

ABSTRACT

of

“WE CAST OUR LOT WITH THE INDIANS FROM THAT DAY ON”:
THE CALIFORNIA INDIAN WELFARE WORK OF
THE REVERENDS FREDERICK G. COLLETT AND BERYL BISHOP-COLLETT,
1910 TO 1914

by

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Few people in early-twentieth century California Indian affairs are as controversial as Frederick George Collett, and little research has been done into his background or on how he fits into the national frameworks of Indian reform and Christian evangelism. Evangelical Protestant ministers, Collett and his wife, Beryl Bishop-Collett, took up the cause of Indian welfare by agreeing to teach at the Colusa rancheria. There they found evidence of neglect by federal, state, and local authorities as well as prejudice by the Indians' white neighbors, and they set to work to remedy the problems. Working with the faith-based organizations of, first, the Mount Hermon Association and, later, the Northern California Indian Association, the Colletts found a vocation that shaped the rest of their lives.

Their first crusade, beginning in 1911, was to enroll Indian children in the state's public school system. Although state law seemingly assured Indian children the right to

attend public schools, the Colletts and other reformers found that widespread white racism denied most Indian children that opportunity. Using the knowledge they had acquired at the Colusa rancheria, the Colletts approached the problem by using federal tuition contracts to encourage districts to accept Indian children and, when that failed, establishing Indian-only public schools. During this period the Colletts had falling outs with H. W. Gilchrist of the Mount Hermon Association and C. E. Kelsey of the Northern California Indian Association over the most effective ways to advance the Indian cause. These fundamental disagreements led to the Colletts' decision to found the Indian Board of Co-operation in 1913 and later fueled attacks on the Colletts and their work.

The Colletts were successful in their public school campaign, but their efforts aroused the antagonism of two Indian agents, C. H. Asbury and Thomas B. Wilson, who lobbied the Bureau of Indian Affairs in Washington to prohibit the use of tuition contracts in California. The Colletts again ran afoul of the two Indian agents, as well as Kelsey, in their next campaign when they sought to solve problems at the Round Valley Indian Reservation. It was at this point that the effective husband-and-wife team began to unravel. Bishop-Collett, perhaps suffering from the effects of a physical and mental breakdown, was noticeably absent from the field at this time. Called to the reservation to investigate the case of three Indian boys who had burned the schoolhouse down, her husband discovered underlying complaints about Wilson's administration of the reservation and school, the mishandling of Indian funds, and the physical punishment of students. He immediately launched a campaign to oust Wilson and school clerk Omar Bates; but, short of cash, Collett asked the Indians to underwrite his efforts. This request

was later perceived by many of his critics as a criminal levy on the poorest of the poor. Collett, however, got results. Within a few months, Wilson asked for a transfer, Bates left the school, and the Indian boys avoided serious punishment for their arson. Collett also provoked the ire of Kelsey and the Indian agents, who then waged a clandestine assault on the Colletts' reputation.

This paper relies on archival records that reveal the thoughts and actions of the major and minor players. These records include correspondence, reports, pamphlets, flyers, articles, and books written by the Colletts and those they interacted with, as well as a variety of materials produced at the time by others. In addition, secondary sources were used to reflect the changing academic treatment of the Colletts and their work as well as to place them in the context of the national Indian reform movement.

By the summer of 1914, the characteristics that marked Frederick G. Collett's career had been established, and he and the Indian Board of Co-operation were pushing ahead on other issues benefiting California Indians. Collett's blend of Protestant evangelism, respect for Indian traditions, and activism marked him as a transitional figure in the history of Indian reformers. He and, most certainly, his wife are a bridge between those who advocated complete Indian assimilation into American culture and society and the later reformers who sought to maintain Indian cultural identity while providing for their limited economic and political integration in national affairs.

_____, Committee Chair
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