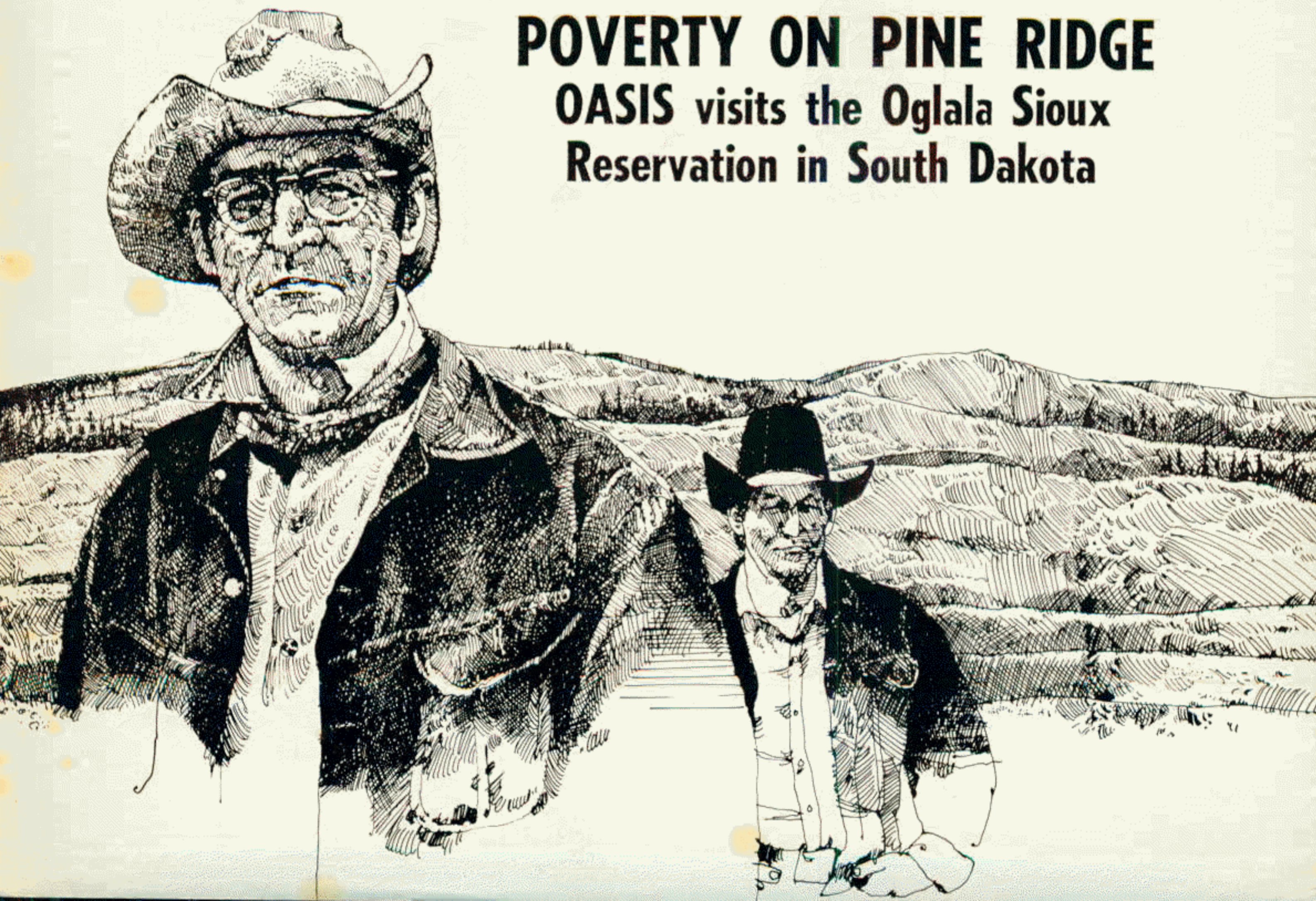


Oasis

OCTOBER 1977

POVERTY ON PINE RIDGE **OASIS visits the Oglala Sioux** **Reservation in South Dakota**



A long wooden sign hangs over the ramshackle school building.

