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# Sophie D. Aberle and the United Pueblos Agency, 1935-1944

Kathlene Ferris

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SOPHIE D. ABERLE AND THE  
UNITED PUEBLOS AGENCY, 1935-1944

By

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Bachelor of Arts, History, University of New Mexico, 1978

THESIS

Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the  
Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts  
History

The University of New Mexico  
Albuquerque, New Mexico

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Several people encouraged and supported the production of **To Kristen and Elizabeth**. Kessell, Dr. Margaret Connell, and Dr. Jameson for their encouragement and support. They led me to new and exciting avenues of research.

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**ABSTRACT OF THESIS**

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## SOPHIE D. ABERLE AND THE UNITED PUEBLOS AGENCY, 1935-1944

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B. A., History, University of New Mexico, 1978

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## ABSTRACT

Sophie D. Aberle served as Superintendent of the United Pueblos Agency (UPA), 1935-1944. Her tenure coincided with the New Deal era and John Collier's administration of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Aberle was a medical researcher and applied anthropologist who brought several years of field experience among the Pueblos to the UPA. Some opposition arose over her appointment, in part because she was a woman. More important, many Pueblos opposed the consolidation of several Pueblo agencies into one large agency, the United Pueblos Agency. The new agency encompassed the nineteen New Mexico pueblos and three small Navajo reservations. Some resistance to Aberle and the consolidated agency lasted throughout her tenure. In spite of this, she concentrated on managing the agency and assisting the Pueblos with efforts to modernize their villages.

This thesis examines Aberle's administration in the areas of health care, agricultural development, and government reform. It looks at how the UPA efforts



reflected similar trends at Indian agencies across the United States and how federal policy advocating Indian self-determination affected the Pueblos. The purpose of this thesis, in part, is to explore how Aberle managed the agency and what personal traits and professional skills she brought to the position. It includes her own assessment of her tenure and how her administration was perceived by the Pueblos.

CONCLUSION

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## CHAPTER 1

### INTRODUCTION

In 1935 Sophie D. Aberle, M.D., Ph.D., became Superintendent of the United Pueblos Agency. The road that led her to become only the second woman to head an Indian agency in the United States was indirect.<sup>1</sup> Born on July 21, 1896, in Schenectady, New York, Aberle was almost 39 when she took her first position with the federal government as head of a newly created agency. Becoming a bureaucrat in the Indian Service was never a career goal for Aberle, whose considerable education and personal interest in human biology were nontraditional for a woman of her time. In the early part of the twentieth century, however, there were new opportunities for untraditional women, and Aberle took advantage of them.

Aberle's parents were Albert Bledsoe Herrick and Clara S. White Herrick. Her family included a sister, Lillian White Herrick, who was three years older than Sophie, almost to the day. The family moved from New York to Ridgewood, New Jersey, on what she later described as a gentleman's farm. Her father was an inventor who worked for a time at Thomas Edison's facility in Menlo Park, New Jersey.<sup>2</sup> Other information about Aberle's immediate family

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<sup>1</sup>The first woman superintendent was Mrs. Elida C. Bowler at the Western Nevada Agency.

<sup>2</sup>"Sophie D. Aberle, MD," *GAMA Reports*, 18 (Jan. 1997): 4.



is obscure. She did not talk much or write about her parents or sister in her later years. As a teenager, she moved in with an aunt who raised her and provided for her education. She apparently lost contact with the rest of her family then and never reestablished those ties. One family member whom she did remember and who influenced her life was her paternal grandmother, after whom she was named, Sophia McIlvaine Bledsoe Herrick.

Sophie Aberle shared Sophia Herrick's scientific intellect. Described as an intellectual with an inquisitive scientific mind, Sophia Herrick was a writer. After eight years of marriage she left her husband due to philosophical and lifestyle differences. Thereafter, she raised their three children on her own. She supported her family by writing for the *Southern Review*. As a major contributor to the journal, she wrote scientific, historical, and biographical articles. She briefly studied biology at The Johns Hopkins University in 1876, after which she wrote scientific articles published in *Scribner's*, creating the accompanying illustrations as well. Her publications also included two books on plant life, one on geology, and a book on poetry.<sup>3</sup> This independent woman served as a role model in Aberle's life. Her education and career in anatomy and medicine testify to her grandmother's influence.

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<sup>3</sup>"Grandmother of S.D.A.," Sophie D. Aberle Papers, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.



Similarly, she seemed to demonstrate her grandmother's self-assurance when she broke away from her nuclear family at a young age. The departure from her family in 1910 took Aberle to San Francisco, where she lived with her aunt, Jessica Westfall, and Jessica's husband, Samuel H. Westfall, a wealthy mine entrepreneur.

Moving in with her aunt gave Aberle the advantages of money and travel. In addition, she found another strong female mentor. Aberle was very close to Jessica Westfall and eventually came to call her 'Mother'. The Westfalls owned several mining interests in California and Nevada and traveled all over the area inspecting their holdings. Rather than put Aberle in a boarding school, which she refused to attend, the Westfalls allowed her to travel with them, along with a private tutor. The Westfall entourage, traveling to gold and lead mines in their large Studebaker, usually included one or two metallurgists or engineers as well. Aberle joined in the conversations and learned much about mining and geology. Although she did not choose a career in the field, she enjoyed going on excursions down into the mines where she watched the miners at work.<sup>4</sup> Formal education and career goals, however, were not on her mind when she married in 1917.

Her first husband, whom she married when she was

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<sup>4</sup>Aberle, "Early life of S.D.A.," typescript, Aberle Papers.



twenty-one years old, was Humberto de Aberle of Guatemala. Like Sophie's parents, de Aberle remains an obscure figure in her life. A few months after they were married, de Aberle died in France in May 1918.<sup>5</sup> Aberle retained an abbreviated version of her married name, eventually substituting the initial 'D' for 'de' in de Aberle. With support from the Westfalls, she acquired high school credit for her tutored studies and began her formal education at the University of California, Berkeley.

After three years at Berkeley, she transferred to Stanford University in 1922. Studying genetics and endocrinology, she earned successive degrees in 1923, 1925, and finished her doctorate in anatomy in 1927. Between 1924-27, Aberle received teaching and research fellowships at Stanford that allowed her to live in faculty housing. She shared a house there with Edith Mirrielees, a professor of English literature who is best known as John Steinbeck's writing instructor at Stanford. Mirrielees and Aberle became close friends. Mirrielees' influence on a mature Sophie Aberle was different from the effect that her grandmother and Julia Westfall had on her. Aberle was twenty-three years old and more in need of a confidant than a mentor. She and Mirrielees shared a mutually beneficial

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<sup>5</sup>De Aberle's death was recorded on insurance documents, but no cause of death was given. Marriage registration, 1917; insurance application, 1924, Aberle Papers. (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1931), 1, 4-5.



relationship of encouragement and emotional support. Years later, at Aberle's invitation, Mirrieles spent several months in New Mexico studying how Pueblo children learn English. Aberle left Stanford in the Summer of 1927 to research in New Mexico.

The Committee for Research in Problems of Sex awarded her a grant to study sex among the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico. The Committee was formed by the National Research Council in 1921 to investigate biological and psychological aspects of human sexual behavior. This formal foray into the world of the physiology of reproduction and the psychology of sex was inspired, in part, by the growing demand of feminists for information about contraception. Earlier study of sexual psychology in Europe also inspired the American scientific community to view sex research seriously. The program brought medical and anthropological research together.<sup>6</sup>

In 1925 Clark Wissler of the American Museum of Natural History joined the Committee to develop the anthropological program. Wissler, who developed the field of applied anthropology, later joined the faculty of Yale University as its first Professor of Anthropology in 1931. Although she never considered herself an anthropologist, Aberle was one of the earliest practicing applied

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<sup>6</sup>Aberle and George W. Corner, *Twenty-five Years of Sex Research* (Philadelphia: Saunders, 1953), 1, 4-5.



anthropologists, due in part to her early association with Wissler.<sup>7</sup> The Committee for Research on Problems of Sex awarded three grants between 1927-1932 for studying reproductive functions in primitive societies. Aberle received one of these grants, which brought her on her first trip to New Mexico.

Her introduction to the Pueblo culture during the summer of 1927 influenced most of her future career and led directly to her later appointment as head of the United Pueblos Agency. She intended to study sexual behavior at San Juan Pueblo. It soon became clear, however, that the language barrier would prevent her from gathering the data she needed for a sexual behavior study. She used the time instead to make observations on the social life and culture of San Juan, which she included later in an unpublished paper, "Pueblo of San Juan."<sup>8</sup> The paper provides information on women's lives at the pueblo, including descriptions of pregnancy, childbirth, child care, diet, and healing. After three months at the pueblo, at Clark Wissler's urging, Aberle enrolled in Yale University to pursue her medical degree.

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<sup>7</sup>Wissler supported Aberle's early research at the Pueblos, encouraged her to pursue a medical degree, and later became a colleague at Yale when Aberle was on the faculty of the Yale Medical School. Lawrence C. Kelly to Aberle, Feb. 21, 1978, Aberle Papers.

<sup>8</sup>Aberle, "Pueblo of San Juan," typescript, Aberle Papers.



Wissler believed that further medical study would help her with her field research. Intrigued with the people of San Juan, Aberle considered a career of research and study among the Pueblos, and consequently agreed to go back to school. Wissler obtained an instructorship for her at the Institute of Human Relations at Yale to provide financial support during the school term. Her anatomy studies at Stanford had given her a head start on her required classes. Therefore, it was not long before she began her hospital internship in New Haven. Work on the gynecology ward exposed her to a "glimpse of the underworld."<sup>9</sup> There she cared for women, mostly prostitutes, suffering the effects of poorly performed or self-administered abortions. An advocate of birth control, Aberle called these women courageous for making such a difficult decision.<sup>10</sup> Clinical work, however, did not appeal to her, and she quickly returned to her interest in research.

Aberle's research focused on female biology. At that time Yale University School of Medicine required that medical students write a doctoral thesis. She conducted experiments for her thesis on the female hormone estrogen.

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<sup>9</sup>Aberle, "SDA Medical School," typescript, Aberle Papers.

<sup>10</sup>Aberle supported reproductive freedom and later served on the Board of Directors of the Bernalillo County Planned Parenthood Association, 1964-1975 and the Board of Directors of Planned Parenthood, World Population (New York City), 1969-1975.



Estrogen research was a new field and the hormone was not commercially available. To acquire a sufficient supply for her experiments, Aberle had to distill estrogen from mare urine, collected at a New Haven farm. The dreadful smell of the distillation process kept all visitors away and provided her with long, uninterrupted hours of experimentation.<sup>11</sup> Much of her subsequent research and publication was on female hormones, pregnancy, and childbirth. Each summer she left Yale to return to New Mexico, where she conducted research on Pueblo populations while residing at San Juan. She began studies that utilized parish church records to track historical population trends. She also collected contemporary data on birth and death rates, frequency of pregnancies, and maternal mortality. This research continued even after she received her M.D. in 1930 and joined the faculty of Yale University School of Medicine as an instructor of Endocrinology.

While in New Haven in March 1932, she attended a lecture by reformer John Collier. Speaking about the defeated Bursum Bill and the Pueblo Lands Act, Collier said that not enough action had been taken to settle claims and force non-Indians off Pueblo reservation land. After the

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<sup>11</sup>Aberle, "Our Roots of Illusion," typescript, Aberle Papers, 32. These pioneering estrogen experiments, conducted on female rats and guinea pigs, led to Aberle's M.D. thesis, "Cyclic Proliferate Phenomena in the Mammary Glands, Vagina and Uterus of the Guinea Pig" (Yale University, 1930). After graduation she conducted primate estrogen research on monkeys and apes.



lecture, Aberle took the opportunity to meet Collier. She told him about the physiological studies that she was conducting among Pueblo children at that time. They agreed that such data could help Bureau of Indian Affairs administrators identify problems and find appropriate solutions. Collier apparently remembered the meeting, because three years later, as Commissioner of Indian Affairs, he surprised Aberle by asking her to take a newly created administrative position as Superintendent of the United Pueblos Agency.<sup>12</sup>

Lewis Meriam of the Brookings Institution in Baltimore told Aberle that Collier was asking about her in regard to the superintendency. Having left Yale, she was living in Baltimore and working at the Carnegie Institution's laboratories. Collier was looking for anthropologists, who he considered particularly qualified to work in Indian administration. He was impressed by Aberle's work in physical anthropology and with her interdisciplinary background.<sup>13</sup> Although Aberle had never before considered a government job, she thought that her scientific background would help her analyze and solve the problems that she had observed at the pueblos. While she was considering his offer, she received a proposal to join the faculty of

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<sup>12</sup>Aberle, typewritten notes on medical school, 1980, Aberle Papers.

<sup>13</sup>Lawrence C. Kelly to Aberle, Feb. 21, 1978, Aberle Papers.



Woman's Medical College of Pennsylvania as Director of the Department of Anatomy, a position that paid a similar salary.<sup>14</sup> Her interest in the Pueblos and her faith in a scientific approach to administration convinced her to accept the position with the Indian Service.

Aberle was one of many middle-class professional women who took advantage of job opportunities provided by the expanding bureaucracy of the New Deal era. Single, well-educated women such as Aberle were moving into public positions of authority in greater numbers. As a doctor, she was not in a traditional woman's role, having been one of only three women who graduated in her medical class. Her work, however, on health and nutrition of women and children was certainly within acceptable social boundaries for a professional woman. As the government took responsibility for education and health care out of the home in the early twentieth century, women moved into the public sector to foster such programs.<sup>15</sup> The Bureau of Indian Affairs was one of several government bureaus to

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<sup>14</sup>Martha Tracy to Aberle, June 29, 1935, Aberle Papers.

<sup>15</sup>Historians have analyzed the career opportunities for women in the New Deal era. See, for example, William Chafe, *The Paradox of Change: American Women in the 20th Century* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1991); Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America* (New York: New Viewpoints, 1979); Sandra Schakel, *Social Housekeepers* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1992); Lois Scharf and Joan Jensen *Decades of Discontent* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1983).



hire more women in the 1930s. Aberle credited her smooth adjustment to service in the large federal bureaucracy to Lucille Foster McMillin, a commissioner on the U.S. Civil Service Commission. McMillin helped her negotiate the civil service system and, on a personal level, bolstered her self-confidence.<sup>16</sup> Aberle began her work with the BIA in May 1935 as the head of one of the largest Indian agencies in the country.

