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## N.D. tribe asks Congress to fulfill 50-year-old promise FRIDAY, JUNE 13, 2003

Fifty years ago this week, on June 11, 1953, the United States dedicated the Garrison Dam. For the Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation of North Dakota, the anniversary is not one to be celebrated.

In creating the dam, the federal government flooded 156,000 acres of prime real estate, including the tribe's capital. More than 300 families and 1,700 residents -- 80 percent of the membership at the time -- were forced to relocate, prompting the loss of an entire way of life, tribal members say.

"The Mandan people -- we called ourselves Nueta -- moved to an area called Twin Buttes," wrote Jodi Rave Lee, a tribal member and reporter for The Lincoln Journal Star, in a May 25 article. "The language was slow to follow, its memory now nearly as flooded as the tribe's sacred sites."

Tribal leaders opposed the project, suggesting alternatives to limit the impact. But it moved forward anyway, and George Gillette, the tribe's chairman at the time, reluctantly signed an agreement to give up one-quarter of the Fort Berthold Reservation.

"We will sign this contract with a heavy heart," he said in 1948. "With a few scratches of the pen, we will sell the best part of our reservation. Right now the future doesn't look too good to us."

Gillette can be seen crying in a photo taken at the event.

The tribe was eventually compensated \$149.2 million for some of the losses. But one critical piece has been missing -- along with the flooding of Elbowoods, the capital, the reservation's Indian Health Service (IHS) hospital there was destroyed.

That brought Tex Hall, the tribe's chairman, and Fred Baker, chairman of the tribe's elders organization, to the Senate Indian Affairs Committee on June 11 to ask the government to fulfill a 50-year-old promise to replace the hospital. Without a new facility, they said, lives are in danger.

"I blame diabetes on the dam," Hall said, quoting a tribal elder. "I blame cancer on the dam." Hall's grandfather was vice-chairman at the time of the 1948 signing



**HEAVY HEART:** George Gillette, second from left, chairman of Three Affiliated Tribes of the Fort Berthold Reservation, and other tribal officials at the 1948 signing of the Garrison Dam agreement. (Click photo to enlarge). File AP.

and is also seen in the photo.

The sentiments were echoed by others at the hearing, held to consider a bill that would authorize \$20 million for a new clinic. Sen. Ben Nighthorse Campbell (R-Colo.), chairman of the committee and one of the sponsors, said the "confiscation" of the tribe's land was one of the most "disheartening episodes" in history.

Sen. Kent Conrad (D-N.D.), another sponsor, called the dam a "bitter chapter of history that forever changed" the tribe. "That is something that is desperately needed," said Sen. Byron Dorgan (D-N.D.) of the clinic. "It is something that is owed to the tribe."

Baker, whose grandfather and uncle were at the 1948 signing, was born at the Elbowoods hospital. As one of the few remaining speakers of the Hidatsa language, he said it was a place where tribal members could go and feel welcome.

"With the advent of the Garrison Dam, our hospital at Elbowoods was closed, and we were forced to seek care at hospitals where we knew no one, everything was strange and different, and sometimes we were not treated very well," he said in his written testimony. "As a result, many of us, especially our elders refused to seek medical care and many died at home, rather than seek care at such a foreign place."

While the bill is likely to be approved at the committee level, it is only the first step in a longer process, supporters acknowledged. Citing competing priorities, they said it would be harder to convince their colleagues to appropriate the \$20 million.

There is also concern that the clinic would not receive priority at IHS, which keeps its own facilities construction list. Dr. Charles Grim, the interim director of IHS, said his agency would build the clinic if the bill is passed.

#### Relevant Documents:

Written Witness Testimony (June 11, 1953)

#### Get the Bill:

Three Affiliated Tribes Health Facility Compensation Act (S.1146)

#### Relevant Links:

Mandan, Hidatsa and Arikara Nation - <http://www.mhanation.com> <

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