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1973, pp. 181-185. <https://doi.org/10.56577/FFC-24.181>

in:

Monument Valley (Arizona, Utah and New Mexico), James, H. L.; [ed.], New Mexico Geological Society 24th Annual Fall Field Conference Guidebook, 232 p. <https://doi.org/10.56577/FFC-24>

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NAVAJO HISTORY: A 3000-YEAR SKETCH

by

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Judging from distribution of the Athapascan language, of which Navajo is a part, the nucleus of the Navajo people crossed the Bering Strait from the west and gradually moved south and east. Some anthropologists assume that this migration began about 3,000 years ago, and it must have taken some seven hundred years for the people who were to become the Navajos to traverse western Canada from north to south and finally arrive in the southwestern United States.

with something of a culture of their own.

The record of that initial journey from the northern ocean to the Southwest is preserved only in Navajo tradition, since they had no written language. Some Navajo elders say that their legends contain references to geographic features encountered on their travels, faintly recognizable from descriptions. Thus, accordingly, the arcane story of the emergence parallels the saga of their wanderings in the north country.



No one knows the details of this five-century trek, but imagination pictures groups of people, large enough to hold their own against the vicissitudes of an unknown land, following the dim trails laid out by other tribes speaking other languages who had entered the New World before them. No doubt they encountered other peoples here and there, and doubtless added some of them and subtracted some of their own group (or groups) who chose to cast their fortunes in more established areas. They probably traveled as an amoeba moves, expanding and contracting as circumstances dictated. In any case, they kept their language pure enough so that it is still spoken today. What they taught the other tribes they met, and what they learned in exchange, one can only guess. It is certain, however, that they arrived in the Four Corners area



Written history records the Navajo people as living in the area visited by Fray Alonso de Benavides, who saw them in the 1620s in the country between the Chama and San Juan rivers in northern New Mexico and southern Colorado. From records of the journey, it is evident that the explorers traveled no farther north than the Navajo area they visited, so that no one actually knows their territorial extent. To the west and south, however, Benavides wrote, "their land ... extends so far in all directions that it alone is vaster than all the others.... In journeying westward through this nation, one never reaches the end of it." Father Benavides also reports that they were "very skillful farmers," so it is apparent that they understood and practiced agriculture.

Some time during this period, the initial group divided. Their numbers were sufficient now to form cultural differences and factions began to form. Those who split off from the more sedentary people are now known as Apaches, who traveled to the south and east before they found their "promised land"; the early Spanish explorers called this group the "Apaches de Navahu."

With the advent of the Spaniards began an era of great change. History shows the invading Europeans as helping themselves to anything they needed. Indians were considered as "fair game" and if the Spaniards wanted something the Indians had, they promptly took it. Whether the Navajos learned this bit of culture from their visitors we do not know. At any rate, what began as small retaliating raids expanded into large ones. The Navajos eyed the Spanish horses and sheep with covetous eyes, and it wasn't long until they had some of both. The Spaniards, who liked slaves, had no scruples about taking them. Back and forth raiding became almost a daily way of life, broken now and then by periods of amity.

As early as 1673 a "campaign of reprisal" was made by Juan Dominguez de Mendoza. This was only one of a series of punishments that prevailed during Spanish occupation.

After they acquired horses and became mobile, the Navajos began to expand their territory to the south and east. The Spaniards, who were colonizing along the Rio Grande, began to look for more lands for farming and grazing. Both peoples wanted the same thing in the same place, and as their interests converged there was additional trouble.

The Spaniards were not the Navajos' only troublesome neighbor. The Utes and Comanches began to make themselves felt in the early 1700s. When the Navajos were at peace with the Spanish, these Indian tribes from the north began raiding Navajo outposts.