Collier formed the United Pueblos Agency in the summer of 1935 by joining five separate administrative units: the Northern Pueblos Agency, Southern Pueblos Agency, Zuni Pueblo Agency, Albuquerque Indian Hospital, and Santa Fe Indian School. It was the fifth largest Indian agency in the country, measured by the number of Indians living in the jurisdiction.<sup>17</sup> By consolidating the agencies, Collier intended to streamline administration and provide more direct access to Washington. He accomplished this by giving Aberle more decision making-authority within the agency and being readily available to her for consultation. For her part, Aberle quickly adopted an energetic and competent administrative style. She selected the best people she could find to fill vacant positions and removed a few people who she thought hampered the efficiency of the

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<sup>16</sup>Lucille Foster McMillin to Aberle, Oct. 22, 1935 and Jan. 13, 1939, Aberle Papers.

<sup>17</sup>U.S. Bureau of Indian Affairs, "Reservation Data Sheet," 1937, Aberle Papers.



organization. In addition, she and Collier developed a congenial and mutually respectful working relationship that developed into friendship. The new agency and its administrator, however, soon became the targets of critics.

Unhappy with the reorganization, some of the Pueblos were concerned that the new agency weakened their control of their own affairs. UPA headquarters was located in Albuquerque, a fair distance to travel in 1935, especially when Pueblo leadership did not always have reliable transportation. Vehicles and gasoline could be hard to come by; there were few roads on the reservations and they were in poor condition. Telephone lines did not reach the Pueblo villages yet. These problems especially concerned Taos and Zuni, the two pueblos located farthest from Albuquerque.

In addition to being remote from Albuquerque, Zuni Pueblo was the only New Mexico pueblo that previously had its own agency. That was a special circumstance they were not eager to give up. Citing concerns about communication with the Albuquerque office and personal contact with Aberle, the Zuni government was opposed to the reorganization from the start. As early as September 1935, the Zuni Council requested a separate agency again, but Aberle reminded them that they had promised her a trial period.<sup>18</sup> The old Zuni Agency office became a subagency of

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<sup>18</sup>Aberle to Collier, Sept. 5, 1935, John Collier Papers (Sanford, N.C.: Microfilming Corporation of America, 1980).



the UPA, and Aberle assured the Council that the subagent had the authority to work with them and to represent her office. Compounding the situation at Zuni were problems with disbursement of goods, which Aberle blamed on the Treasury Department, and personnel problems with the subagent, a poor replacement for the regular agent, who was on extended leave. The disbursement problem was beyond her control, but she did promptly replace the subagent.<sup>19</sup> In general, Aberle was pleased with the reception that she received at all the pueblos, including Zuni. She credited Collier's relationship with the Pueblos for this. "Things are going very well. I spend two to three days a week in the field and am meeting the Indians. I find an appreciation and a loyalty that have amazed me. They feel as if I were your especial candidate and their devotion to you accounts for the reception I have received."<sup>20</sup> Although the problems with Zuni Pueblo seemed contained, direct attacks on her superintendency continued throughout her nine-year administration.

Controversy surrounding the appointment of a woman as superintendent of the new United Pueblos Agency rose immediately after the announcement in May 1935. Strong opposition to her appointment came, surprisingly, from

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<sup>19</sup>Aberle to Collier, September 9 and 14, 1935, Collier Papers.

<sup>20</sup>Aberle to Collier, Sept. 5, 1935, Collier Papers.



other white women. Mrs. Harold Ickes, wife of the Secretary of the Interior, opposed the appointment solely because Aberle was a woman. Anna Wilmarth Ickes loved to visit New Mexico, where she and her husband owned a home near Gallup. She did not believe that Indian leaders would accept a woman as superintendent. In a tragic turn of events, Mrs. Ickes died in a car crash on August 31, 1935. The controversy over Aberle's appointment did not end with Anna Ickes' death.

Mabel Dodge Luhan, a writer and art patron who lived in Taos and married a Taos Pueblo man named Tony Luhan, led the opposition. Luhan took it upon herself to speak for the men of Taos Pueblo and, indeed, for all the Pueblos. Aberle herself found no evidence that the Pueblos disapproved of a woman superintendent. In a letter to Collier, she wrote, "Aside from the attitude of the white people, I have found no indication that the Indians themselves object to a woman."<sup>21</sup> Luhan, however, claimed that they did. In letters to the editor of the *Albuquerque Journal*, Luhan accused Aberle of being an inexperienced woman, unsuited for the job, and unable to control such a large agency. Pueblo men, she claimed, could not publicly disapprove of Aberle because it was not possible to fight a woman, so Luhan had

<sup>21</sup>Aberle to Collier, Sept. 9, 1935, Collier Papers.



to criticize her for them.<sup>22</sup> Her outspoken opposition to Aberle increased until the Spring of 1936 when, precipitated by the firing of a Taos Pueblo lawman, it exploded into the national press.

Tired of what he saw as charges against his administration, Collier came to Aberle's defense, releasing statements refuting charges that she was incompetent and that the Pueblos could not work with a woman. He refuted the accusation that Antonio Mirabal, a UPA employee and member of the Taos Pueblo Council, was fired for speaking against Aberle. Rather, he insisted, Mirabal was fired for not performing his job.<sup>23</sup> Countercharges and accusations flew between Luhan and Collier, all reported in the pages of the Washington papers, as well as in New Mexico. The situation, which Collier and Aberle privately referred to as "the Mabel disturbance," degenerated into personal attacks. Aberle, for the most part, stayed out of the public debate, but Collier and Luhan, close personal friends in private, resorted to pettiness and name calling in the press.

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<sup>22</sup> *Albuquerque Journal*, May 5 and 12, 1936, clippings, Dennis Chavez Papers, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

<sup>23</sup> Mirabal, a law enforcement officer, was accused of suppressing facts in a case involving peyote and marijuana use at Taos Pueblo, but that accusation was never made public and official charges were not filed against him. Collier to Aberle, Apr. 22 and May 8, 1936, Collier Papers.



Pue. Collier's personalized reaction to Luhan's criticism was certainly inappropriate and unprofessional, especially since her attacks were not directed at him. For her part, Luhan's persistent charges against Aberle may have been caused by resentment. Luhan wanted Collier personally to address even the most minor issues affecting Taos Pueblo.<sup>24</sup> In addition, her personal interest in the details of Taos Pueblo's problems kept her from objectively viewing the agency as a whole. The press soon lost interest in the controversy, and, without a public forum, Luhan's protests quieted, but never stopped. In a later call for attention, the Mirabal and Luhan families, along with a few other members of Taos Pueblo, signed a statement in December 1936 asking for the removal of Secretary Ickes, John Collier, Sophie Aberle, and the attorneys for the Pueblos, Richard Hanna and William Brophy. This was over the matter of peyote use and the Native American Church in Taos Pueblo. The issue divided the Pueblo of Taos, but the Department of the Interior stood behind what it called the religious freedom of Pueblo members. Similar controversies manifested themselves in personal attacks against Aberle for the remainder of her administration. Leaders of Taos Pueblo, along with Zuni and Santo Domingo pueblos, never fully accepted Aberle's administration. From time to time other

but she was most interested in and concentrated on Taos

<sup>24</sup> Collier to Mabel Dodge Luhan, Feb. 25, 1936, Aberle Papers.



Pueblos as well turned disagreements with the UPA administration into opportunities to reiterate and expand on their criticisms of Aberle. No administration of an agency as large as the UPA was likely to go without criticism. Aberle seemed to accept the charges made against her in a calm and professional manner, focusing her energy and attention on the operation of the UPA.

The United Pueblos Agency, like other Indian agencies in the 1930s, benefitted from a shift in federal Indian policy. Under federal New Deal programs, more money and expanded programs came from Washington to the Indian agencies. In an era of unprecedented change, John Collier, pushed funding and policy reform measures through Congress that were intended to give Indians greater control of their own political and economic affairs. New Mexico tribes profited as much as any in the country, perhaps more, since Collier himself took a personal interest in the Indians of the Southwest, especially the Pueblos. For her part, Aberle enthusiastically used the coincidence of opportunities presented to her. She consolidated the five former agencies, organized the new UPA, and coordinated and implemented new policies and programs. Many administrative areas needed attention, including education, economic development, and law enforcement. She addressed them all, but she was most interested in and concentrated on three areas in particular: health issues, land development, and



Pueblo government. Those subjects are examined in the next three chapters, with a focus on what part Aberle played as a scientist and administrator in the United Pueblos Agency.

poor health conditions and the spread of disease was taken up by the United Pueblos Agency during the 1930s and 1940s. When Dr. Sophie D. Aberle assumed the position of Superintendent of the UPA in 1933, she already had considerable experience researching health issues among the Pueblo people. As a scientist, physician, project administrator, and someone who was well known to many Pueblo people, she was considered by John Collier, who appointed her to the position, extremely qualified. She also held a Ph.D. from Stanford in Anthropology, and an M.S. from Yale. Health care, nutrition, and sanitation of the Pueblos were, therefore, important aspects of her administration.

Health problems were already recognized when Aberle first began her research at San Juan Pueblo in 1917. The New Mexico Association on Indian Affairs (NMAIA) supported Indian health needs. This private group of Anglo-Americans originally organized to fight the Bureau Bill, which threatened Pueblo land holdings. After they successfully defeated the bill, they turned their attention to Indian health issues and lobbied the Bureau of Indian Affairs to provide public health services for the Pueblos. Their efforts paid off in 1924, when the BIA began a field nursing program for the northern Pueblos. In addition, the BIA funded field nurses for pueblos such as Jemez, where the BIA



## CHAPTER 2

### HEALTH CARE AND DISEASE PREVENTION

The challenge of solving problems that contributed to poor health conditions and the spread of disease was taken up by the United Pueblos Agency during the 1930s and 1940s. When Dr. Sophie D. Aberle assumed the position of Superintendent of the UPA in 1935, she already had considerable experience researching health issues among the Pueblo people. As a scientist, physician, project administrator, and someone who was well known to many Pueblo people, she was considered by John Collier, who appointed her to the position, uniquely qualified. She also held a Ph.D. from Stanford in Anatomy, and an M.D. from Yale. Health care, nutrition, and sanitation at the Pueblos were, therefore, important aspects of her administration.

Health problems were already recognized when Aberle first began her research at San Juan Pueblo in 1927. The New Mexico Association on Indian Affairs (NMAIA) supported Indian health needs. This private group of Anglos was originally organized to fight the Bursum bill, which threatened Pueblo land holdings. After they successfully defeated the bill, they turned their attention to Indian health issues and lobbied the Bureau of Indian Affairs to provide public health nurses for the Pueblos. Their efforts paid off in 1924, when the BIA began a field nursing program for the northern Pueblos. In addition, the NMAIA funded field nurses for pueblos such as Zuni, where the BIA



did not place them.<sup>1</sup>

The federal government hired nurses to provide at-home health care to Indians on reservations, as well as to staff the Bureau of Indian Affairs hospitals. These women were formally trained in public health care, but not in the culture and traditions of the Indian people. An appointment as a field nurse in the BIA was both an exciting adventure and the chance to help people in desperate need. As Elinor Gregg, Supervisor of Field Nurses promised, "It is a service which requires idealism and realism. . . . There is romance and hard work."<sup>2</sup> But many of the nurses, along with their professional training and personal motivations, brought a stereotyped concept of Indians into the service with them.

Several field nurses who worked at the Pueblos reported "superstition" and resistance to white ways among their patients. As one wrote, "It is hoped that . . . the primitive Indian can be taught to come to the white man's doctor rather than to the medicine man when he is ill, and to accept hospitalization instead of attending ceremonial

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<sup>1</sup>Shackel, *Social Housekeepers*, 61-62.

<sup>2</sup>Elinor D. Gregg, "The Work of the United States Indian Bureau," *Public Health Nursing* 20 (1928): 19-22. Gregg recalled her tenure with the Indian Bureau in *The Indians and the Nurse* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1965).



dances for the purpose of curing illness."<sup>3</sup> There are, however, conflicting reports from other field nurses, who found the Pueblo people open to Western medicine and accepting of the health and sanitary education the nurses provided. The differences in these reports can be attributed to the nurses' attitudes toward the Indians and their native healing traditions. Although many of them had preconceived notions of the so-called "primitive" status of the Pueblo people, they varied in their ability to allow traditional and modern medicine to coexist.

Pueblo Indians, on the other hand, were generally able to accept both traditional and Western medicine. According to Aberle, "They believe that there are diseases which are of real entities, such as appendicitis; then there are others caused by the evil spirits . . . [where] magic bridges the gap between cause and effect . . . "<sup>4</sup>

Traditional Pueblo medicine was based on the belief that health is linked to balance and harmony in life. Illness, therefore, was a sign of discord. Healing and curing disease were performed by a hierarchy of healers, from family members to community healers. Medicine societies were at the top of the hierarchy. The medicine societies were comparable to a group of specialists familiar with

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<sup>3</sup>Rosalie I. Peterson, "Public Health Nursing Among the Indians," *Public Health Nursing* 31 (1939): 279.

<sup>4</sup> Aberle, "San Juan," 6.



specific healing rituals. Basic health care was provided by family members and community healers who relied on herbal remedies and sometimes prescribed castor oil or used axle grease as a salve. They also commonly used a treatment of vigorous massage, or rubbing.<sup>5</sup>

Aberle described a massage treatment for a foot injury, which she observed at San Juan Pueblo in 1927. She gave the medicine man who provided the treatment credit for his knowledge of anatomy, and acknowledged that the patient would benefit from improved circulation. But she also felt that his manipulations were too harsh and could result in injury.<sup>6</sup> In cases where rubbing and herbal therapy did not affect a cure, then a medicine society was called in to provide ritualized treatment.

Although there were differences in the rituals and paraphernalia used in the ceremonies, the basic beliefs in the cause of disease and the cures used by the medicine societies were similar among the Pueblos. The medicine societies were primarily responsible for curing disease, but sometimes they also held secondary functions such as

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<sup>5</sup>Descriptions of traditional Pueblo medicine are found in many sources. Among those are Edward P. Dozier, *Pueblo Indians of North America* (New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1970); Alfonso Ortiz, ed., *New Perspectives on the Pueblos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1972); and Stephen Fox, "Consciousness in Health and Healing in New Mexico Indian, Hispanic, and Alternative Therapy Groups," (Ph.D. diss., University of New Mexico, 1984).

