

Grandmother's Deal With Judge Gave Bennett Early Head Start

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Washington, D. C.—The late Circuit Judge Henry Graass of Green Bay made a deal many years ago with Mrs. Mary A. Doxtator, who lived with her eight children on the nearby Oneida Indian reservation.

Mrs. Doxtator's grandson, Robert La Follette Bennett, became acting commissioner of the bureau of Indian affairs last Tuesday, succeeding another Wisconsin man, Phillio Nash. President Johnson said Friday that he would name Bennett as commissioner soon.

It would not be stretching the facts to say that the earlier event profoundly affected what happened Tuesday when an Indian became head of the bureau for the first time in nearly a century.

Grandma Doxtator, it seems, didn't want to send any of her children to the Indian school, as Judge Graass insisted she should.

Lucky for Bennett

The deal as worked out by the judge was that if she sent the four younger children to school, the four older ones, all boys, wouldn't have to go.

The older ones never learned to read or write and never learned English. Of the younger ones, the most avid for learning was Bennett's mother, Lydia Doxtator, who learned English and had nine years of schooling, through her freshman year in high school.

Lydia Doxtator, who married Fred H. Bennett, a white man who was a rural mail carrier, must have been a remarkable woman.

She infused her son with a desire to learn and he in turn

is driven by a burning desire to bring better education to the 380,000 Indians who have just become his charges.

Admired La Follette

When her son was born on the Wisconsin reservation on Nov. 16, 1912, Mrs. Bennett gave him the name of Sen. Robert M. (Fighting Bob) La Follette, whose politics she admired. A close friend, Mrs. Josephine Webster, had just named her newborn son after Woodrow Wilson.

Mrs. Bennett was fluent in the language of the Oneidas,



Bennett Nash

who had migrated to Wisconsin from New York state in 1821.

A full blooded Oneida, she often served as an interpreter, but at home she insisted on talking English with her son and daughter, Prudence, who still lives on the reservation.

Young Robert Bennett attended St. Joseph's parochial school at Oneida and went to high school at Seymour and at St. Norbert's in De Pere.

Earned Law Degree

He was graduated in 1931 from Haskell institute, an Indian college at Lawrence, Kas.,

where he specialized in business administration.

Later he got a law degree from Southeastern university here, not with the idea of practicing law but to prepare himself better to serve his people.

After a short stint with the veterans administration, where he developed training programs for Indian veterans, Bennett joined the Indian bureau in 1933 at the Ute reservation in Utah, where he remained for five years.

Then he came to Washington as a specialist in tribal affairs. Following service in World War II as a marine private, he joined the veterans administration staff in Phoenix, Ariz., to work with Indian war veterans.

Returning to the Indian bureau in 1949, he served in the Dakotas, back in Washington and as superintendent of the consolidated Ute Indian agency at Ignacio, Col.

Worked in Alaska

In 1962 Nash appointed him area director of Indian affairs for the Alaska region, with headquarters in Juneau.

That is where he met his second wife, the former Mrs. Cleota Minor Brayboy of Baltimore, a social worker.

He has children by his former marriage, three of whom live here with him. Of the three older sons, two are navy veterans and one is a marine veteran.

Bennett is a member of the American Academy of Political and Social Science, the American Society for Public Administration, the National Congress of American Indians, Rotary International and the National Advisory Committee for Indian Youth.

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