One of the most forceful campaigns of the Spanish period occurred when Jose Antonio Vizcarra took action against the Navajos in 1823. He gave them a four-point ultimatum: they must surrender all captives in their possession (Navajos held captive would be freed only if they wished to be); all stolen livestock must be restored; they must convert to Catholicism, and they must agree to live in pueblos. Naturally, this was not workable, and Vizcarra took to the field with a large command. His route from Santa Fe led over the Chuska Mountains and past Canyon de Chelly to the Hopi country. There he divided his command, sending Colonel Salazar across Black Mesa to Agathla Peak, south of Monument Valley. He himself went around the west side of the mesa and attacked the Navajos under Juanico not far from Kayenta, putting them to flight with the loss of 87 cattle and over 400 sheep and goats. Salazar in the meantime reached the lower part of Monument Valley and attacked a small camp there. On August 18 he

rejoined Vizcarra at the mouth of Canyon de Chelly.

The advent of American occupation in 1846 made no difference to the Navajos. Tribal representatives could have had peace with the American government, but their fighting men ignored peace completely. The Spanish invasion had been troublesome enough, but the Anglos were even more aggressive. While Navajo leaders were compelled to sue for peace, the Navajo rank and file wanted no part of it. They concentrated on their fierce desire to completely destroy the white settlers. It was a purpose born of desperation; they staked everything on the success of continued raids of villages and the roundup of stock.

By the winter of 1846 Colonel Alexander Doniphan brought a regiment of volunteers to a meeting with Navajo chiefs Zarcillos Largos, Mariano and Narbona at Ojo del Oso (Bear Springs), near present Fort Wingate. They signed a treaty, the first of a series that were to be ignored by both sides.

In the summer of 1849 a heterogeneous collection of New Mexico volunteers, Jemez Indians and troops under Colonel John Washington took the field. Their route was a long one: from Chaco Canyon to Two Gray Hills, across Washington Pass, north and west to the mouth of Chinle Wash. On their way they killed Narbona, the great Navajo chief. At Chinle



Chief Mariano. (Photo Courtesy: Museum of New Mexico).

they signed another treaty—this one the first to be ratified by the United States Congress. It also had no effect.

In August, 1851, seven companies of troops, both afoot and mounted, hauling mountain howitzers, marched from the Rio Grande to establish the site of Fort Defiance. Colonel E. V. Sumner, leader of the party, left five companies of troops at the new post with instructions to treat the Navajos with the utmost rigor until they sued for peace.

A series of Indian agents, not under army rule, was instituted. The first two were safely stationed at Jemez and performed their duties from this distant location. The third, however, was a man who took a different approach with the Navajos—he treated them as people. Henry L. Dodge had unusual empathy with the Indians. The next spring he moved into their country and established his agency near the eastern end of Washington Pass. His fearlessness and unusual diplomacy gave him great influence over the headmen. He learned that some of them had been making bridle bits, knives and other implements, and so they might learn to work competently with metal, he brought in a blacksmith and requested a thousand pounds of iron and four sets of blacksmith tools. By teaching them the arts of peace he managed to obtain peace.

It was too good to last. Four years after his appointment, Dodge was killed by enemy Apaches while on a scouting party below Zuni. Had he lived, future trouble might have been avoided.



Chief Narbona. (Photo Courtesy: Museum of New Mexico).

Before long the privacy of the Navajos was again tested. The oncoming tide of white settlers could not be repelled forever. Fight as the Indians might, the fates were against them. Each new raid brought fierce reprisals, and military orders went out to "subjugate the Navajos or exterminate them."

Troops of soldiers explored the Navajo country. Captain John G. Walker with his mounted rifles crossed Black Mesa to Monument Valley, where he arrived on September 12, 1859. He was not impressed, calling it "a desolate and repulsive looking country." From here the soldiers dropped down to the head of Kletthla Valley and went to Long House ruin, where they camped overnight, pulling down roof timbers for firewood.

Many bands of Indians, realizing that they could not stand and fight against overwhelming odds, retreated farther and farther into the fastnesses of such regions as Navajo Mountain, where they could hide and be safe. The soldiers penetrated even there, but without results. The headmen led their bands far ahead of the troops, evading and eluding them. Some groups even crossed the San Juan River and escaped to the north.

About half of the Navajo population managed to keep away from the troops, eking out some sort of living in the rough region where they could not be displaced. The other half did not fare so well. General James H. Carleton commanded Kit Carson, the famous scout and Indian fighter, to take his troops and conduct total warfare against the Navajos; this he did with disastrous results. He penetrated into Canyon de Chelly, killing stock, cutting down fruit trees and destroying corn fields. From his reports it appears that many days were spent in enforcing this scorched earth policy, and it was done thoroughly. Carson knew that the only way to conquer the Navajos was to starve them into submission.