<sup>6</sup>Aberle "San Juan," 8-9.



rain dances. Often, members of the societies were people who had been cured by them. For instance, at Acoma Pueblo the members of the snake society, who were responsible for curing snake bites, had all been treated for snake bite themselves.<sup>7</sup> Only medicine men from the appropriate societies could provide specialized treatments, but women acting as midwives attended at routine childbirths.

Various traditions and beliefs surrounded pregnancy and childbirth. Within the Tewa pueblos of San Juan and Santa Clara no method of birth control was practiced. According to a study by Aberle, babies were born to mothers at an average of 23 months apart.<sup>8</sup> Therefore, childbirth was a frequent occurrence. Midwives in attendance gave a vaginal exam to determine how far along the delivery was. Then they manipulated the mother's abdomen, if necessary, to speed delivery. When public health nurses became available, they were not called to assist with routine deliveries. The nurses, however, took an interest and checked on maternity cases when they heard of them.

Before and after delivery, certain food taboos were observed by pregnant and post-partum women. These varied within each pueblo, according to family tradition. Some

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<sup>7</sup>Leslie A. White, "A Comparative Study of Keresan Medicine Societies," *Proceedings of the International Congress of Americanists* 23 (1928): 606.

<sup>8</sup>Aberle, "Frequency of Pregnancies and Birth Interval Among Pueblo Indians," *Journal of Physical Anthropology* 16 (1931): 63-80.



women drank only boiled or warmed water, others drank only cold. Some did not eat certain fruits such as melons or peaches. And while all could drink coffee, milk in all forms was generally avoided. In addition to these practices regarding food, post-partum women did not bathe for four days after delivery.<sup>9</sup> Aberle saw these traditional practices as nutrition and hygiene deficiencies threatening both mother and newborn.

By the time that she was appointed as superintendent, Sophie Aberle had eight years of anthropological observation and medical study at the pueblos behind her. She lived at San Juan over several summers and undertook studies relating to a variety of health-related issues. These studies included infant and maternal mortality, child growth and development, the onset of puberty in females, frequency of pregnancies, and pediatric dental health. The studies were carried out with funding from the National Research Council, the Carnegie Institution, and the BIA. Designed to provide data to compare with studies completed on non-Indians, this research was expected to demonstrate any physiological differences between races, as well as unmet health and nutrition needs of the Indians.

Since there were obvious physical differences between races, Aberle and other scientists were looking for other

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<sup>9</sup>Aberle, "San Juan," 8-13; Elsie Clews Parsons, "Tewa Mothers and Children," *Man* 112 (1942): 148.



biological differences as well. Thus, there was an element of racism involved. Aberle wondered, for instance, if there were inherent physical and mental differences between races, or if such differences were based on diet. She wondered if Indians had certain physiological characteristics that resulted in immunity to certain diseases and/or susceptibility to others. There is evidence that she believed there were mental as well as physical racial characteristics. She wondered whether the mental capacity of Indians would allow them to follow new opportunities and assume new responsibilities.<sup>10</sup> However, there is no evidence that she anticipated any particular outcome of her studies or that her studies were biased in any way. On the contrary, she was devoted to scientific principles and methodology. She found no evidence of basic physiological or psychological differences in her studies, only of environmental and cultural factors that contributed to poor health. The data that she collected pointed to the need for better medical care and education to improve health conditions at the pueblos.

John Collier was convinced that Aberle's research was useful for the BIA. In a letter of support for expanding her study of growth rates in children, he stated that her data indicated nutritional needs that might have caused

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<sup>10</sup>Aberle to John C. Meriam, September 21, 1934, Aberle Papers.



psychological and social problems.<sup>11</sup> Similar ideas had been expressed earlier by the public health nurses and doctors in the field, and by "friends" groups such as the NMAIA. But Aberle now had the data she believed could lead to real improvement in the administration of federal health care for Indians. Controlled conditions demonstrated that Indian children who received cod liver oil (a fish oil high in vitamin A) put on weight and increased their activity level.<sup>12</sup> Here was clear evidence that dietary changes and supplements would have a positive effect on Indian children's health. A comparison of the frequency of pregnancy among Pueblo women with mid-nineteenth century white women in New York and Ohio showed comparable rates. The study detected no distinction in ovarian function between white and Indian rural women. Again, no evidence of biological differences appeared. It followed that better health care, variety in diet, and improved sanitary conditions would improve Pueblo health. Aberle concluded not only that the Pueblo people suffered from poor health conditions, but also that the federal government could do more to alleviate the problem.<sup>13</sup>

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<sup>11</sup>Collier to Bronson Cutting, June 22, 1933, Aberle Papers.

<sup>12</sup>Ethel C. Dunham et. al., "Physical Status of Two Hundred and Nineteen Pueblo Indian Children," *Journal of Diseases of Children* 53 (1937): 739-749.

<sup>13</sup>Aberle, "Physiological Characteristics of Pueblo Indians," lecture, n.d. Aberle Papers.



Health care was already improved to some extent by the time that Aberle became the superintendent. More public health nurses worked at the pueblos, and BIA doctors and contract physicians provided health care in the field as well. These positions were hard to fill, however, and there was always a high turnover rate. In general, rapid turnover of field personnel was common in all branches of the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Rural, impoverished living conditions and low pay did not entice most field workers to stay long. Elinor Gregg, national director of the BIA nursing program, was in competition with the Army, Navy, Veterans Administration, and Public Health Service, all of which were busy recruiting graduate nurses. The demand was simply higher than the supply, and the BIA paid less than the branches of the armed forces. In addition, working and living conditions were harsher, especially for field nurses stationed on Indian reservations.<sup>14</sup> A vigorous campaign to attract public health nurses to the BIA was not successful in filling the large number of vacancies. The UPA suffered from this shortage of nurses as much as any Indian agency did.

Similar problems were faced in recruiting doctors to work in the BIA. When regular staff physicians were not available, local doctors were hired on contract. Problems arose in the search for good doctors who met the necessary

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<sup>14</sup>Gregg, *Indians*, 89.



Civil Service requirements. There were others who simply refused the unattractive terms of the standard contracts. Aberle was concerned about the quality of physicians hired. She personally reviewed the credentials of the doctors being considered for service in the United Pueblos Agency jurisdiction. She rejected some because she knew them, or knew of their work, and did not consider it competent.<sup>15</sup> Thus, an already limited pool of qualified doctors who were interested in jobs at the pueblos was reduced further under Aberle's scrutiny. Those doctors who were hired either served at a centralized hospital facility, or were assigned field duty at the pueblos. Despite steady increases in pay throughout the 1930s, the high number of vacancies continued.

Hospital assignment had obvious advantages over field work. The hospitals were centrally located in large towns, if not outright urban areas. So hospital nurses had access to modern living conditions and more social opportunities than their counterparts in the field. Besides doctors and nurses, health care personnel included a small number of nurses' aids and quite a few hospital assistants. Statistics from 1934 show that a number of these people were Indians. Nationally, there were thirty Indian nurses, three hundred fifty Indian hospital assistants, five Indian

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<sup>15</sup>Aberle to Collier, June 22, 1936, Collier Papers.



nurses' aids, and one Indian doctor.<sup>16</sup> The UPA had its share of Indian personnel. One was nurse Margaret Cornay (Apache, Navajo, and Pueblo), who received her training at St. Vincent's Hospital in Santa Fe and was recommended for a permanent position with the BIA in 1934. Another, Esther Thompson, a full-blood Laguna Pueblo, worked as a field nurse at Laguna in 1940, before being transferred to the Santa Fe Indian Hospital. In addition, many Indian hospital aids worked at Albuquerque, Santa Fe, and Zuni. Thus, the United Pueblos Agency followed the national BIA trend of hiring both professional and nonprofessional Indian personnel.<sup>17</sup>

The construction of medical facilities increased in the 1930s and 1940s. In the UPA jurisdiction, three new hospitals were constructed and one was expanded between 1934 and 1939. This added more than 200 hospital beds to the number available. The facilities were administered by the UPA, but they were not exclusive to the Pueblos and served other Indian patients as well. The Albuquerque Indian Sanatorium for tuberculosis cases opened in March 1934, about a year before Aberle became the superintendent. This facility was important because it isolated sufferers

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<sup>16</sup>Elizabeth Sheply Sergeant, report, February 1935, Collier Papers.

<sup>17</sup>Sergeant to Collier, Nov. 2, 1934, Collier Papers; *United Pueblos Quarterly Bulletin*, 1 (July 1940): 49 (hereafter, *UPQB*).



of tuberculosis, a highly contagious respiratory disease, in a separate institution. The sanatorium also provided specialized services for day patients such as x-rays, blood tests and surgery. In April 1940 Aberle reported that the sanatorium had admitted 875 patients, taken 45,000 x-rays, and performed 3,575 operations since its opening. These large numbers reflected a change of policy from admitting only patients with a good chance of recovery when the facility first opened, to admitting more advanced cases. The new policy was designed to avoid the spread of infection in the villages. Because of the nature of tuberculosis, patients required long stays at the sanatorium, sometimes over a year. To fill their time, they made craft items for sale at a sanatorium shop, which averaged \$1,500 a year in sales. The proceeds went directly to the patients. These profits were small compensation, however, for being separated from family and community for long periods of time. Nonetheless, the very existence of the sanatorium provided a better chance of recovery, as well as some control over the spread of the disease.<sup>18</sup>

In addition to hospital facilities, living quarters were constructed in Albuquerque to house Indian hospital personnel. Field nurses also received improved living

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<sup>18</sup> U.S. Bureau of the Budget, *Hospital Medical and Health Services* (Washington, D.C., 1948); "Albuquerque Sanatorium Scene of Tuberculosis Institute," *UPQB*, 1 (April 1940): 21-22.



quarters when plumbing was installed. Clinics at some pueblos were relocated to newer buildings. These improvements hardly brought their facilities up to modern standards, but having water piped into a nurse's residence was certainly appreciated. At pueblos such as Zia, where the clinic had been an ancient room, use of the new day school's facility was a dramatic improvement. Such advances meant cleaner and more functional health facilities in the Pueblo villages.

In the field, medicine was practiced under less than ideal circumstances. Medications were dispensed by physicians, but their visits were rarely regular. With responsibility for up to three different pueblos, doctors spent much of their time responding to emergency calls. Regularly scheduled visits were necessarily uncommon. The field nurses faced the same situation, and often found it difficult to coordinate their visits with the doctor's. This created poor communication between health professionals. One doctor complained of feeling like a traveling medicine show, dispensing medications out of his car at Zia Pueblo, before he met the nurse who showed him to a small clinic in the village.<sup>19</sup> Besides dispensing medicine and responding to emergencies, another important part of field work was inoculations.

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<sup>19</sup>Ina Sizer Cassidy, "Zia Pueblo," memoranda, March 7, 1934, Collier Papers.



Most young Pueblo children attended day schools in their villages, so the day schools became the focal point of child health care. School children received physical checkups, vision exams, and inoculations from the field nurses. Epidemics of measles, whooping cough, diphtheria, and typhoid, all preventable by the 1930s, were common at the pueblos. Inoculations of children were considered critical to controlling outbreaks of these diseases. Alone, however, vaccines for children could not stop the rapid spread of infections, especially when some Pueblo mothers refused to have their children vaccinated.<sup>20</sup> Among the children and the general population of the villages, conditions were still ripe for epidemics. In years of heavy flooding at the pueblos, outbreaks of disease were especially severe. A typhoid outbreak after heavy spring flooding at San Juan and Santa Clara in 1941 was met with the inoculation of 250 people who had not been previously vaccinated in those pueblos. Similarly, a whooping cough epidemic at Puertocito was stopped with the inoculation of all adults and children. Although seven people died in the month before the organized campaign was initiated, Aberle believed that the response was efficient and effective.<sup>21</sup>

In 1942 Aberle reported that health care in the Pueblos Agency jurisdiction was steadily improving. The

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<sup>20</sup>Aberle, "Roots," 157, Aberle Papers.

<sup>21</sup>QPQB, 2 (July 1941): 22; UPQB, 1 (April 1940): 49.



turnover rate among health service personnel, however, remained high. Hospital, medical, and nursing services were of good quality, but inadequate quantity.<sup>22</sup> Nonetheless, the doctors and nurses successfully provided not only high quality health care, but also began a campaign to teach nutrition and safe food preparation at the pueblos.

Nutrition was already recognized as a cause of health problems among Indians when Aberle first arrived at San Juan Pueblo in 1927. In 1926-28, the Brookings Institution conducted a comprehensive study of federal Indian administration and conditions on the reservations. Published in 1928 under the title, *The Problem of Indian Administration*, this sweeping report was commonly known as the Meriam Report after the director of the study, Lewis Meriam.<sup>23</sup> Addressing health conditions, the report concluded that, "The solution of the Indian health problem depends upon a close interrelation of the economic, social, and educational activities of the Indian Office." The recommendations stressed preventive medicine and training programs to teach nutrition and hygiene, among other things. The report found that traditional Indian diets had serious deficiencies, and the methods of food preparation

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<sup>22</sup>Aberle memorandum, July 21, 1942, Collier Papers.

<sup>23</sup>Institute for Government Research, *The Problem of Indian Administration* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1928), 225.



and storage were considered unhealthy by the scientific community. Knowledge of scientifically proven dietary standards and food preparation would help Indians prevent disease. diet. In addition, she believed that they needed

more The basic Pueblo diet differed little in the 1930s from its centuries-old pattern. Small amounts of beef or mutton supplemented the staples of beans, corn, and squash. Those with enough cash purchased canned goods such as peas, peaches, coffee, and milk as well. This diet provides complex carbohydrates which, by modern standards, are considered the basis of a sound diet. In the 1930s, however, health professionals emphasized protein. Aberle was particularly concerned by the lack of dairy products in the Pueblo diet, especially for women and children. The benefits of calcium for bone development were known in the medical community. She was concerned that Pueblo children might be smaller on average than non-Indian children due to a lack of calcium in their diet. She was also worried by lactating mothers who purposely avoided milk in their diets. This, she thought, could have a serious effect on the development of their babies.

defi In the winter of 1931-32, Aberle recorded the typical diet of a family at Laguna Pueblo. Sticking mainly to corn, coffee, bread, syrup, apples, chile, potatoes, and beans, variety, especially in the use of vegetables.

<sup>13</sup> Currently, the preferred term for this ethnic group is Hispanic American. The term Spanish-American is used here because that is what Aberle used in her reports.



they consumed very little meat or dairy products.<sup>24</sup> In fact, canned milk was used only to lighten coffee. Recognized protein sources were not a significant portion of their diet. In addition, she thought that they needed more variety in the types of fruits and vegetables they ate. As a scientist, Aberle set out to collect the data to prove that a better diet would bring positive results to Pueblo children.