**TO WNSEND MEETING
TONIGHT
CLUB NO. 79**

An aged couple, the man pushing along with a cane, slowly ascends the steps and finds seats in the front row of the school auditorium. They are followed by two old men, one of them carrying an ear trumpet. Then another couple and another, and soon a steady stream flows into the hall. As the last rays of the sun ebb and fade away on the horizon, the walk to the schoolhouse is crowded with aged couples.

By eight o'clock the hall is packed. Nearly two thousand people jam its main floor and balcony. Here and there are young persons looking about curiously; but mostly they are old. From the balcony, the auditorium is a restlessly moving sea of gray heads. An occasional shiny bald pate or mop of black hair is like a reef in an ocean of white.

Most of the men wear baggy suits, with a few here and there clad in sweaters and mackinaws. Beneath the women's coats can be seen print house dresses, although several have decided to outshine their sisters by wearing more elaborate garments. They could not be more grave or solemn at church.

On a battered school piano is a cardboard picture of a lean, silver-

haired old man with horn rimmed spectacles. Next to it is a plaster-of-Paris bust of the same individual. A gray-headed woman at the piano breaks into a recognizable if not entirely melodious version of "America." And the old people's faltering voices rise to the lofty ceiling of the auditorium with a fervor and enthusiasm many of them have not exhibited for years.

*-From an account of
a Townsend meeting, 1936*

IN THE 30s, when the country was sunk deep in the Great Depression, there were any number of shamans who came forward with plans to lead us out. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was himself elected in 1932 because he promised, and folks believed, that he had mapped the road to prosperity . . . or at least to a less terrible poverty. And FDR tried to make good his promise with a deluge of government programs which forever changed the face of America.

There were scant provisions for the aged in 1932. Many Americans reaching their 60s looked forward to nothing but poverty and a poorhouse coffin. Unemployment was especially high and especially hard-on them. And something clearly needed to be done.

The Social Security Act was the centerpiece of FDR's New Deal programs, by his own testimony. But it wasn't the only old-age pension program vying for public and

congressional approval in the early 30s. There were others. And none was a bigger threat to FDR's program than the one known as the Townsend Plan, the brainchild of Dr. Francis E. Townsend.

The purpose of the Townsend Plan, one advocate stated, "is to make it possible for everybody to buy enough of everything to keep everybody employed."

This was to be done by having Uncle Sam give every retired man and woman over 60 years of age \$200 a month for the rest of their lives. (Two-hundred dollars was a phenomenal sum in 1933.) The beneficiaries of this 200 bucks per would then be *required* to spend every dime within 30 days. The Townsendites reasoned that with 10 million oldsters in the country, \$2,000,000,000 would flow into the economy each month. This would then create jobs for all of those under 60.

The Townsend Plan called for financing this scheme by leveling a 2 percent transactions tax, which would not only enable the payment of \$200 a month to every person GO and over, but would retire the national debt and replace all other forms of taxation.

If Dr. Townsend's claim seems a little grandiose, it was an example of reserved understatement compared to some of the claims made by his disciples.

In a book entitled "A Common

**Millions of Americans
had faith in
Townsend's \$200-a-month
pension plan.**

**OH, LORDY
WE'RE
GONNA BE
RICH, PA**

Sense Analysis of the Townsend Plan,” author Harry Thompson writes that if the Townsend Plan is passed into law there will be “no chance of being knocked out [of work] when you pass 60 years and no *danger* of being without work while you are under 60 years. You will have better health, which means more comfort and more pleasure.

“You will be able to enjoy art, music, science, nature. You can have a vacation whenever you feel like it. You can travel to the sunny shores of California, or Florida. You can get married and help build up the homes of the nation by building your little dream house.

“You won’t be bothered with crime because crime will be almost eliminated. You will pay lower prices for everything, including lower taxes, and you will get higher wages.

“All this means peace. No more wars.”

Etc.

Well, who wouldn’t vote for such a plan? And if you doubt that folks believed such hokum, there is ample testimony to the contrary.

This is what two astute social commentators, Richard Neubauer and Kelley Loe, wrote *in 1936*.

“In a city in the Pacific Northwest an elderly couple asked a real-estate broker to sell their small suburban home, explaining that they desired to contribute five hundred dollars to the pension move-



ment. They told him it would be a good investment and that they felt it the duty of every person over sixty to give to the limit. The real-estate agent said these old people were confident that parting with their home was not a blunder, inasmuch as their five-hundred dollar gift would help Dr. Townsend materially in seeing to it that the government sent them each two hundred dollars a month."