Word went out that those who surrendered peacefully would be treated well. For the sake of their families, small groups began appearing at Fort Wingate. When most of them had arrived, they were sent east to Fort Sumner, on the Pecos River, where Carleton planned to relocate them. His idea was to form them into villages, where they could become peaceful farmers.

Carleton's plan did not work for several reasons: the ground was poor, and insect pests ravished the crops as soon as they appeared above the surface; water from the river was bad and caused illness; the Comanches and other still-free tribes raided the Navajos and made away with what little they still possessed.

When General William Tecumseh Sherman visited Fort Sumner in 1868, the Navajos were a beaten people. They pleaded for peace, asking only that they be allowed to return to their former lands, and promised never to fight again. The resultant treaty of 1868 was the final one.

At home again, on a reservation set aside for them in the heart of their old lands, they began a new life. The government issued them three sheep and a goat apiece, and gradually gave them farming implements, wagons and other necessities. They began to hold their heads up again.

The reservation given them was nowhere as large as the territory over which they formerly roamed, but with their reduced numbers it was sufficient.

Actual civilization came to the Navajos with the advent of

trading posts. Instead of having to travel considerable distances to other tribes for trading, or to wait for itinerant traders to come their way, they now had fixed points of business. Traders brought a variety of necessities to exchange for sheep, wool, blankets, silver jewelry, or whatever else the Navajos might have to barter with. Principal among these was textiles. Navajo women were proficient weavers and had already become famous for the quality of their work since the 1780s. The traders had caught on quickly to the salability of weaving, and influenced the change from the lighter-weight fabrics required for blankets to heavier material that could be used for rugs. They suggested colors and designs that would be popular, and encouraged the women to make rugs that could be most readily sold.

Another source of income was silversmithing. Materials for this craft were hard to acquire at first. Although the Navajos had long fancied silver ornaments and had used them both on clothing and horse bridles, they had only acquired them by trade with other tribes or with the Mexicans. It remained for Agent Henry L. Dodge to import a blacksmith and a Mexican silversmith in 1853 so that they could learn and practice the craft. A Navajo called Herrera (Spanish for "iron worker") is said to have visited the Dodge agency and to have learned something of silversmithing there.