From 1931-34 Aberle, in association with the Yale Department of Anthropology, and with funding from the Bureau of Indian Affairs, set out to study child development among Pueblo Indians. Two hundred Indian children and fifty Spanish-American<sup>25</sup> children were included in the experiment. The children were divided into two groups; one received regular doses of halibut oil, a source of vitamin A, the other, a control group, did not. The children, students in Indian day schools or county public schools, were bussed to Albuquerque to be tested. Five x-rays were taken of each child, since this study occurred well before the dangers of x-ray exposure were known. The results, which clearly demonstrated nutritional deficiencies, were eventually published by Aberle and three

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<sup>24</sup>Aberle, handwritten notes, winter 1931-32, Aberle Papers. She was concerned that the Pueblo diet lacked variety, especially in the kinds of vegetables consumed.

<sup>25</sup> Currently, the preferred term for this ethnic group is Hispanic American. The term Spanish-American is used here because that is what Aberle used in her reports.



other physicians who worked on the study.<sup>26</sup>

As a part of the study, they took notes on nutritional snacks given to the children in day schools. Some schools provided these snacks to supplement the children's regular diets. At Santo Domingo, for instance, students received apples twice a day. The apple supply for a similar program at Santa Clara, however, ran out by December. Twice a day the students at Taos Pueblo school received milk. The children at Zia fared well, receiving soup and tomatoes each school day. At Jemez, Tesuque, and Cochiti, however, they received no extra food. The teacher at Cochiti, identified only as Miss Brewer, "considers it futile to judge Indian children by white standards."<sup>27</sup> As part of the study, the children received physical exams. In the group of Pueblo children, the doctors classified 65% as having good or fair nutritional status, leaving 34% rated as poor. They did not break down results by pueblo in the final report, so it was impossible to tell the effects, if any, of the food supplements provided at the schools. Nonetheless, Aberle advocated milk as a necessary nutritional component for Pueblo children.

The effort to increase milk consumption created a conflict for Aberle. Her scientific background clashed with

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<sup>26</sup>Dunham, "Physical Status," 739-749.

<sup>27</sup>Aberle, handwritten notes, Dec. 14, 1932, Aberle Papers.



the realities of being an administrator. The federal government had introduced herds of dairy cattle to several pueblos to provide a source of fresh milk. In 1935, three of these government dairy herds carried tuberculosis and had to be destroyed. Other problems came from inadequate storage for the raw milk. Refrigeration was often available only in the day school. In homes at Zuni Pueblo, where the hospital distributed free milk, they stored it in open pails at room temperature. The program, intended to improve the health of Zuni children, exposed them to contaminated milk instead. Coincidentally, a shortage in the budget for the Zuni Agency was conveniently offset by getting rid of the dairy herd. Citing concerns over health issues, which were supported in a report by Dr. Nancy D. Campbell of Zuni Hospital, Aberle ordered the cows destroyed. The Zuni people strongly resented the move, however, and Governor Henry Gasper used the incident in subsequent complaints about Aberle's performance.<sup>28</sup> Despite such problems, diet and nutrition remained an important part of the UPA's health program.

In addition to supplying extra food to Pueblo school children, many employees of the day schools taught nutrition and hygiene. Presumably, Miss Brewer, teacher at Cochiti who thought her students would not benefit from

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<sup>28</sup> Collier to Henry Gasper, Jan. 14, 1938, Aberle Papers.



better nutrition, did not bother teaching them health. There were others who thought that Indians might have trouble grasping the concept that germs caused disease. Aberle's field notes indicate that she thought education would take a long time because, in her view, Indians accepted natural phenomena and did not see why they should be controlled.<sup>29</sup> Nonetheless, she advocated such training and it became an active part of the disease prevention campaign at the pueblos. Children were a captive audience because they were in school on a daily basis. In addition to learning about a balanced diet, they were also taught personal hygiene. Washing food and hands before eating became routine practice, at least while they were in school. At Zia Pueblo the teacher, referred to only as Miss Page, claimed a high success rate in teaching hygiene to her students. She was assisted by Luciana Shije, a Zia woman who was the school's housekeeper. Apparently, having an Indian woman set an example for the students helped motivate them.<sup>30</sup> The teachers assumed that responsibility for hygiene was a woman's role. Most Pueblo women, however, continued traditional practices such as hanging meat to dry where flies swarmed over it. Some teachers feared that Pueblo mothers would have their daughters revert to the unusual situation of being so alone without their

<sup>29</sup>Aberle, handwritten notes, n.d., Aberle Papers.

<sup>30</sup>Sergeant, memoranda, May 22-25, [1934], Collier Papers.



traditional but unsanitary food handling practices. Aberle believed that ultimately Pueblo women would have to learn hygiene and safe food handling methods to make any real change in Pueblo homes.

Since canned goods were available from local merchants, Pueblo people used them when they had money or credit to buy them. Storing food for winter consumption was also a common practice at the pueblos. Traditional methods of food preservation included drying and canning. The conditions under which these processes were carried out were problematic. Sun drying food was a common practice among non-Indian as well as Indian people in the arid Southwest. Drying foods were hung from ceiling rafters or spread out on roofs under the sun. While these were effective drying methods, they also invited contamination from flies and other insects. Aberle, aware of the disinfectant quality of direct solar rays, still thought the women needed instruction in safer methods of drying and canning food. The UPA established instruction programs including canning classes, which became popular forms of entertainment for Pueblo women. The Albuquerque Indian School sponsored the canning classes, attended by three or four women from each pueblo. These women capitalized on the unusual situation of being in a large town without their families. They used the opportunity not only to learn safe food preparation, but also to socialize and dance with each



other, and go to the movies in town. Organizers of the classes claimed a 754% increase in the number of canned goods produced by Pueblo women in the first season, and Aberle considered the classes a huge success.<sup>31</sup>

Further instruction for Pueblo women coincided with U.S. involvement in World War II. In a United Pueblos Agency report on war activities, nutrition and health education were highlighted as a part of the war effort. The Albuquerque Indian School nutrition project was established to promote better physical fitness among Indian recruits for the armed forces. The armed forces rejected potential Indian soldiers because of malnutrition.<sup>32</sup> Malnutrition led to low energy, rickets, scurvy, beriberi, anemia, and lowered resistance to disease. According to the report, poor diet was due in part to poverty, but also to unfamiliarity with nutritional standards. "Underprivileged" women needed instruction in healthful eating, disease prevention, and child care, so that they could take better care of their families.

The BIA and the State of New Mexico initiated a joint project to teach health and nutrition to Pueblo women. A pilot program was established under the direction of Emergency Medical Services, for which Aberle served as

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<sup>31</sup>Aberle, "Roots," 161-163.

<sup>32</sup> Aberle, "United Pueblos Agency Report to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs on War Activities of the Pueblos," 1942, Aberle Papers.



state director. The pilot project included the study of a group of twenty-two Pueblo and Spanish-American children and instruction for three Spanish-American and two Zia women. Subjects studied included nutrition, infant care, child care, disease prevention, first-aid, and home care of the sick. The women expressed interest in the classes by asking questions and participating in discussions. They also took a test, which they all passed, at the end of their instruction. Based on those results, the program expanded, with two courses offered to eighteen women at Santa Fe and Albuquerque the following month. This type of training brought mainstream notions of cleanliness into pueblo homes, but outside those homes, public sanitation was another health problem that required attention.

Potable water sources and waste disposal were communal issues that needed to be addressed at each Pueblo. Traditionally, each village had one communal well that was the sole source of household water. This water was hauled on a daily basis to each home by the women. Household water was used primarily for drinking and cooking, since the amount that the women were able to carry was limited. Usually there was not enough for bathing or washing clothing, so those activities took place in a nearby river or irrigation ditch. The quality of river and ditch water was generally poor due to contamination, and even the drinking water at some Pueblos, such as Zia, was highly



alkaline and therefore substandard.<sup>33</sup> A few Pueblos had good quality water, but it was not close to homes. For instance, Santa Clara had three available wells, but some women still had to carry water for as much as one-quarter mile every day. Pueblo governors and councilmen testified before a congressional subcommittee in 1931 about drinking water contamination. They asked for federal assistance to dig wells and construct pipelines through their villages.<sup>34</sup> Work on drinking water projects was underway in some Pueblo villages in 1935 when Aberle took over the United Pueblos Agency.

Water, always in short supply in the desert Southwest, was especially scarce on reservations without large streams or rivers. In 1938 the United Pueblo Agency's jurisdiction grew with the addition of three small Navajo reservations, Alamo, Canoncito, and Ramah. These three bands were ethnically and culturally Navajo, but they shared many health and sanitation problems with the Pueblos. Water projects on the small Navajo reservations included wells, windmills, and concrete tanks to assure a constant water supply for stock. Most important, however, were the new wells that provided drinking and washing water for the people. Previously, they had to haul water by wagon in

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<sup>33</sup> Sergeant, report, March 6, 1934, Collier Papers.

<sup>34</sup> Congress, Senate, *Hearings Before a Subcommittee of the Committee on Indian Affairs*, 71st Congress, 2nd session, pt. 19.



wooden barrels, wash tubs, and even old garbage cans.<sup>35</sup> A nearby source of water was just the beginning, and shower and laundry facilities were the next improvements.

The first building to acquire an adequate supply of good quality water was usually the Indian school. Since day schools were constructed at each pueblo, they were built with indoor plumbing and their own well. They provided showers for the students as well as laundry facilities. The school buildings quickly became community hygiene facilities. One observer reported that 100% of the families at Tesuque Pueblo used the school's laundry facility. In another enthusiastic, if overstated, report from the Navajo reservation, a nurse wrote, "The Indian desires to be clean, and he never passes a day school without stopping to take a bath and to wash his clothes."<sup>36</sup> With the popularity of public showers and laundries, it was only a matter of time before running water came to individual homes.

Getting good water into Pueblo houses was not a difficult proposition by 1935. Labor supplies created under the federal New Deal public works programs built new wells, pumps, and piping systems. Money for public works on Indian reservations came through the Civilian Conservation Corp and federal work programs. There was no shortage of Indian

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<sup>35</sup>Aberle, "Roots," 165-171.

<sup>36</sup>Sergeant, memoranda, May 22-25 [1934], Collier Papers; Peterson, "Public Health Nursing," 278.



men who needed the work. Aberle capitalized on the situation by encouraging infrastructure development at the pueblos. At Santa Clara, where an adequate supply of household water was already available from three wells, a community water system was laid in 1936.<sup>37</sup> Women were understandably happy to give up the daily chore of hauling water, especially when their homes were uphill from the well. Reporting from Zia, journalist Elizabeth S. Sergeant wrote, "All the women I have talked to are in favor of having the water pumped to the top of the mesa. In winter it is very hard work. The men are in favor of it also."<sup>38</sup> At some Pueblos, however, the people were divided on whether to install community water systems. The Governor of San Felipe, Don Sanchez, gave permission for a new well and water tank, despite opposition from three members of the San Felipe council. He felt that most people wanted the system and that he could overcome the opposition to laying pipe in the village.<sup>39</sup>

Aside from household water, other major community health problems related to the lack of sanitary facilities

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<sup>37</sup> A. L. Walker, "An Analysis of Social and Economic Factors Affecting the Indians of the Pueblo of Santa Clara in 1936," United Pueblos Agency, Superintendent's Records, Pueblo Archives, Indian Pueblo Cultural Center, Albuquerque.

<sup>38</sup> Sergeant, report, March 6, 1934, Collier Papers.

<sup>39</sup> Don Sanchez to Aberle, Nov. 4, 1939, Superintendent's Records.



and poor drainage at all of the pueblos. Drainage projects were also funded through federal work programs. The UPA purchased its own heavy earth moving equipment to construct a series of levees and small earth dams to keep river water from flooding farm land. Flood water and rainwater tended to accumulate in low areas, creating stagnant pools where mosquitos bred freely. This was a health hazard because mosquitos carry malaria, a deadly contagious disease. The earthen dam projects helped control the flooding, and ditches were dug to drain the low lying areas of the villages. With the mosquitos under control, there remained the problem of sanitary facilities.

Few Pueblo homes had even an outdoor privy in the early 1930s. Home surveys conducted for school curriculum development indicate that a large number of Pueblo families simply relieved themselves outside, often in the corral. For instance, only 11 of the 95 families at Santa Clara had privies in 1927.<sup>40</sup> Constructing privies was a relatively simple prospect, especially when it could be done on an individual household basis. During the 1930s and 1940s, new houses were built at the pueblos to replace the old rooms on the plazas. People moved out of the small, dimly lit, ancient rooms into homes that reflected those in

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<sup>40</sup> Roy Adams, "Survey of Santa Clara Pueblo Home Conditions in Connection with the Revision of the Curriculum for Indian Students," Superintendent's Records.



neighboring urban areas.<sup>41</sup> These new houses utilized modern construction, with amenities such as electricity, more windows for ventilation, piped water, and indoor toilets with cesspools or septic systems for sewage disposal. Windows were covered with screening to keep flies and mosquitos out. Even after federal funds for public projects dried up during U.S. involvement in World War II, available wage work in the war industries provided individual Pueblo Indians with money for new homes. A slow but steady process, this exodus from village centers led to improved health conditions. People were less crowded, their houses were better ventilated, and their modern sanitary facilities did as much as any other measure to stop the spread of communicable diseases at the pueblos.

Health problems at the pueblos were by no means solved during the 1930s and 1940s, but there were steady gains made in the areas of health care, nutrition, and sanitation. In an effort that continued trends already underway, the United Pueblo Agency addressed these issues by expanding existing programs and developing new ones. Aberle capitalized on the reform policies and generous funding from Washington. Public health nurses, already in the pueblos in 1935, increased in number and received more direct support from more doctors and new medical

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<sup>41</sup> Elizabeth V. Duggan, "Health Work Among the Zuni Indians," *Public Health Nursing* 20 (1928): 21.



facilities. More Indians were trained and hired to provide medical services to their people. Emergency responses to epidemics and flooding alleviated the potentially disastrous impact of those phenomena. Nutritional supplements were given to Pueblo children to optimize their growth potential and maintain their general health. Water supplies increased and access improved, providing clean drinking water and sufficient water for bathing and laundry. Improved housing and sanitary facilities helped clean up villages so that living conditions contributed less to the spread of disease.