All Townsendites weren't so generous in their enthusiasm. But there were at least 30 million of them, members of more than 4,500 Townsend Clubs such as the one described earlier, all advocating the party line.

These clubs were the basis of Townsend's political power. They were well organized and they wrote their congressmen and they turned out to vote on election day. Elected officials in Washington, -faced with the alternative of voting for bad economics or facing irate voters next November, either voiced support for the Townsend Plan or made such vague statements that none knew where they stood.

When Congress convened in 1935, Dr. Townsend was in Washington to testify before Congress about his Plan, which had been introduced as a bill in the lower house. And despite protestation to the contrary, FDR's troops were nervous.

Who Was Dr. Francis Everett Townsend?

Francis Townsend was born in a log cabin on a 160-acre tract of Illinois farmland 2 years after the Civil War. He migrated to California in his late teens and worked for the next 10 years throughout the Western and prairie States at various jobs-cowboy, farmer, teacher, and itinerant salesman of Home Comfort stoves.

At the age of 31, he entered medical school in Kansas, took a degree, and moved north to set up practice in the South Dakota Badlands. His patients included saloon-keepers, gunslingers, town pillars, prostitutes, miners . . . every character in every "B western" you've ever seen.

At the age of 40, he married his nurse, 35-year-old Minnie Mollie Bogus (everyone called her Bogie). At the age of 50, with two infant children, Dr. Townsend enlisted in the Army, kissed Bogie goodbye, and volunteered to serve on the front in France. Instead, he was made camp physician in Vermillion, SD., where he was called on to treat the great swine flu epidemic of 1918 that ravaged the camp.

A year after the war ended, Townsend fell ill with peritonitis and, after several months convalescence, he and Bogie sold the farm and moved to Long Beach, Calif. Dr. Townsend ran a borderline medical practice there until 1930, when he took a job as a Los Angeles County medical examiner. Then, in 1933, at the age of 66, Dr. Townsend found himself out of work when a municipal election brought in new officials, and his job became a political plum.

"Mother and I began wondering," he wrote in his autobiography, "about our future. I had never been a top-flight . . . physician and surgeon. Mrs. Townsend was an excellent nurse but past sixty and a grandmother.

"We debated whether I should try to make a fresh start as a doctor in private practice. But to what end? What good would even a fairly large practice do me when well-established physicians could barely make a living due to the impossibility of collecting fees?

"Then came the idea. . . ."

Dr. Townsend wrote a letter-to-the editor of the Long Beach *Press-Telegram* outlining his idea on September 30, 1933. A couple wrote in response, and within a week, the paper was devoting a full page to discussions of "The Townsend Plan."

Given this sort of encouragement, Townsend started his own newspaper, *The Townsend National Weekly*, whose circulation eventually topped 500,000. And he began the first Townsend Club, from which 4,500 others sprang within 2 years.

The country had never seen any-

thing like it.

Did Dr. Townsend's shooting star suddenly fade with the passage of President Roosevelt's Social Security Act?

NO.

A year after passage of the Social Security Act, the Townsendites were still going strong. Benefit payments from FDR's social security program were still a long way off, and they were to be considerably smaller than those desired by Townsendites. As an editorial writer of the day noted:

"It mattered not that Townsend was considered a menace and a nuisance by the social scientists who had been drafting old-age pension laws for several decades. A man dying of thirst will drink at the largest pool."

The Townsendites continued to exert an influence on American politics until the war economy alleviated the Depression, and the social security program took roots and grew to acceptance.

* * *

It's now 44 years since Dr. Townsend conceived his "idea" in California, a State which was called "America's nursery of strange ideas," a State where it was said that "no fad or theory was too bizarre or too preposterous to fail completely."

East coast economists who hooted and ridiculed the notion of a \$200 stipend to oldsters would now find their professional progeny advocating higher welfare payments to many more Americans than those over sixty. And FDR's program which handed out a \$30 sum to aged now averages around \$300 per month.

Of course, times and circumstances have changed. But still, with a mental squint at the historical pictures, old Dr. Townsend's Plan seems less ludicrous now than then.

And whether he was merely a man before his time or a glib, engaging fool, Dr. Francis Everett Townsend should be remembered by those of us who administer the social security programs. □