When the Advocate Becomes the Adversary: The Rise and Fall of Chicago's Indian Council Fire, 1920-1970

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Abstract: The Chicago American Indian population resulted from the federal termination and relocation policies of the 19th and twentieth centuries. Beginning in the early 20th century the federal government, who had had a heavy hand in American-Indian affairs since the age of paternalism after the American Civil War and westward expansion, passed a series of laws that limited the American-Indian’s tribal experience and encouraged them to migrate to urban centers. The result was the steady increase of American-Indians across the country, including the expanding city of Chicago. The city itself was a product of migration, having received many European migrants at the end of the 19th century, and was continuously growing. Life for the minority American Indians was difficult. Complicated with economic, political and social issues the population sought advocacy in American Indian groups who offered services to the new population. Thus, the 1920s-1970s marked a period of transformation for American Indians. The relationship between the U.S. federal government’s Bureau of Indian Affairs, the Chicago Indian organizations, and the Chicago American Indian population demonstrates the complexity of an emerging population, the external factors affecting their experience, and their own interpretation of their role within society. This paper aims to explore these relationships. With a focus on Chicago’s Newberry Library Modern Manuscript Collection, the Indian Council Fire, the primary and secondary sources used for this paper reveals a unique narrative for the Chicago American Indian and its relationship with organizations and the federal government. Section one of the paper introduces the organization central to this discussion, the Indian Council Fire, and its emergence in the context of federal-Indian policies in the twentieth century. The second section explores image, identity and status of the American Indian. It primarily focuses on the formation of the Indian Achievement Award, its Impact on the ICF, and the inevitable affect on the Chicago American Indian community. The third section, the Era of Controversy, 1960s and 1970s: The Defining Decades for the ICF and The American Indian Community, draws on internal conflicts that have arisen within the organization and the changes within the Chicago American Indian community. Throughout this paper the narrative seeks to shed light on new truths, revealed through the Newberry Library’s special Manuscript collection.