Such advancements were occasionally stymied by seemingly uncontrollable circumstances. The UPA was plagued by a consistently high turnover rate among its professional medical personnel. Federal funding was not generous enough to support all the building construction and infrastructure systems to bring the Pueblos up to modern sanitary standards. Incidences of some diseases, in particular trachoma, were not significantly reduced, and the infant mortality rate remained high.

Under Aberle's direction the UPA made significant efforts to continue and expand existing trends in Indian health policy. Aberle brought scientific experience and insight to the issues of health care, nutrition, and sanitation. It was not enough to solve all problems, but it was enough to improve living conditions and health care at



the pueblos.

### LAND ACQUISITION AND USE

By the 1930s, the Pueblos largely depended on a local agricultural economy that suffered from outside pressure and an inadequate land base. At the same time, new economic strategies encompassing such work were becoming more popular. Having completed several years of field work and historical research on the pueblos, Apple C. Aberle appreciated the pueblos' relationship to their land. She respected the economic wisdom of the Pueblos, but she also retained her own deference for scientific approaches to problem solving. Applying both practical and scientific strategies, she led the United States Agency in addressing the problems caused by land tenure laws and grazing lands in the 1930s and 1940s. The Agency applied programs of land acquisition and reclamation and adopted the economic strategies in order to increase agricultural production.

For centuries, land was central to the agricultural economy of the Pueblos. When the Spaniards first arrived in New Mexico in the sixteenth century, they found the Pueblo people living in well-established agricultural villages. Pueblo culture and religion were closely tied to their economic dependence on agriculture and remained so into the twentieth century. Despite selective assimilation over four hundred years of contact with Spanish and American cultures, a significant economic change came as Pueblos adopted livestock raising, adding sheep and cattle to their



## CHAPTER 3

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basic economy. But livestock, also a land-based economic activity, only compounded the problems the Pueblos faced as their access to land decreased. Pressure from Spanish, Mexican, and later American settlement in New Mexico reduced the Pueblos' agricultural and grazing lands.<sup>1</sup>

As outsiders settled in New Mexico, they required agricultural lands of their own. The Pueblo populations declined significantly after contact with the Spaniards due to the introduction of disease and wars, as well as drought. When the Spanish crown accorded legal land titles in the form of land grants to individual pueblos, they were based on the needs of a severely reduced pueblo population. These land grants effectively reserved the rest of the New Mexico colony for Spanish settlement. After Mexican Independence in 1821, the Mexican government actively encouraged further settlement in New Mexico by awarding numerous land grants. In addition, under Mexican rule the government in Santa Fe was apathetic, or at best ineffective in keeping settlers off Pueblo lands.

Encroachment on Pueblo land continued after the United States took control of New Mexico in 1846. Legal purchase of pueblo lands was supported by a U.S. court decision, *United States v. Joseph*, which found that Pueblo lands were

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<sup>1</sup>Aberle's own research on Pueblo land tenure is included in her publication, *The Pueblo Indians of New Mexico: Their Land, Economy and Civil Organization*, Memoirs of the American Anthropological Association, no. 70 (Menasha, Wis., 1948).



not protected under federal Indian law and that they could be sold. This decision was reversed in 1913, *United States v. Sandoval*, a reversal that brought some 10 percent of Pueblo lands into dispute and created tension between the Pueblos and non-Indian settlers. Although the Pueblo Lands Act of 1924 was intended to settle these disputes, it was not until the 1930s that non-Indian claims to pueblo lands were finally settled. In addition to reclaiming their lands from non-Indians, several federal New Deal programs offered the Pueblos the chance to add to their land base, either directly through land purchases, or with the use of federal lands around the reservations.<sup>2</sup>

Having conducted studies of Pueblo populations herself, Aberle had first-hand knowledge of the significant growth in the twentieth century. Total Pueblo population increased from 11,126 in 1905 to 14,188 in 1932. By 1942 the total population was 17,187.<sup>3</sup> This trend in population growth had important implications for the Pueblo agricultural economy. In order to maintain their traditional culture and life-style, the Indians needed to expand their agricultural base

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<sup>2</sup>Felix S. Cohen, *Handbook of Federal Indian Law* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1941), 391-393.

<sup>3</sup> Edward Dozier, *Pueblo Indians*, 122. These figures include the Hopi population of Arizona, which was not part of the United Pueblos Agency jurisdiction.



and increase food production to support the expanding population. The Pueblos needed new lands for farming and grazing. Additionally, they had to make the lands already held produce more efficiently. Together, a larger land base and improved production would, Aberle thought, allow agriculture to keep pace with the population.

Grounds for acquiring new lands came through a land-acquisition program instituted in 1934. The program involved a number of efforts designed to provide access to new lands by purchase, exchange, permit and lease. These efforts were coordinated by the Land Acquisition Division of the UPA. When Aberle arrived in the UPA, she promoted the land-acquisition program and encouraged the Pueblos to make purchases and exchanges to consolidate their land holdings. In addition, she fostered leases and permits to expand Pueblo access to grazing and timber lands. Her first priority, however, was to settle the claims of non-Indian settlers to Pueblo lands.

Aberle and her future husband, Special Attorney for the Pueblos, William Brophy, aggressively sought settlements to finish the work begun by the Pueblo Lands Board in 1924, clearing claims against Indian land. They waited until compensation payments were issued to non-Indians, then promptly evicted them from Pueblo land. Despite final settlements and aggressive enforcement, there were still some problems persuading non-Indian settlers to



vacate their claims. As late as 1937 a settler, who had been paid \$8000 for his claim to Laguna land, still refused to leave and was running cattle on Indian range. UPA personnel could not persuade him to leave and finally had to call on outside law enforcement to remove him.<sup>4</sup> Eventually, in 1938, Aberle and Brophy announced that all claims were settled according to the dictates of the Pueblo Lands Board. A contemporary historian optimistically wrote, "For the first time, therefore, since late in the seventeenth century, the Pueblo Indians of New Mexico are free from land controversy."<sup>5</sup>

The resolution of these disputes meant that the Pueblos finally had uncontested use of their land grants, as recognized by the U.S. government. They also had funds from compensation payments to purchase additional land. The money was paid to each pueblo for lands that, in the Board's determination, were settled in good faith by non-Indians. The money was not sufficient compensation, however, and the need for land, not cash, was evident. Aberle and most of the Pueblo councils agreed that compensation money should be spent for land whenever possible. Over 47,000 acres were purchased with the compensation money paid to fifteen individual pueblos. The

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<sup>4</sup>UPQB, 2, no. 1 (1940): 11.

<sup>5</sup>Herbert O. Brayer, *Pueblo Indian Land Grants of the Rio Abajo, New Mexico*, University of New Mexico Bulletin 1, no.1 (1939): 31.



other four pueblos--Acoma, Sandia, Zia, and Zuni--either did not receive any compensation funds, or did not spend them on new land purchases.<sup>6</sup> Those pueblos that purchased land with compensation funds, consolidated their territory and bought out non-Indians who had won their claim to settlements within Pueblo land grants. In fact, the pueblos specifically could not purchase land outside their reservation boundaries with compensation money. However, under the Pueblo Lands Act amendment of 1933, they could expend compensation funds for reclamation projects, reservoirs, and irrigation.<sup>7</sup>

Each Pueblo council retained the authority to decide how to spend their compensation funds and to approve all land purchases. On the other hand, all land purchases were subject to the approval of the secretary of the interior. Aberle acted as liaison between the Department of the Interior and the pueblos, making recommendations to the Pueblo councils and generally endorsing their decisions. Pueblo authorities, the UPA, and Secretary Harold Ickes agreed that consolidating Pueblo land holdings and purchasing land to replace what had been lost to non-Indian claims was in the best interest of the Pueblos. At Acoma, for example, \$270,499 in compensation funds bought a total

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<sup>6</sup>Dozier, *Pueblo Indians*, 109. Aberle, *Pueblo Indians*, 12.

<sup>7</sup>Cohen, *Handbook*, 391.



of 10,874 acres, of which 7,009 were within the external boundaries of Acoma reservation.<sup>8</sup> They emphasized concentrating Pueblo land and eliminating non-Indian territory within the reservation boundaries. In fact there simply was not enough compensation money or land for sale within the Pueblo boundaries to meet their needs. They had to find other means to acquire more land.

In addition to land compensation funds, federal money was appropriated through the Indian Reorganization Act of 1934, and six other government programs for Indian land purchases.<sup>9</sup> With support from the United Pueblo Agency, most pueblos took advantage of these funds to expand their land holdings. Again using the Acomas as an example, they bought 27,247 acres of non-Indian land with IRA money. Since this land all lay within the boundaries of the Acoma reservation, the land title went to Acoma Pueblo. Other land purchases, made outside of reservation boundaries, were held directly by the federal government for use by one or more nearby pueblos. For instance, in 1938 the Resettlement Administration bought the Zia-Santa Ana purchase area, a portion of which, the San Ysidro Grant,

delegation, led by Pablo Abaita, Secretary of the All-

<sup>8</sup>Aberle, "Pueblo of Acoma Land Status," April 1940, Aberle Papers.

<sup>9</sup>These were the Submarginal Lands Board, the Federal Surplus Relief Corporation, the Federal Emergency Relief Administration, the Resettlement Administration, the Rehabilitation Administration, and the Bankhead-Jones Act. Aberle, *Pueblo Indians*, 12.



was used by Jemez Pueblo. These land purchases provided expanded grazing pasture to the pueblos.

The western pueblos benefitted most from large land purchases outside of their reservation boundaries. Because they were located in the semi-arid country west of the Rio Grande Valley, the pueblos of Acoma, Laguna, and Zuni depended heavily on raising livestock instead of farming for their livelihood. Purchases of extra-reservation land added large expanses of needed grazing areas for livestock. During Aberle's administration Acoma acquired 88,197 additional acres for grazing outside the reservation. The Indian Service bought and administered the land for exclusive use by the pueblo. Government purchases amounted to an additional 170,085 acres at Laguna and 67,186 acres at Zuni.<sup>10</sup> In all, the total acres of Indian land under UPA jurisdiction increased 50 percent between 1935-1940.<sup>11</sup>

Although hundreds of thousands of dollars were spent, the money available for land purchases still did not match the needs of many pueblos. In 1936 a delegation of Pueblo leaders went to Washington, D.C., to meet with government officials, including Secretary of the Interior Ickes. The delegation, led by Pablo Abeita, Secretary of the All-Pueblo Council, presented concerns regarding land

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<sup>10</sup>Aberle, *Pueblo Indians*, 69-84. Figures include public domain purchased for use by the Pueblos.

<sup>11</sup>Aberle, "Consolidation of Separate Agencies," report, 1942, Aberle Papers.



purchases, conservation programs, and non-Indian use of Pueblo lands. Abeita, a well-known leader from Isleta Pueblo, blamed Congress for not appropriating sufficient funds for Indian programs in general, and for land acquisitions in particular. Indeed, the Interior Department appropriations bill for 1936 specifically excluded New Mexico pueblos from money for land purchases.<sup>12</sup> With virtually no influence over Congress, the Pueblos found other means, such as leasing land, to augment their limited land supply.

Leases and permits to use other federal lands supplemented the already expanded Pueblo land holdings. Leases and permits were used mainly to gain access to more grazing lands. Federal agencies that leased land or sold permits to pueblos included the Forest Service, Taylor Grazing Service, and the Soil Conservation Service. The state of New Mexico also leased public domain to some pueblos.<sup>13</sup> Western pueblos, with their economic dependence on sheepherding, benefitted from land leases, but they were not alone. Taos Pueblo, for instance, obtained a permit to

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<sup>12</sup>"Indians Seek Congressional Aid for Woes," A.P. Dispatch, n.d., Dennis Chavez Papers, Center for Southwest Research, General Library, University of New Mexico, Albuquerque.

<sup>13</sup>The terms and length of leases varied depending on the policy of the agency leasing its land. In general, annual payments were made by the responsible party, either the Pueblo council or the BIA, whichever made the original lease agreement.



use 30,000 acres in the Carson National Forest where they ran a cattle herd. With cattle from the Federal Emergency Drought Relief Administration, twenty-four individuals from the pueblo acquired herds and formed the Taos Pueblo Cattlemen's Association.<sup>14</sup> Although they maintained individual herds, they benefitted from the combined sales of cattle and bulk purchases of feed and equipment that the association afforded. In all, thirteen of the nineteen New Mexico pueblos used public lands by lease or permit to extend their grazing territory.<sup>15</sup> As boundary disputes were settled and fencing was erected around Indian and non-Indian lands, the Pueblos used leases and permits to access outside pastures.

In conjunction with grazing on public lands, Pueblo councils sharply reduced the number of permits given to non-Indians for use of Indian grazing land. For instance, all non-Indian leases were canceled at Isleta Pueblo to make room for a community-owned cattle herd. Aberle hoped that a communal approach to livestock raising would appeal to Isleta culture and tradition and benefit the pueblo as a whole. A group of three Isleta men managed the herd, which, like the Taos herd, was purchased through the Emergency Drought Relief Program. After four years, the debt owed the federal government was paid off with fifteen hundred

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<sup>14</sup>Aberle, "Roots," 93.

<sup>15</sup>Aberle, "Roots," 93.



calves, one for each original cow issued. Aberle considered the program an outstanding success, since each year the weight of the yearlings increased, from 255 pounds in 1935, to 495 pounds in 1939. Topping off the success was a third place ribbon taken by the Isleta show herd at the 1939 New Mexico State Fair.<sup>16</sup>

The accomplishments of the community herd at Isleta notwithstanding, there were still places where federally owned lands, intended for exclusive use by the Pueblos, were leased to non-Indians. The situation was cause for friction between the Pueblos and their neighbors, especially where the Pueblos thought they needed more grazing pastures of their own. Non-Indian grazing permits were issued for BIA controlled lands on the Martinez Grant, the Acoma Purchase area, the San Ysidro Grant, and the Karavas Tract. Aberle approved these exceptions to general UPA policy under pressure from the State of New Mexico, which argued in favor of non-Indian use.<sup>17</sup> Encroachment onto Pueblo lands came in other forms as well. In 1941 the town of San Ysidro received authorization from Aberle to establish a new cemetery within the San Ysidro Grant, which

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<sup>16</sup>UPQB 1 (April 1940): 25.

<sup>17</sup>The official state recommendations and analysis of land use around Indian reservations was published in a lengthy report, New Mexico State Planning Board, *Indian Lands in New Mexico* (Santa Fe, Oct. 1, 1936).



was administered by the UPA.<sup>18</sup> In general, however, when non-Indians wanted admission onto Pueblo lands, it was for use by their livestock. Given the limited agricultural lands available in New Mexico, the UPA made compromises with the pueblos' neighbors and occasionally allowed shared use of Indian lands, as well as in the public domain.