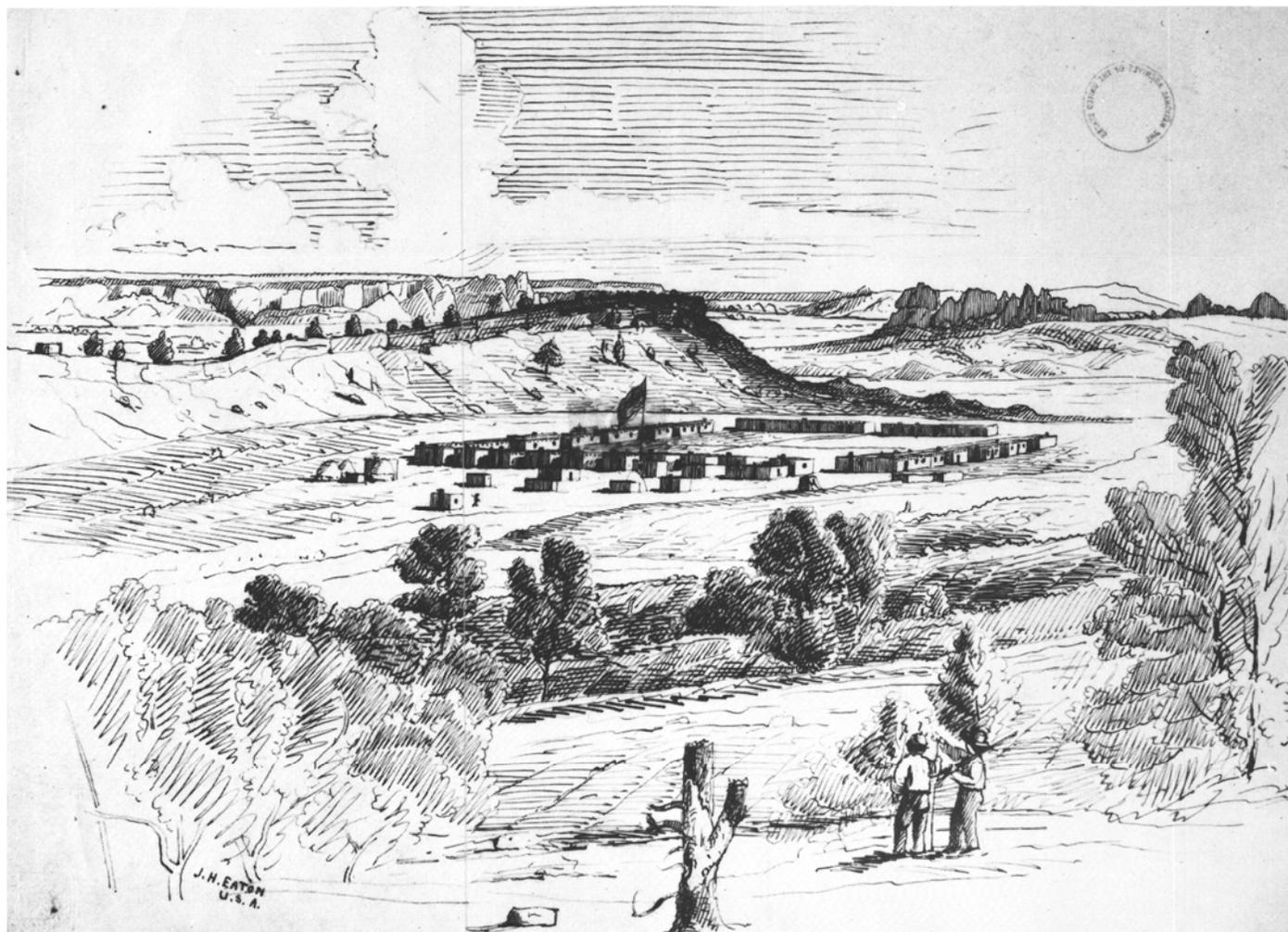
Before Fort Sumner only two or three Navajo silversmiths

were making their own buttons and perhaps a few bracelets, using traded silver. After Fort Sumner the craft became popular, with Mexican silver coins used at first, obtained from one of the first trading posts operated by Charles Cray near Ganado Lake in 1871-72. Later they used American dollars that they received from soldiers at Fort Defiance and Fort Wingate. The coins were melted down and then shaped to suit the Navajo need. Today silver in sheets of various weights and silver wire are obtained from supply houses or trading posts.

Here again the traders influenced the craft, requesting certain types of jewelry and weights of silver. The use of turquoise began in the 1880s, and since it proved very popular more and more of it was used commercially. Coral and shell also became popular.

With characteristic resiliency, the Navajos made the most of their new beginnings. But in time, as the population increased and contact with the whites became constant, necessary changes had to be made.

The captive population in 1864 was placed at 8,570; twenty years later it was estimated at 17,200—today it is approximately 132,000. With this growth it became vitally necessary for the government to increase the acreage by adding sections to the original treaty reservation. Land was added in all directions, and included the now controversial Executive Order of 1882, which was designed for the use of the Hopi and other



Fort Defiance during military days.

tribes as the government saw fit. This growth, from the original three and a half million acres in 1868, began in 1878, and its size increased until 1962. (The present Navajo Reservation is 16,000,000 acres.) The tribe itself has purchased and now owns 379,749 acres of land off the reservation.

The increases in both population and land meant the necessity for roads, schools, hospitals and other improvements. During World War II there was a great demand for wool that the tribe could supply, and wartime jobs brought added income to thousands of Navajos. The famous Marine "code talkers" deserve special mention, since this unique development enabled the Allies to provide an unbreakable code for sending messages.

The Navajo Reservation of sixteen million acres was divided early into convenient agencies, six in number (including the Hopi), for better administration. An all-Navajo council was established in 1923, with a chairman and two delegates from each agency. The council met annually and passed on such subjects as land leases, since uranium, vanadium and oil, as well as other minerals, had been found on the reservation. As of June, 1970, there were 825,000 acres of land under lease for oil and gas development.

