CHAPTER 15

“The Matter of Wages Does Not Seem to be Material”: Native American Domestic Workers’ Wages under the Outing System in the United States, 1880s–1930s

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Introduction

In the early decades of the twentieth century, Native American girls and young women worked as domestic servants in white homes under a government program known as “Outing.” Historians of the Outing program have pointed to its simultaneously assimilationist and exploitative nature. The question of the wages paid to the young women “working out” in white homes, however, has not yet received attention. That the wages were low is simply taken for granted, and the assumption that the authorities approved is not problematized in any way. Such oversight may be seen as justified by offhand remarks in the record, such as those of an unnamed senior official in the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), who made the dismissive comment upon the 1916 report of an Inspector for the BIA on the Outing program, that the “big thing is for us to see that the girls are protected in these homes and the matter of wages does not seem to me to be material in that connection.”

In this chapter, I want to open up that final, rather curt remark for a closer interrogation, in order to more clearly elucidate the significance of the wage rates for the administration and for our understanding of the Outing program. The 1916 Inspector’s report had directly raised the issue of wage rates. Inspector Sweet, reporting on the Outing system as it operated in the American Southwest, had pointed out that the wages received by the young women working as maids in Arizona’s two major cities, Tucson and Phoenix, were relatively high, considerably exceeding those paid to Outing workers elsewhere. Further, Sweet had explained that the superintendent of the Phoenix Indian school expressly disapproved of higher wages, as did the superintendent of the

Sherman Institute at Riverside in California; but the woman who placed the
girls at Phoenix, Outing matron Amanda Chingren, had disagreed, declaring
that there was "no reason why the Indian woman should not receive the same
wages for the same work as a white, negro, German, Swedish or other woman."\(^2\)
Sweet himself thought the superintendents’ argument (that employers who
paid better wages were consequently less willing to exercise moral supervision
over the girls) unconvincing. Lower wages must make mistresses less likely to
control their workers, he proposed, for fear of losing their ultra-cheap labor.
Until the superintendents could “show a more definite relation between lower
pay and higher watch-care,” Sweet felt that the matron commanded the logic
of the case.\(^3\)

Sweet’s observations were clearly not welcome, however. The Indian Office
official who closed off and filed his report asserted that the wages for Outing
workers had no bearing on the priorities of the central administration, namely
the restraint (“protection”) of young Indian women. As far as the BIA was
concerned, he implied, wages could be high, low or non-existent, and there
would be no impact on the shape of the program. But while the central Office
never would set any kind of wage scale for Outing rates nor offer explicit advice,
leaving the school superintendents or Outing matrons to negotiate wages with
employers at the local level, the wage rates were a real and contentious issue
for those who actually ran and supervised the Outing programs, as well as for
those workers and employers who were subject to them. Closer examination
reveals that there was no one, singular, uncontested meaning of the Outing
workers’ wages. The “matter of wages” certainly was of critical importance, as
material economic issues intersected with less tangible, and often conflicting,
cultural and symbolic imperatives.

The Outing System

The original Outing program had begun in the 1880s over on the East Coast,
under Captain Richard Henry Pratt at Carlisle Indian School in Pennsylvania.
Pratt’s program entailed the “placing out” of his pupils in white homes to work,
originally during the summer vacations, but soon year-round also, attending
public schools. A succession of Indian Affairs Commissioners urged its expan­
sion to the West in the wake of the Dawes Allotment Act of 1887, which had
empowered the US Congress and the Office of Indian Affairs to break up the

\(^3\) NAB RG75 CCF, E. Sweet, Report on Outing System.