This shared use of public domain by Indians and non-Indians caused tension near several Pueblos. Despite the instances when she gave in to outside pressure, Aberle avoided such situations where possible. She preferred to consolidate land use areas for the Pueblos and to keep their land-based enterprises separate from non-Indian utilization. Consolidation of land holdings through purchase and exchange, and separate lease and permit areas would, she thought, avoid potential conflicts. She agreed with a report on the Jemez and Zia use of the Montano Range that warned, "Use of the same area by Indians and non-Indians will tend to bring about personal friction . . ."<sup>19</sup> Having finally cleared all claims brought before the Pueblo Lands Board in 1938, Aberle was in no mood to stir up strained relationships between the pueblos and their

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<sup>18</sup>Aberle to E.G. Sandoval, June 25, 1941, Aberle Papers.

<sup>19</sup>"Relative Suitability of Available Grazing Capacity of Montano Grant to Indian vs. Non-Indian Livestock," report, United Pueblos Agency Records, General Correspondence, R.G. 75, National Archives and Records Administration, Denver.



neighbors.

In addition to conflicts over joint use by Indians and non-Indians, there were also some disputes over boundaries between pueblos. Land grant perimeters overlapped on borders shared by four pueblos: Cochiti and Santo Domingo, Santo Domingo and San Felipe, and San Felipe and Santa Ana. These pueblo versus pueblo cases were not taken up by the Pueblo Lands Board and remained points of contention among the four pueblos.<sup>20</sup> Despite claims that boundary disputes were all settled by the Pueblo Lands Board, conflicts remained. Problems with shared use of public domain and some inter-pueblo border disputes continued, but were dramatically reduced by efforts to consolidate pueblo land holdings.

Land purchases and leases significantly increased the acreage available to the Pueblos, but were still not enough to meet the needs of growing Pueblo populations. Aberle agreed with agricultural experts who argued for new land management techniques that would improve farm and livestock production. The newly acquired Pueblo lands were mostly suitable for grazing livestock. In fact, only 6 percent of land purchased with compensation funds was decent farm land.<sup>21</sup> Small plots of irrigated farm land came back to the

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<sup>20</sup> Aberle, "Pueblo of Acoma."

<sup>21</sup> James A. Vlasich, "Transitions in Pueblo Agriculture, 1938-1948," *New Mexico Historical Review* 55 (1980): 26.



Pueblos as non-Indian settlers, acting on decisions of the Pueblo Lands Board, finally left their claims in the 1930s. Larger areas of irrigable land, however, simply were not available for purchase. Range land, on the other hand, was easier to come by. The federal government purchased for the Pueblos almost 400,000 acres of grazing land between 1938 and 1941. With a carrying capacity of close to 34,000 sheep, the new range provided the space to implement a program of scientific livestock management that the UPA pushed the Pueblos to adopt.

Scientific management of the agricultural industry was the federal response to poor soil conditions spotlighted on the national level by the dust bowl era of the early 1930s. Images of barren land and severe dust storms in photographs and art work of the day brought agricultural problems to the attention of the American public. Erosion and loss of vegetation on farm and range lands spurred the Departments of Agriculture and the Interior to promote soil and water conservation and land management techniques that would rehabilitate and preserve the agricultural industry.

Conditions on the small Navajo reservations were similar to those of the western Pueblos. The Ramah reservation, located in the checkerboard area, where the railroad owned every other section of land in the north, the state owned some, and commercial lumber and livestock companies owned still more, was typical of the land pattern around the



western Pueblos. With reservation grazing land thus limited, methods to improve its quality were essential.

The scientific approach certainly appealed to Sophie Aberle, whose faith in scientific principles was even greater than her respect for Pueblo tradition. At first, she knew nothing about livestock and had to learn the terminology in order to comprehend the potential benefits of new management techniques. For example, she heard the term "wethered lambs" and even used it herself as she had heard it used in discussions about breeding, but she did not know what it meant. After several months in the dark, she discovered the correct spelling and was able to look up the word in the dictionary.<sup>22</sup> The experience should have given her some insight into the language barrier between Extension Service agents and their Pueblo students. Efforts to encourage community agriculture aside, Aberle's support of scientific management approaches to farming and ranching conflicted with Pueblo customs. Practicing patience and her belief in human reasoning, Aberle used a direct educational approach to promote conservation practices.

Early in her administration, Aberle began to hold a series of meetings at each pueblo, speaking to the Pueblo council as well as calling general meetings to explain the necessity of adopting new agricultural techniques. The most difficult change for the Pueblos to accept was the

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<sup>22</sup>Aberle, "Roots"



livestock reduction program. Aberle employed visual aids, in the form of dried plant specimens pinned to a board, which she carried to pueblo meetings. The display included text explaining the range, palatability, and growing season for each plant. The meaning, however, was lost to the many Pueblo people who could not speak, let alone read, English. Aberle, at least, learned about New Mexico flora from the display and used the knowledge in her arguments endorsing livestock reduction.<sup>23</sup>

Range management experts from the Soil Conservation Service and the Indian Service's Extension Department evaluated each grazing area and determined its maximum carrying capacity. Most of the ranges used by Laguna, Acoma, and Zuni Pueblos were overstocked; therefore the number of cattle or sheep on each had to be reduced. Reduction of herds was not a popular economic concept for any American rancher. On the nearby Navajo reservation environmental conditions and land use patterns were similar to those at the Western pueblos. The economic and psychological repercussions of the Navajo stock reduction resulted in extensive animosity toward the federal government.<sup>24</sup> Among the Western pueblos, where social status and cultural practices were closely tied to

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<sup>23</sup>Aberle, "Roots," 64.

<sup>24</sup>The effects of stock reduction on the Navajo reservation are discussed in Donald L. Parman, *The Navajos and the New Deal* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976).



sheepherding, Aberle anticipated resistance to the idea of stock reduction.

Aberle wanted not only to implement stock reduction, but also to convince the Pueblos to understand and accept it. Along with an interpreter, she spent hours in meetings explaining the rationale behind the program. Always calm and professional, even as she repeated the same arguments to the same audience, Aberle's resolve never wavered. Her old friend, Edith Mirrieles, upon observing Aberle, praised her composure by writing, "She never loses her exactitude of statement or her poise."<sup>25</sup> In the end, regardless of dissenting opinion at some pueblos, they agreed to the reduction program and implemented it.

Each Pueblo council approved its own stock reduction program and decided how the cutbacks would take place. Laguna Pueblo, which had the poorest land and the strongest need for livestock reduction, received first consideration regarding agricultural assistance from the UPA. Aberle considered Laguna's range management a priority for her administration, but assured all the Pueblo governors that, "What the Laguna Indians decide to do and how they decide to do it, is a matter for the Governor and the Council and the people of Laguna to make up their minds about."<sup>26</sup> The Laguna Council debated about set percentage cutbacks for

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<sup>25</sup>Edith Mirrieles, diary, Feb. 1936, Aberle Papers.

<sup>26</sup>Aberle to Pueblo governors, n.d., Aberle Papers.



each livestock owner, but decided instead to place the burden on the few wealthy owners of large herds. Over a three-year period, beginning in 1935, 48,365 sheep were removed from Laguna's herds. Aberle considered the program a success, because the quality of both the grazing lands and the remaining herds improved.<sup>27</sup> Unlike Zuni Pueblo, where stock reduction programs were a source of friction between Aberle and her critics on the Zuni Council, the people of Laguna and Acoma largely accepted the program and its results.

At Zuni Pueblo, friction that already existed between Aberle and Zuni leaders played out over the stock-reduction program. Zuni was one of the Pueblos that opposed Aberle's appointment to head the UPA and opposed Collier's consolidation move to place the Zuni Agency under UPA jurisdiction. Personnel problems at the Zuni subagency compounded Aberle's difficulties with the Zuni council. They took every opportunity to fault the UPA and her administration of it. As Aberle herself later wrote, "The Zunis were long dissenters from my policies because the new organization had established a subagency instead of a full agency in Zuni."<sup>28</sup> It was not surprising, therefore, that they also complained about the stock reduction program.

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<sup>27</sup>Aberle, "Livestock Marketing Program, Laguna Pueblo," reports, 1935, 1936, and 1937, Aberle Papers.

<sup>28</sup>Aberle, "Roots," 51.



Less than three thousand head of sheep were permanently removed from the Zuni herds, and the council had the authority to determine how those reductions took place. With the removal of poor quality sheep and the introduction of 952 improved-quality rams, the overall result was a 27% increase in wool production by 1943.<sup>29</sup> While these figures do not illustrate economic hardship caused by stock reduction at Zuni, the program remained a source of contention between Aberle and her opponents on the Zuni council.<sup>30</sup>

Stock reduction programs were only one part of the overall scientific management practices applied to pueblo lands in the New Deal era. Controlling river flooding, soil erosion, and the water supply were important components as well. Cooperative efforts between the BIA and the Soil Conservation Service facilitated new land and water management practices. In addition, the federal government supported an Indian Division of the Civilian Conservation Corps (CCC-ID), which Aberle used effectively at the pueblos. Indian lands under the UPA jurisdiction were in

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<sup>29</sup>Aberle *Pueblo Indians*, 86.

<sup>30</sup>In her article on Zuni stock reduction, Susan E. Perlman contends that the Zuni did suffer economic hardship. Her study, however, does not consider other explanations for the Zunis' complaints. "New Deal at Zuni: Livestock Reduction and the Range Management Program," in *Essays in Twentieth-Century New Mexico History*, ed. Judith Boyce DeMark (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1994) 63-74.



poor condition when she took control of the new agency in 1935. Problems included poor quality and quantity of vegetation, wind and water erosion, and an alkali buildup in irrigated fields. Fortunately, there were resources available to address the problems.

The CCC-ID and its predecessor, the Indian Emergency Conservation Works (IECW), developed dozens of projects at the Pueblos. They relied on earth works to conserve and develop natural resources, building diversion dams and dikes to control flooding, dredging reservoirs to restore holding capacity, and digging new irrigation channels. Pueblo councils authorized funds to purchase heavy equipment for individual pueblos, and the UPA also purchased its own earth moving machinery for use at all of the pueblos. Until the war years of the 1940s, when funding dried up, tons of earth were moved about pueblo fields and rivers in an effort to reclaim farm lands, control floods, and increase agricultural water supplies. After 1938, when the small Navajo reservations of Ramah, Canoncito, and Alamo became part of the UPA jurisdiction, they implemented range management and water development projects there as well.

The Ramah Navajo depended on surface water accumulations for their stock supply. Although federal construction funds paid for several earthen dams, shallow drainage wells, and three deep-drilled wells with windmills



and stock tanks, rain water that pooled in natural stone depressions was still a main source of drinking water for livestock in 1941.<sup>31</sup> In this harsh, arid region of the West, it would take far more work than the UPA was able to finish to develop the necessary water supplies. By 1941, with pending war occupying Congress, funds for development and reclamation of Indian lands evaporated. The CCC-ID was funded at only 75 percent that year, and funding continued to decline thereafter. Suddenly, the focus shifted from construction projects, to protecting what limited water resources were already available to the pueblos. As one UPA employee put it, "We must take all available measures to protect Indian Water rights and the Irrigation Division will devote major [sic] part of the coming year's work to that end."<sup>32</sup>

Agricultural water rights for American Indians had been confirmed by a federal court decision of 1908 commonly known as the Winters Doctrine. It stated that the generally accepted principle of prior appropriation applied to Indian water use as well. In other words, Indians had first right to use the water that flowed through their existing agricultural lands. Moreover, they were guaranteed a

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<sup>31</sup>John L. Landgraf, *Land-Use in the Ramah Area of New Mexico: An Anthropological Approach to Areal Study*, Papers of the Peabody Museum, no. 42 (Cambridge, 1954).

<sup>32</sup>Alan Laflin, statement of construction work, May 18, 1940, United Pueblos Agency Records.



sufficient water flow to maintain their fields. The Winters Doctrine clearly applied to the agricultural pueblos, but demand for water in New Mexico, like demand for farm land, was far greater than supply. The Pueblos needed not only to maintain their existing water rights, but to gain access to additional water for their new farmlands. Since the right of prior appropriation only applied to fields already under cultivation, the Pueblos had to compete with non-Indian interests to gain more river water for their new fields. For pueblos located on the Rio Grande, this meant working through the Middle Rio Grande Conservancy District.

The Conservancy District, a division of state government, controlled water resources in the central Rio Grande Valley. Eighteen percent of the district was pueblo land, so the UPA had to work closely with the state on matters affecting the pueblos. By 1936, two major projects, diversion dams at Cochiti and Isleta were completed, and the District claimed that 20,700 acres of Indian land was newly developed.<sup>33</sup>

The Pueblos of Cochiti, Santo Domingo, San Felipe, Santa Ana, Sandia, and Isleta, were all affected by District operations. Congressional legislation provided for reimbursements to the Conservancy District for projects benefitting the Pueblos, but only for lands outside of the

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<sup>33</sup>Ira G. Clark, *Water in New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987), 211-212.



existing 8,346 irrigated acres. Newly reclaimed lands were subject to liens against Conservancy District charges for construction, operation, and maintenance of water diversion and flood control works.<sup>34</sup> The Bureau of Indian Affairs was responsible for the costs to the Pueblos, who decided for themselves how to divide up the irrigation water and the reclaimed land.

Aberle and the extension experts at the UPA urged Pueblo councils to make large, communal farms on reclaimed land. These, they argued, would operate more efficiently and produce larger yields. However, only two Pueblos, Sandia and Isleta, established tribal farms. The other Pueblos resisted efforts to alter their traditional system of individual family farm plots.<sup>35</sup> They divided the new plots according to need, some giving preference to newly married couples, others bestowing the largest and best plots on those with only poor-quality lands. As long as it continued under cultivation, a plot remained with a family for generations, but the title to the land and the power to redistribute it belonged to the council.

Each pueblo handled the distribution of irrigation water as well as land use internally. A mayordomo, or ditch boss, was appointed by Pueblo authorities to disburse water from the irrigation channels and to assign work crews to

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<sup>34</sup>Cohen, *Handbook*, 391-393.

