabled, and 606 cases of aid to dependent children, making a total of 997 cases. In Caddo County where Indians represent somewhat over 10 per cent of the population they comprise 280 cases. In Pottawatomie County with only 4.2 per cent of Indian population they comprise 139 cases; in Comanche County with 2.8 per cent of the population 86 cases are on public assistance; in Pawnee County with 5.2 per cent of the population 44 cases are on public assistance; in Kay County with 3.2 per cent population 70 cases are on public assistance. This is but an indication of the difficulties in which Indians find themselves largely through disadvantages oc-

casioned by cultural factors. In addition to the public assistance statistics recited above, the Bureau of Indian Affairs through its general direct assistance grants spent in the period July, 1963, to May, 1964, a total of \$98,635. In the overall picture of poverty these figures do not loom large. Among Indians in some communities they represent much more than half of the total Indian population, and it is especially tragic for those affected, since they are seemingly caught up in a vicious cycle from which extrication seems hopeless.

If there is to be a successful war on poverty, there must be a planned attack. Already operative are programs directed by the Bureau of Indian Affairs. More than half of the total budget of the Bureau goes to operation of elementary, secondary, and vocational schools and to classes for adults; in addition, Federal assistance through the Bureau is furnished to public schools enrolling Indian students. Most of Oklahoma's Indian youth enroll in public schools, but the Bureau operates a special remedial school at Concho and vocational schools at Chilocco and at Haskell Institute in Kansas. Educational opportunities are also being offered to adults. One program is being operated in conjunction with the University (see box). The Bureau has an Employment Assistance program which aids individual families in relocation and vocational training. The program is, of course, wholly voluntary. Through the Indian division of the Public Health Service Indians are receiving better health serv-

ices than at any time in their history. Emphasis is in health education, environmental sanitation, and preventive health measures. The Service also staffs hospitals and clinics with adequate professional care.

What should be the strategy to win the "war on poverty" for the Indian people? We have seen how Indian people, caught in the poverty culture, have been unable and frequently unwilling to join the stream of social and economic life which has engulfed them for at least three generations. While many of them have made remarkable advances and progress in a relatively short period of time, others have found that the ever-changing higher levels and standards of non-Indian culture have continuously eluded them. If Indian Americans are to overtake change and participate meaningfully in American life, they must be helped by special measures and special programs to overcome their disabilities. The battle plan should be two-dimensional: short-range and long-range.

On the short-range side it has been suggested that the first order of urgency is to provide the family head with a job at meaningful, satisfying work. If the male head of the household is working, employment becomes an example and expectation for children. This offers the quickest and most effective way to break the dependency cycle because children will not have been taught that welfare hand-outs are a satisfactory way of life. The subtleties and complexities of the long

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OU's Indian Education Program

Under a contract with the Anadarko area of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the University's Human Relations Center is leading an Indian Education Program for adults which now has centers in five Oklahoma communities with plans to expand in 1964-65. Directed by Bob Miller, the program is designed to be developed locally by Indian participants, based on needs identified by the group. The pilot project in Lawton was established in November, 1962, and since then four more centers—in Ponca City, Carnegie, Watonga and Anadarko—have been organized. Here's the way the program works: Each center holds a weekly meeting with participants deciding upon a topic to be discussed. The University furnishes faculty members who are expert in the area of interest, and they address the evening meetings and hold discussion periods. Last year some of the topics considered by the centers were Family Budgeting and Buying, School-Community Relations, The Indian Parent and Child, Local Agencies and Their Services, Person-to-Person Communication, Areas of Adult Education, Indian Participation in Local, State and Federal Government Affairs. "The program's purpose," says Miller, "is to help the Oklahoma Indian improve his position by creating more favorable communications and understanding between himself and the non-Indian. It's intended to give the Indian citizen a greater awareness of his relation to the community, the responsibilities involved, and the opportunities available to him." Miller hopes the program will take in other communities this year with the established centers becom-

ing stronger and working inside their respective communities. Almost 700 Indians participated in the program last year; from 1,200 to 1,500 are expected to take part during the coming school year. In a recent Indian Education Newsletter Miller ended by saying, "Quite often someone asks me, 'What's the purpose of the Indian Education Program? What are you people trying to do?' There are probably as many answers to this question as there are people trying to answer it. I've tried often; each time it comes out different. Let me give you an example of what I think the program is accomplishing—with people. I met Ron Harper for the first time last fall at a meeting in Ponca City. He was curious about the center so he attended a meeting, was so impressed by what he saw that he invited several friends to the next meeting. About his third meeting Ron told the group that the programs he had heard about had convinced him he needed to do something about his education—something he had abandoned a few years earlier as unnecessary. Ron presently attends Haskell Institute at Lawrence, Kansas. He isn't sure about what he'll do—but the fact that at 21 he returned to school to prepare himself for a better life is worthy of consideration. What is the purpose of the program? Among other things it's people helping people; people helping themselves. It's people getting acquainted with people, learning to understand how other people think and live, and more important, I believe, it's people respecting people—which just might start with all of us taking a long, hard look at ourselves."

