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With the opening last month of a large-scale electronics assembly plant on the Navajo Reservation, a trend toward Indian employment in precision industries has been solidly established, the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs reported.

The Navajo-based enterprise--Semiconductor Division of Fairchild Camera and Instrument Corporation of New York--extends the company's worldwide operations to another economically underdeveloped area and offers promise of a further breakthrough in the Indians' efforts to bring new vitality to isolated regions.

The Navajo Tribe has been on the lookout for ways to develop a rural area-- the craggy volcanic hill country surrounding Shiprock, New Mexico. The Shiprock site for the Fairchild electronic enterprise was selected by the tribal council because it is located in a region marked by the tribe for industrialization and urbanization in an effort to diversify and expand the region's economy.

More than 200 Navajos will be trained on-the-job under a contract between Fairchild and the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Recruitment is on a reservation-wide basis. A further series of on-the-job training programs is anticipated for the near future, with eventual employment projected at 800.

The 50 Navajos already on the job, trained under a program financed through the Area Redevelopment Administration, "learn quickly and have a high productivity level" according to Fairchild spokesmen.

In exploring the possibilities, Fairchild representatives admitted they had some early doubts concerning the ability--and reliability--of Indian workers.

A check with other firms employing Indians--such as Harry Winston Minerals, a diamond-processing plant near Phoenix; and Bulova Watch, which manufactures ordinance parts at the Turtle Mountain Chippewa Reservation in North Dakota--satisfied them that Indian workers are precise, accurate and willing.

The Navajo country has a population of over 90,000, with tremendous unemployment. Every job created by Fairchild is expected to generate at least one other new job in business or services in the area.

What is happening on the Navajo Reservation is also taking place in other Indian areas.

New uses--economically productive uses--of Indian land are being sought to breathe new life into many communities. An increasing Indian population (due to declining infant, maternal and disease death rates), coupled with a national economic evolution away from independent farming and ranching, have created new problems for the Indians who still cling to rural reservation life. There are about 552,000 Indians in the United States according to census figures, and about 380,000 of them live on reservations and receive help from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, trustee for 50 million acres of Indian land.

One of the Bureau's concentrated efforts has been toward encouraging Indian tribes to link forces with the industrial and business community. As a result, manufacturers seeking workers with a combination

of manual dexterity and highly developed sense of spatial relationships are looking toward the Indian labor market.

The Indian, with a natural affinity for precision work, is equally at home as a high-climbing steel structural worker and as a weaver of intricate designs. Somewhere between the two extremes lies electronic factory work, which calls for skill that is rooted in pride of workmanship. Two other electronics industries are already in business in economically hard-pressed Indian areas, and three more are currently under construction. Simpson Electric Company currently employs 75 Indians (nearly half its total employment) in a plant on the Lac du Flambeau Reservation in Wisconsin, which manufactures electric meters and parts. It was one of the first to venture into the Indian labor market. Burnell &Company, Inc., employs 100 Pueblo Indians in a components manufacturing plant on the Laguna Pueblo in New Mexico. The Bureau of Indian Affairs was the primary agent in bringing the Indians and Burnell together.

Two companies are now preparing for production in economically depressed areas of South Dakota. They are CalDak Electronics, which will soon open at the Lower Brule Sioux Reservation, and Electro Tech Educational Corporation, scheduled to open a plant on the Yankton Sioux Reservation.

U.S. Automatics Corporation is in partnership with the Crow Tribe of Montana, and the new venture will soon commence operation at Hardin.

Other industrial ventures include the Sequoyah Mills at Anadarko and the projected Emle Western Hosiery Mill in Pryor, Oklahoma, and a variety of plants at Cherokee, North Carolina.

A total of 52 enterprises of various kinds have found their way thus far into Indian areas, with the Bureau of Indian Affairs supplying technical advice to tribal authorities and industrial representatives through the planning and financing stages.

The list of products that Indian workers are manufacturing includes fish products (Unalaska, Alaska); soft goods (Cherokee, North Carolina); ladies' garments (Fort Hall, Idaho); aluminum culverts (Gallup, New Mexico); furniture frames (Mille Lacs, Minnesota); cheese (Mission, South Dakota); plastic aircraft instrument panels (Wewoka, Oklahoma).

The total impact upon Indian areas is evidenced in new housing; community activity centers; classes in adult basic education in which tribal elders are the eager students; development of neglected areas into recreational parks and campgrounds for tourists; marinas bordering waterways; paved roads; new livestock breeding herds; sawmills; a revival of arts and crafts production; and a surge of social and political vitality.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs offers Indians what is believed to be the best bargain in vocational-training opportunities available anywhere. The plan Days all costs of training and even pays cost of family living if the Indian trainee is the family head.

The response to this foot-in-the-door to employment has been so great that an initial fund of $3,5 million annually, established by Congress eight years ago, was increased this year to $15 million.

Many of the Indian men and women enrolled in the Adult Vocational Training program are preparing for work in some aspect of electronics--ranging from radio repair to rocketry.