<sup>35</sup>Sando, *Pueblo*, 101.



maintain the ditches. With the right to distribute water in an agricultural community, the ditch boss was potentially a powerful person within the community. In fact, however, he served at the pleasure of the council, which exercised control on his authority. Externally, control of the water supply was divided up between the pueblos, other land owners, commercial and urban interests downstream, and the State of New Mexico. All these competing interests left the Rio Grande pueblos, in particular, with few guarantees of agricultural water. Only the water rights affirmed under the right of prior appropriation were dependable.

Too much water was sometimes as troublesome as too little. Flooding from rivers during years of heavy spring runoff could devastate fields, ruin crops, and destroy villages. Considerable flood control works built during the height of the CCC-ID were not always enough to contain the Rio Grande within its banks. In 1941 high snow pack in the mountains and warm spring temperatures combined to create the potential for hazardous flooding along the river. The District warned residents along the river of the danger, and Aberle took it upon herself to see that the most seriously threatened Pueblo of Santa Ana was evacuated. She issued the evacuation order, then drove to the pueblo herself to be sure that everything was in order. When she arrived the governor directed her to the cacique, who remained in his home with his small grandson. Although he



gave his permission to evacuate the rest of the village, he refused to leave. The old man calmly told her that he could not leave; that he and the child had to stay and pray or the village would be flooded. Unable to dissuade him, Aberle left, certain that she was leaving them to their deaths. Her fears were unfounded, however, because the cacique's prediction proved correct and the village did not flood that year.<sup>36</sup> Relieved as she was, she was also proud of the efficient and speedy evacuation organized by the UPA. Earth works could not always be depended on to stand up to nature, but her employees were ready to react in a practical and competent manner.<sup>37</sup>

Ironically, the Pueblos were undergoing a shift away from their agricultural economy, even as the UPA supported massive efforts to improve the farming and grazing industries. Wage work was increasingly available on or near the pueblos during the 1930s, and during the 1940s the war-driven job market drew large numbers of Pueblo workers to urban areas in the West. The tremendous amount of money that the federal government poured into the Pueblos during the New Deal era, \$1,800,000 in 1934 alone, provided jobs at an unprecedented level. Although agricultural experts were brought in from outside the pueblos, most of the labor

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accident, the owner of the car was liable for any damages.

<sup>36</sup>Aberle, "Roots"

<sup>37</sup>Aberle, monthly report, May 1941, United Pueblos Agency Records.



was supplied by Pueblo workers. The BIA policy was to give as many jobs as possible to Indian workers. Aberle supported that policy in practice, and also promoted Pueblo employees to technical and supervisory positions as they gained expertise in a field. For instance, Pueblo heavy equipment operators who demonstrated proficiency on the job were promoted to driving instructors. Aberle was certain that even after federally funded job opportunities decreased, they would be able to find positions with commercial companies. Local jobs, mostly with the Indian CCC and other New Deal programs, were available throughout the 1930s.

Among the many construction projects tied to agriculture, fence building became a veritable industry in and of itself. Thousands of miles of fencing went up within and around the pueblos to control livestock movements. Fences on the perimeter of each pueblo kept its livestock in and other livestock out. Within each pueblo, fencing established grazing areas where cattle, sheep, or goat herds could be rotated through pastures allowing some to re-vegetate while others were being used. Another use for fencing was to keep cattle and horses off highways. If a gate were left open and a cow on the highway caused an accident, the owner of the cow was liable for any damages. Aberle sent a letter to each governor warning of this liability, but the problem persisted. Fencing was also used



to keep cattle out of poisonous weeds, and to try, often unsuccessfully, to keep rustlers away from Pueblo herds.

In addition to the traditional Pueblo agriculture, the UPA promoted new industries and applications during the New Deal. Aberle described the mood of the era as exciting and innovative. Years later she wrote, "I realize now the wide latitude we had. We could try new social experiments, or repeat old costly mistakes without being penalized."<sup>38</sup>

Aberle directed some of the UPA's resources into new agricultural experiments. She set up communal canning programs, where the abundance of crops that came with better production measures were stored for later use. Each participating pueblo owned its own canning equipment and facilities. In a sort of tithe system, 10 percent of the canned goods at each pueblo were set aside for distribution to the poor and elderly. Some pueblos expanded existing community enterprises, such as the lumber mill at Zuni, which was furnished with faster power saws. Home gardening production also increased, with Aberle establishing experimental farms at several pueblos to demonstrate the benefits of modern fertilizing and pest control techniques. Engineers from the UPA built a hydroponic garden on the campus of the Albuquerque Indian School, but it quickly failed due to disinterest. Aberle learned that she could go too far and too fast in trying to change traditional Pueblo

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<sup>38</sup>Aberle, "Roots," 53.



agricultural methods.

All of the changes and innovations applied to Pueblo agriculture under Aberle's administration followed national trends. Scientific management was the order of the day and the Interior and Agriculture departments established range and water control projects all across the country. Aberle accepted and instituted conservation measures at the Pueblos largely with good effect. In a 1942 report to Collier, she boasted of successes in all areas of agricultural production, citing impressive increases in total pounds of cattle and tons of wool sold.<sup>39</sup> Her aggressive support of federal management programs and unreserved use of federal funds for land-based improvements were well directed. She took advantage of the opportunities offered the pueblos under the New Deal, including job opportunities for Pueblo labor. With general support from the Pueblos arising from their ancient agricultural tradition, she oversaw successful land acquisition, reclamation, and production programs.

<sup>39</sup>Aberle, "Consolidation."



## CHAPTER 4

### PUEBLO GOVERNMENT AND THE INDIAN REORGANIZATION ACT

Sophie Aberle, as Superintendent of the United Pueblos Agency, took an active role in promoting changes in Pueblo government. The Indian Reorganization Act of 1934 encouraged development of Euroamerican governmental structures among Indian tribes. An advocate of John Collier's vision of Indian self-government, Aberle encouraged each Pueblo to adopt its own constitution and to settle internal disputes through the electoral process.<sup>1</sup>

Aberle's knowledge of Pueblo government was based largely on her work in applied anthropology. She researched at the pueblos during summers between 1927-1935, and she lived at San Juan Pueblo while researching there in 1927. Her first encounter at San Juan was a visit to the governor to explain her mission and secure lodging for herself. Acting on advice from her contacts in Santa Fe, she learned who had authority to grant her permission to conduct research at each pueblo. As she studied health, physical

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<sup>1</sup>Pueblo historian Joe Sando characterized the Indian Reorganization Act as an effort to reaffirm the Indian's right to self-government under a structure imposed by the federal government. Sando, *Pueblo*, 223. For overviews of the IRA see Lawrence C. Kelly, "The Indian Reorganization Act: The Dream and the Reality," *Pacific Historical Review*, 44 (1975): 291-312; Kenneth R. Philp, *John Collier's Crusade for Indian Reform, 1920-1954* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1977); Graham D. Taylor, *The New Deal and American Indian Tribalism: The Administration of the Indian Reorganization Act, 1934-1945* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1980).



development, and mortality, she also acquired background knowledge of Pueblo history and culture. Her interest in Pueblo history continued throughout her term with the UPA and culminated in a comprehensive article focusing on Pueblo government and economy.<sup>2</sup>

Traditionally, the Pueblos' civil as well as spiritual authority rested with the caciques, or religious leaders. The Spanish colonial government imposed formal village administration on the Pueblos to provide a means of formal communication and control. The system established at each pueblo included a governor and lieutenant governor, along with other officials to assist them. Since ultimate Pueblo authority rested with the religious leadership, it naturally fell to the caciques to select the civil officers. So, even with a civil administration in place, the traditional social and religious leaders still controlled internal pueblo affairs.<sup>3</sup>

Each pueblo maintained its own internal system of authority and its own version of civil government. In some pueblos religious leadership passed between two (or in a few cases more) moieties. Ritual and prescription dictated peaceful transfer of power between groups. The selection of

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<sup>2</sup>Aberle, *Pueblo Indians*.

<sup>3</sup>Reginald G. Fisher, "An Outline of Pueblo Government" in *So Live the Works of Men*, Donald D. Brand and Fred E. Harvey, eds. (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1939), 147-148.



civil officers followed patterns whereby each group shared power by unwritten agreement, taking turns supplying officers. At Taos Pueblo for example, governors and other officers were nominated by spiritual leaders then elected in the council.<sup>4</sup> In other places the authoritarian system was tempered by one head cacique who accepted suggestions for appointments from other religious leaders, such as heads of societies or war captains. For instance, at Zia Pueblo appointments were made without regard for clan affiliation, and most men served at one time or another due to that pueblo's small population.<sup>5</sup>

While there were similarities in each civil government, individual pueblos developed their own versions. Some of the official positions created under Spanish rule still existed in the twentieth century, while other positions had changed according to the needs of the era. This European-style government first dictated by the Spaniards had blended into Pueblo culture by the twentieth century. When Aberle took over the UPA she had to learn to administer federal programs by working with each individual pueblo governor and council --nineteen separate governments in all.

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<sup>4</sup>Elsie Clews Parsons, *Taos Pueblo* (Menasha, Wisc.: George Banta Publishing Co., 1936), 71. Parsons describes Taos Pueblo civil government in detail.

<sup>5</sup>Leslie White, "The Pueblo of Sia, New Mexico," Smithsonian Institution, Bureau of American Ethnology, *Bulletin* 184 (1962): 135.



Generally, the cacique nominated or appointed the governor and other officers. Elected officials were always men, since Pueblo women still did not have direct roles in their government. In pueblos where the all-male council voted for officers, it was to elect one of the cacique's own choices. The pueblo council, usually consisting of former governors, and at some pueblos all former officials, also provided a forum for discussion of internal administrative matters affecting the pueblo. Since the cacique nominated most former governors, he wielded considerable control over the council as well.

The cacique himself never acted in an official capacity with outsiders. He held a respected and revered spiritual position, therefore he never worked in the conventional sense. During her tenure, Aberle never dealt directly with a cacique and never even knew who they were, except by her own speculation. It was the governor and council who represented the pueblo to outside interests.

Religious control over civil matters was what Aberle hoped to change when she enthusiastically endorsed the Indian Reorganization Act. The IRA was the principal Indian New Deal legislation formulated by Collier and passed by Congress in 1934. It promoted Collier's dream of Indian self-determination by giving tribes the authority to draw up constitutions, employ legal council, prevent the sale of tribal lands without the consent of the tribe, and



negotiate with the federal, state, and local governments. In the second phase of the program, tribes could write a charter and conduct business as a corporation.

The IRA, according to Collier and his supporters, provided the formula for Indian self-government. Despite changes to the bill and serious limitations placed on Collier's original concept, it was presented to the tribes as a mechanism for self-rule. Aberle, whose warm relationship with Collier developed as together they battled the opposition to her appointment in 1935, saw herself as his personal representative to the Pueblos. Since Collier advocated the IRA to foster Indian self-government and self-determination, she staunchly supported it. No doubt, the logic of implementing constitutional authority over the civil government of the pueblos appealed to Aberle. Even without Collier's mandate, she likely would have supported the IRA because it applied an organized structure and some control over the authoritarian rule of the caciques. In addition, it granted the Pueblos a more secure position by establishing formal federal and state recognition of Pueblo governments. Aberle believed that the American pattern of separating religious authority from government would advance self-determination for each of the pueblos.

Promoting the IRA was more difficult for Aberle than for most other agency superintendents because she had so



many separate groups to convince. Given that each of the nineteen pueblos had its own government, administration of the UPA was problematic. Collier's consolidation of three separate Pueblo agencies into the UPA engendered conflict from the start, since many Pueblos believed that the agency, headquartered in Albuquerque, was too distant. Historian Graham D. Taylor characterized the consolidation as an imprudent emphasis on similarities between pueblos, without considering their political and cultural differences.<sup>6</sup> From Aberle's perspective consolidation made sense. She saw greater administrative efficiency with more resources going directly to the pueblos, but the move created problems for her. She spent much of her time travelling to individual pueblos, or receiving their representatives in Albuquerque in her efforts to communicate and work effectively with the nineteen separate pueblos.

Aside from the communication and management difficulties of the UPA, traditional Pueblo culture frustrated efforts to change political systems. Aberle's own staunch independence made it difficult for her to understand Pueblo cultural and political elements that resisted individualism. Political and religious leaders at each pueblo worried that written constitutions would undermine their customary authority. As a result, Aberle

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<sup>6</sup>Taylor, *New Deal*, 74.



faced a more complex situation than other agency superintendents in trying to implement the IRA. She contended with opposition carried over from the simultaneous announcements of the consolidated agency and the appointment of a woman as its head. In addition, she had to negotiate with each individual pueblo, attempting to persuade them to overthrow their traditional authoritarianism. These obstacles limited the success of the IRA among the New Mexico Pueblos.

The one success that Aberle claimed in implementing the IRA was at Santa Clara Pueblo. Santa Clara was the first pueblo to adopt a constitution under the IRA. Factional battles for control of the pueblo began before Aberle arrived at the UPA in July 1935. The election held in January that year was contested, and two different factions each claimed their candidate the winner. To complicate matters, splinter groups from each faction broke off, effectively creating four different parties vying for control. These contingents were known as the Summer Progressives, Winter Conservatives, Summer Conservatives, and Winter Progressives. By the time Aberle was appointed, Elizabeth Sheply Sergeant was already at Santa Clara at Collier's request, trying to iron out the dispute.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup>Collier commissioned Sergeant's services on several occasions. In the 1930s she conducted the social and economic condition surveys referred to in chapter 2 of this thesis.



Sergeant, accompanied by a Santa Clara interpreter, David Dozier, attended meetings of all sides, learning what she could of the dispute and informing Collier. In her assessment, both economic and moiety questions affected the controversy.<sup>8</sup> Serious disagreements arose over how to spend Pueblo funds, in light of new revenue generated by land compensation payments. Also, there were accusations that the governor recognized by the BIA was exchanging farm land for more lucrative townsites, to his own economic advantage and the detriment of the tribe.<sup>9</sup> A number of Santa Clara men looked to the IRA as a solution to their governmental problems.

The old ways of running the pueblo seemed ineffective, and the IRA offered an expedient alternative. At the same time, economic opportunities offered by New Deal programs were stymied by Santa Clara's internal problems. Speaking in favor of a new system of government, one man put it this way, "I'll tell you . . . if we can get these factions together in this pueblo we might be able to do something but not until we do get together."<sup>10</sup> Filario Tafoya of the Winter Clan spoke at a meeting in favor of a constitutional form of government. His statement included a call for

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<sup>8</sup>Sergeant to Collier, July 15, 1935, Collier Papers.