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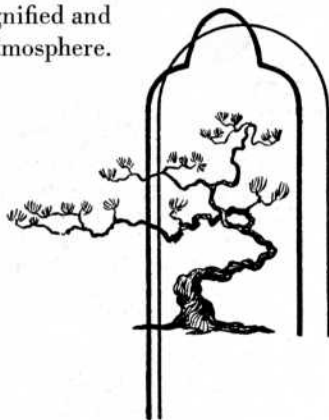


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Marc Q. Jacobs, 60bs, '63ma, of Oklahoma City, a Phi Beta Kappa, has been granted a \$600 fellowship through the OU Research Institute from the Air Force Office of Scientific Research. The grant will be used this summer for research on his doctoral dissertation.

MARRIAGES: Teresa Ann Johnson and Ben T. Benedum, '59bus, were married May 29 at St. John's Catholic Church, Edmond. The couple will reside in Norman, where Benedum is in law school.

Nathalie Pierrepoint, and William Twyman Comfort Jr., '59ba, were married June 7, in Long

Island, New York. The couple will reside in New York City.

Norma Jean Long, '60bs, Wetumka, and Frank Girard Tappan II, Norman, were married in the home of the bride's parents in Wetumka, March 26.

Rose Cude and Robert C. McConnell, '60bus, were married June 14 in Bessemer Baptist Church, Greensboro, North Carolina. The couple will reside in Ada.

DEATHS: Joe Oliver Ellis, '60ba, '63Law, Rogers County Attorney, appointed to the job April 30, died May 1 in an auto accident.

Robert Neill Turk, '60eng, Lancaster, California, died May 26.

Wesley Gene Cornelison, '59bus, died recently in East Hartford, Connecticut.

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range war will demand careful analysis and tailor-made campaigns and the plans must be sufficiently flexible to permit bold and imaginative assaults upon stubborn resistance centers. The primary attack must be mounted at the local community level where all forces in the society must be enlisted for the battle. Any partial commitment by Federal forces and resources alone will be ineffectual. Specifically, Indian people should be deeply involved in the formulation of plans and the plans should be aimed at the development of programs for eliminating the disadvantages now faced by the unacculturated. This could mean an expanded effort on the education front from nursery schools to adult classes with curricula developed to meet specific needs. It could mean an expansion of health services through the whole range of preventive and curative practice. It could mean intensive attention to special problems such as proficiency in the language arts, teaching and understanding of cultural patterns and values, bolstering and improving home conditions in support of education and the schools. It could mean a deliberate effort to create better understanding and tolerance in community attitudes by all segments of the population with a wide expansion of community services.

This is not a commitment for a few weeks or a few months. This war will require sustained effort over many years. But it will surely lead to the victory sought: the elimination of poverty and suffering in the families of too many Indian people and the final voluntary incorporation of Indian Americans along with all other groups of Americans into the structure and fabric of that "great society" which has been projected for the future.

1961-62

BIRTHS:Lt. Leslie L. Conner, '61ba, '63Law, and Mrs. Conner have chosen the name Lauren Elaine for their daughter born April 2. The Conners, who are stationed in Tucson, Arizona, have another daughter, Deborah Lynn Conner, 2½.

John E. Norlin and his wife (Judy Patricia Mitchell, '61ba) are the parents of a daughter, Alisa Aileen, born May 1. The Norlins' other child is Edie Lorraine, 2.

Dr. Kenneth A. Rogers Jr., '61med, and Mrs. Rogers have chosen the name of Hollister Blaine for their daughter, born April 18.

Lt. and Mrs. Douglas Feaver, '61ba, have chosen the name Steven Blake, for their second son, born June 6 in Berlin, West Germany. The maternal grandparents are Mr. and Mrs. Byron Amspacher, of Norman, and the paternal grandparents are Dr. and Mrs. E. Kenneth Feaver, also of Norman. The Feavers expect to remain in Berlin for another 18 months.

Like the Little Mermaid of Copenhagen, the little boy (right) on the pedestal of the fountain between the business building and the liberal arts building has suffered the humiliation of losing a head. Since the fountain was dedicated in 1941 to the memory of Patricio Gimeno, a long-time professor of modern languages at OU, the boy and his fish have been faithfully providing those who pass with a scene of pleasant serenity. Professor Gimeno's son Harold, a Los Angeles architect, recently heard of the boy's plight and has promised Robert Rucker, landscape artist supervisor, a new boy, cast from the original form but in long-lasting concrete rather than the deteriorating terra cotta which this youngster wears. At least a happier fate awaits the Gimeno fountain—OU's other two fountains now serve as planters. The fountain given by the class of 1935, located between the law barn and the Union, is filled with flowers and will be demolished when the Union expansion begins. Another fountain between the art school and art museum had its water cut off years ago because of the relentless wind which kept blowing it on passers-by. (Photo by J. P. Smith)