The minerals department of the tribe is now exploiting petroleum, oil, gas and strip-coal possibilities of the reservation. Uranium is found from southern Colorado to the Church Rock area east of Kayenta.

In 1935 the five agencies were united into one governing body. Two years later the Navajo Tribal Council was organized. This new body expanded into a group of 74 men, with a chairman and vice-chairman. In 1947 an advisory committee was formed to review and consider all matters that were to come before the council. This committee of twelve members passes on all business to be presented. Committees and divisions now acting include: Budget and Finance, Grazing, Health, Education, Resources, Welfare, Trading and Parks and Recreation.

When the council was established in 1927, two chapter houses were formed as units of the agricultural extension service. Since that time they have developed into a form of regional government, and today some 100 chapters represent the local Navajos at the rural level. Handsome chapter houses built by local labor are not only meeting places, but also furnish facilities for bathing, laundering, sewing and cooking; most of them are built near wells developed through a water development program. Local social events, held at the chapter houses, provide funds for the continuance of the chapter program. Members of the Tribal Council represent one or more chapters. The people gather at the chapter houses to hear reports of council deliberations that directly concern them.

As a result of the awareness of the Navajos of modern ways, a number of electronic plants have been established on the reservation, each employing a majority of Navajos. The strip-mining operations on Black Mesa and elsewhere have also given employment to a large number of Indians. Another result of this awareness, coupled with the unique Navajo facility for adaptation to circumstances, is the fact that there are now over 1,000 miles of paved roads on the reservation, connecting some 60 schools, 120 health facilities (including hospitals and clinics); over 130 trading posts and more than 175 missions, as well as seven tribal parks, patrolled by Navajo rangers. These trained men, including the Navajo Police Department, guard the reservation, enforcing the laws and protecting humans, wildlife and natural resources. The Navajo Antiquities Act,

passed in January, 1972, provides for the arrest and punishment of pothunters and other vandals.

Persons who regard the Navajo Reservation as a land of deserts and canyons fail to realize that there are 458,459 acres of marketable timber contained in its beautiful forests. The eleven million dollar sawmill at Navajo, New Mexico, built, owned and operated by the Navajo Tribe, produces about 20 million board feet of lumber a year, cut on the sustained yield system. The plant employs about 430 Navajos as contrasted to only 43 non-Navajos.

The Navajo Tribal Utilities Authority, established in 1960, employs about 180 skilled men who supply utilities to the people. Many hogans in isolated settings boast a TV aerial, and an electric blanket is as popular with the Navajos as their own hand-woven rugs are with the whites.

Another tribal enterprise is the Arts and Crafts Guild, which encourages Navajo artists to produce their best work. Arts and Crafts salesrooms are located in eight widely-separated communities on the reservation.

At Window Rock is located the Navajo Tribal Museum, where the history of the Navajo people is set forth in many educational exhibits. Additional displays illustrate the ecology, paleontology, flora and fauna of the area, as well as cultural material. A zoo contains specimens of many birds and animals native to the reservation.

The Navajo Times, a weekly newspaper with a wide circulation both on and off the reservation, keeps its readers abreast of national as well as local affairs.

Since 1969 the reservation has had its own community college; a new campus is nearing completion at Tsaile. The president and most of the officials and staff are educated Navajos, men and women who are equally at home in a classroom, an auditorium, or an office. Another college (religious) is now in operation at Ganado.

For a number of years the Navajos have been represented in the legislatures of both Arizona and New Mexico.

Several annual fairs are held at various points on the reservation. Here the attractions are likened to old-fashioned country fairs, such as displays of livestock, canning and preserving, needlework, prize vegetables and fruits and exhibits of world-famous Navajo weaving and silversmithing. A Navajo girl, chosen for beauty, poise and talent, is crowned Miss Navajo each year. Some fairs have been held for more than sixty years, and each year they display the progress of the Navajo Tribe in many ways. In fact, the "nation within a nation," while retaining its unique flavor, can boast of as modern a culture as any community in the United States.

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