Review: 'Oklahoma's Indian New Deal'

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invites further exploration of the role of place in shaping race and class struggles in the Depression era and the nature of interaction between two of the decade’s most important social justice battles.


Why were Oklahoma Indians exempted from most provisions of the 1934 Indian Reorganization Act (IRA)? And why did Congress change its mind two years later and pass the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act (OIWA)?

Oklahoma’s Indian New Deal offers answers to these questions and examines the impact of the OIWA on the tribes and native peoples inhabiting Oklahoma. Jon S. Blackman provides historical context for the legislation of the so-called Indian New Deal and for the subsequent “Oklahoma’s Newer New Deal” offered to the state’s Indians (p. 90). In his view, the OIWA “fell short of intended objectives” but should nonetheless “be credited with a positive impact on Oklahoma Indians” (p. 147).

Chapters 1 and 2 provide an overview of the removal of eastern and southern tribes to Indian Territory and the ensuing struggle between native groups and non-Indians over land and resources. During the four decades before the Indian Reorganization Act, tribal governments were dissolved, the tribal land base was reduced by 90 percent, and “Oklahoma Indians experienced a level of exploitation by whites unmatched by any other tribal group in the nation” (p. 32). The Great Depression and the Dust Bowl exacerbated problems of poverty, poor health, and lack of education.

The central chapters of the book describe the events leading up to the passage of the IRA and the OIWA. As Blackman notes in chapter 3, the Indian New Deal had four basic objectives: “rebuilding Indian tribal societies, enlarging and rehabilitating Indian landholdings, fostering Indian self-government, and preserving and promoting Indian culture” (p. 54). The Indian Reorganization Act furthered these goals by ending allotment, extending restrictions on alienation of Indian lands, restoring lands to tribal ownership, creating a revolving fund for loans to Indian chartered corporations, and providing a process by which tribes could adopt constitutions and establish governments.

Blackman notes that Oklahoma politicians and many Oklahoma Indians opposed the IRA. Both groups viewed tribal governments and tribal control over property with suspicion. However, as chapter 4 describes in detail, legislation specifically directed at Oklahoma Indians was introduced in Congress in 1935 and was debated in a series of meetings held at Indian agencies in Oklahoma. The final version of the Oklahoma Indian Welfare Act, which became law in June 1936, focused on land acquisition, credit programs, and the reestablishment of tribal governments.

The two concluding chapters assess the impact of Oklahoma’s Indian New Deal. Only a few tribes had organized under the OIWA by 1950, very little land (“a miserly thirty-six thousand acres”) was added to the Oklahoma tribal land base, and only about 10 percent of those eligible took advantage
of loan programs (p. 147). Yet, Blackman argues, "the OIWA helped place Oklahoma Indians on the path toward self-determination" (p. 157). Whether the OIWA produced the positive intangible results claimed by Blackman may be the subject of further debate. What cannot be doubted is the fact that *Oklahoma’s Indian New Deal* is a useful resource for anyone interested in the history of Oklahoma and, more generally, the origins and continuing legacy of the Indian New Deal.

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The seventy-fifth anniversary of many New Deal programs has provoked great interest, both academic and popular, in the architectural legacy that remains today, particularly seen in the some eight hundred state parks throughout the United States built by the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC). The Texas Parks and Wildlife Department (TPWD) sought to honor and promote this legacy within the Lone Star State, where the CCC constructed twenty-nine state parks, by developing a website, *The Look of Nature: Designing Texas State Parks During the Great Depression* (www.texascccparks.org), and this companion volume, *Texas State Parks and the CCC: The Legacy of the Civilian Conservation Corps*.

The first half of *Texas State Parks and the CCC* briefly examines the initial development of the state park program; the rustic design and landscape considerations of park development and the influence of the National Park Service during the New Deal decade; and the experiences of the young men of the CCC who built the parks. These overviews rely heavily on well-known studies in the CCC canon, including James Wright Steely’s important book-length treatment, *Parks for Texas: Enduring Landscapes of the New Deal* (Austin, 1999). However, this new general history of the CCC in Texas is enriched vitally through the use of several interviews with CCC alumni, conducted by TPWD staff, excerpts of which are available on the Look of Nature website. The second half of the book explores the legacy of the CCC state parks: the parks were hugely popular with the public yet were plagued by the lack of financial support from the state legislature, almost from the start, a situation not unique to Texas. The book shines while considering the “Parks as Mirrors of Society,” both in tourism development and in civil rights (p. 76).

The greatest contribution of *Texas State Parks and the CCC* comes in the final chapter and the epilogue, which highlight the pathbreaking work of the TPWD in documenting, maintaining, and promoting the parks as architectural and historical legacies not just of Texas but also of the nation. Authors Cynthia Brandimarte and Angela Reed emphasize the importance of both the stunning architectural and landscape features created by the CCC and the stories of the men who created them. The epilogue, which covers the tragic Bastrop wildfires in 2011, will strike a chord with any historian of