<sup>9</sup>Geronimo Naranjo to Dennis Chavez, Feb. 15, 1937, Chavez Papers.

<sup>10</sup>Cleto Tafoya, quoted in a report by his nephew, David Dozier, July 17, 1936, Collier Papers.



separation of religion and government, "We should form a new government with constitutional regulations, and not in connection with the customs or religion . . . I do not want the caciques to have anything to do with it. They should be set aside in governmental matters."<sup>11</sup> The progressives, mostly representing the Winter Clan, claimed that Santa Clara could not attack other pressing issues, such as economic development, unless they could all work together. They believed that they needed a new structure for internal government.

Sergeant, who was soon joined by Aberle, also argued in favor of a constitution to avoid power struggles and provide legal controls on authority. It is difficult to imagine the nerve of these two white women, going before meetings of Santa Clara men to advocate a dramatic change in their government. Since Pueblo women did not participate in government, these outside women's participation in meetings was unusual enough to annoy some traditionalists. The situation, almost predictably, made Aberle vulnerable to personal attacks by the conservative opposition. Even after the Santa Clara constitution was adopted, she was accused of lying about it and pressuring people to accept it when they

<sup>11</sup>June 1, 1935, Collier Papers.

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<sup>11</sup>Sergeant, report on Winter party meeting, July 22, 1935, Collier Papers. In addition to interpreting from Tewa to English for Sergeant, David Dozier supplied written English translations of this meeting and others for her.



did not even understand it.<sup>12</sup>

Those members opposed to any change in government emphasized custom and culture. The Summer party, which represented the Summer Clan, was generally conservative and traditional. They held that the old system could still work. "We . . . want the cacique to appoint a governor. We want to keep the old customs up . . . since we can remember, we have worked like this."<sup>13</sup> This argument was certainly valid. The Pueblos withstood centuries of outside pressure from different cultures, changing and adapting slowly and selectively to external forces. Describing this communal trait, anthropologist Edward P. Dozier wrote, "While dissension is common, even endemic in every pueblo, disputes have rarely broken up a village completely."<sup>14</sup> It is doubtful, then, that a new government was necessary for Santa Clara to survive.

Nonetheless, the majority of Santa Clarans voted for a change in their government and supported an IRA constitution. Clan power struggles, economic opportunities, and pressure from the UPA combined to make Santa Clara the first pueblo to adopt a constitutional form of government.

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<sup>12</sup>Jose D.D. Naranjo to Chavez, Jan. 26, 1937, Chavez Papers.

<sup>13</sup>Jose Maria Chavarria, quoted in Sergeant and Dozier, report on meeting, Santa Clara Pueblo, July 26, 1935, Collier Papers.

<sup>14</sup>Dozier, *Pueblo Indians*, 19.



such To appease and include all factions in the framing of the constitution, a committee was formed consisting of an equal number of representatives from each of the four parties. The progressives began by assuring traditionalists that customs and beliefs would not be affected by a change in the government structure. Some of the conservatives' concerns were addressed within the constitution and by-laws, which were drafted at the same time. For instance, traditionalists worried that their native language was being replaced by English. They wanted the constitution written in Tewa, but Aberle argued that the document had to be understood by BIA lawyers. This caused problems later when opponents claimed that she "buffaloed" them with a document they could not understand.<sup>15</sup>

The question of native language was still important. As far as they could control it, the committee did so. They addressed it in the constitution by requiring all officers to speak Tewa. The sheriff, in addition, had to speak Spanish and English as well, since all three languages were considered necessary for his job. Meetings of the pueblo council would be held in Tewa, with an interpreter provided if outsiders (usually BIA officials) were present, but only at the discretion of the council itself.<sup>16</sup> Debates over

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<sup>15</sup>Naranjo to Chavez, Jan. 26, 1937.

<sup>16</sup>Sergeant and Dozier, report on meeting, Santa Clara Pueblo, Oct. 3, 1935, Collier Papers.



such issues as language led to compromise and eventually to agreements on two levels. First, the Santa Clarans had to reach a consensus among themselves, then they had to come to an agreement over issues raised on behalf of the BIA.

But The constitutional committee worked out its own consensus, but then it had to consider the federal perspective, as represented by Aberle. BIA officials in Washington reviewed Indian constitutions before they went to tribal members for a vote. Charged with reworking the Santa Clara document into legal language, William Brophy, Special Attorney for the Pueblos, awaited the committee's final draft. Some committee members expressed concern about the rewording. They wanted to approve the final document after Brophy reworked it. Aberle, however, insisted that Brophy must have the last draft, or he would be wasting his time working on a document that might be changed again. She and Brophy both gave assurances that the meaning and intent of the Santa Clara constitutional committee would be preserved. Only the language would change to guarantee that the document was legally correct. The committee relented, but in November they held another meeting to approve the final document without revision.<sup>17</sup>

At the last meeting of the committee in November, Brophy presented the final constitution and by-laws. It

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<sup>17</sup>Minutes of constitutional committee meeting, Santa Clara Pueblo, Oct. 5, 1935, Collier Papers.



contained all of the agreed upon provisions: established officers, election procedures, specific powers of each office, formation of a business organization, and council authority to negotiate with other pueblos and governments. But there certainly had been changes. By the time it had been returned to the pueblo committee, the document had undergone revisions by Aberle and Sergeant, as well as Brophy, then in Washington where Collier and BIA lawyers reworked it again. William Brophy proudly announced to the constitutional committee that Collier was personally interested in the Santa Clara constitution and had made some revisions himself.<sup>18</sup> Santa Clarans were probably displeased by the news, however, since they were understandably wary of any outside changes made to the text.

The document that filtered back to Santa Clara in November contained a number of legalistic changes. The revisions to the constitution concerned some committee members. The language, they said, was too complex for the people to understand. Brophy answered that Washington had insisted on adding more legalistic language than he recommended and that he would help them explain it to the Santa Clara voters. Aberle assured them that she and her staff would also help and would be available later to

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<sup>18</sup>Minutes of constitutional committee meeting, Santa Clara Pueblo, Nov. 15, 1935, Collier Papers.



assist in interpreting the constitution as needed. Sergeant, also in attendance at the meeting, told the committee that it was up to them to explain the document to their various factions before the general vote to ratify.<sup>19</sup> Aberle's staunch support of the revised document later led to the criticism that she forced it on Santa Clara. Whatever kind of pressure she did or did not exert, it was the committee who wrote to Harold Ickes asking him to call an election on the question of ratification as soon as possible.

After discussing the new language of the constitution, the meeting degenerated into a belated debate over religious rites and the induction of the new governor. The discussion turned into a heated argument and the meeting broke up without settling the issue. Nonetheless, the constitution was approved, and put before the people of Santa Clara, who ratified it. Questions of the relationship between religion and government still disturbed Sergeant. She warned Collier of the potential problems indicated by the "religious flare-up" in the committee meeting. And she let him know that, in her opinion, the Santa Clara council needed long-term help interpreting their new constitution.<sup>20</sup>

In January 1936 Santa Clara held its first general

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<sup>19</sup>Minutes, Nov. 15.

<sup>20</sup>Sergeant to Collier, Nov. 15, 1935, Collier Papers.



election under the new form of government. Aberle was pleased that 96% of those eligible voted, including forty-two who voted by absentee ballot.<sup>21</sup> The result of the gubernatorial election was close. The union of progressives from both the Summer People and the Winter People, which made reform possible in the first place, fell apart. This split among the progressives threw the election to the conservative Winter People candidate, Agapito Naranjo, who won by five votes. Oliver LaFarge, head of the Association on Indian Affairs, observed and reported on the outcome of the election. In his assessment, the progressives lost the governorship because Filario Tafoya, a progressive member of the constitutional committee, was angry at not being nominated for governor. In retaliation, Tafoya gave his support to Naranjo's candidacy, enabling Naranjo to win. The progressives handily won all of the other offices, proving the popularity of the progressive movement.<sup>22</sup>

The Santa Clara constitution demonstrated the potential of the IRA. Factions worked out their differences in a written document that became the basis of the pueblo's government. It was what Collier and Aberle hoped to accomplish, a system of civil government that separated civil government from control by religious leaders, placing

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<sup>21</sup>UPQB 1, no.2 (1939): 54. At the time, absentee balloting was not allowed in New Mexico state elections.

<sup>22</sup>Oliver LaFarge, undated report on Santa Clara election, Collier Papers.



it in the hands of the pueblo electorate. It also superseded the old pattern, which sometimes led to factional fighting for control. The success at Santa Clara led Aberle to push for constitutions at the other pueblos as well.

Aberle faced problems trying to implement the IRA at most of the other pueblos. All of the pueblos, except Jemez, voted to accept the IRA, in theory. Still, few went on to write and adopt their own constitutions, because of their tradition of conservatism and close ties between religion and government. Although Santa Clara was the only pueblo to adopt an IRA constitution by 1943, five other pueblos, including Acoma and Isleta, had some kind of document delineating their internal government.

Acoma suffered repeated factional disputes over the selection of governor. The pueblo operated under a written agreement from 1930 that outlined a system of nominating and electing officers. In 1936, Aberle interceded when the cacique from one clan refused to install the elected governor. This incident was followed by another controversy in 1939. The progressive Antelope clan opposed the governor, who was from the conservative Medicine Clan.<sup>23</sup> In each of these cases, Aberle focused on settling the feuds individually, rather than seizing an opportunity to promote

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<sup>23</sup> *Pueblo Newsletter* (Jan. 9, 1939): 1. This seems to be the first issue of what became the *UPQB* later in 1939.



the IRA as a solution. Unlike Santa Clara, Acoma lacked a strong internal progressive movement. Despite continuing internal problems, Acoma kept its traditional form of government.

Isleta also developed a written agreement regarding election procedures in response to a power struggle between progressives and conservatives. The dispute, which centered around political control, developed economic aspects as well. In particular, some Isletans questioned the distribution of funds generated by the successful community cattle herd, or claimed that their payments were withheld altogether.<sup>24</sup> In 1943 the opposing sides produced a written agreement regarding election procedures, which failed to settle the dispute. Losing patience with their failure to decide the issue internally, Collier froze the pueblo's funds in an effort to force them to settle the issue. Aberle, acting in her role as Collier's representative, agreed with his decision and tried to mediate between Washington and Isleta. As with Santa Clara, she believed that Isleta could solve its political problems by forming an IRA-type government. Eventually Isleta adopted a constitution, but not before Aberle left the UPA in 1944. Freezing pueblo funds in 1942 was a drastic response to Isleta's problems, but that kind of authoritative action

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<sup>24</sup>Elias Jiron to Collier, Dec. 17, 1942, United Pueblos Agency Records.



was not new in Collier's relationship with the Pueblos.

An earlier religious controversy at Taos Pueblo led Collier and Aberle to respond again through direct interference in internal pueblo affairs. In spite of their theoretical commitment to self-determination and internal control of pueblo affairs, they believed American-style religious freedom to be more important than pueblo theocratic authority. The dispute was about peyote use at Taos Pueblo, which began early in the twentieth century. The established authorities at Taos were opposed to the introduction of peyote, in part because it threatened their control. They first employed religious expulsion to repress it. Eventually the civil government stepped in, forcibly breaking up a peyote meeting and confiscating the personal property of those in attendance.<sup>25</sup> After Aberle arrived at the UPA, the Taos governor and council escalated the controversy by confiscating the family land of peyote users. This action brought a severe response from the BIA.

Defending the peyote users' religious rights became a higher priority for the BIA than the push for self-government. BIA officials took the position that internal pueblo matters could not violate U.S. law or the constitutional protection of religious freedom. Conversely, Taos leaders argued that if they had self-government under

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<sup>25</sup>Parsons, *Taos Pueblo*, 62-68. Parsons describes the peyote ceremony from first-hand accounts and gives background on the controversy.



IRA, they should be able to handle the matter as they saw fit. This argument was sound, highlighting the poor timing of the issue. On the one hand, BIA representatives promoted the IRA, on the other hand they directly interfered in tribal affairs. The conflicting messages were not lost on Taos leaders, who argued for internal control in the name of self-government.

Secretary Ickes spearheaded BIA reaction by writing a letter to the Taos governor and council decrying the taking of land from members of the Native American Church. He called it "...religious persecution [that] ...jeopardizes the religious liberties and the self-government of all the other Pueblos and, indeed, of every Indian tribe."<sup>26</sup> Aberle was assigned the task of delivering Ickes' letter to Taos. She read it through an interpreter before a general meeting of the pueblo in October 1936. The announcement that Ickes was invoking his authority to rescind the land transfer was not well received. Aberle, as the bearer of bad news, again became a target of verbal attacks.

Tony Luhan, a member of the Taos council, and his wife Mabel Dodge Luhan, renewed their personal assault on Aberle. This time, however, it escalated into attacks against BIA leadership in general. In December, pueblo members of the Mirabal and Luhan families along with a few

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<sup>26</sup>Harold Ickes to Santano Sandoval, Sept. 30, 1936, Aberle Papers.



other individuals signed a statement asking for the removal of Secretary Ickes, John Collier, Sophie Aberle, William Brophy, and another attorney, Richard Hanna, specifically because they supported Native American Church members.<sup>27</sup> The petition was an exaggerated reaction to the Bureau's meddling in Taos Pueblo affairs, but the signers had a valid perspective regarding the extent to which the secretary could go in revoking land transfers.

In the fall of 1936 a special assistant to the Attorney General, G.A. Iverson, was sent to New Mexico to investigate legal matters relating to the Taos peyote controversy. In his opinion, the pueblo owned communal lands and individuals using assigned plots had no legal interest in them. Therefore, the pueblo authorities could revoke privileges of land use, even as punishment for misdemeanors. Furthermore, he found that worship and religious ceremonies were internal pueblo affairs. The Taos council, he said, had the right to regulate peyote use because, "...the Indians themselves created the tribunal and custom and usage supports the validity of its judgements."<sup>28</sup> During the course of his investigation, Iverson also indicated that the Taos Council divided up the confiscated land among themselves, demonstrating a degree

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<sup>27</sup>Star Road to Aberle, Dec. 10, 1936, Aberle Papers.

<sup>28</sup>Iverson memo quoted in Cohen, *Handbook*, 393-396.



of self-interest in their actions.<sup>29</sup> There was no doubt, however, that Iverson considered the council's actions legal.

The Taos peyote controversy is indicative of occasional incompatibility between two different goals of Collier's administration: to promote Indian self-government and to preserve Indian culture. IRA-style government was not necessarily compatible with traditional systems of authority. Certainly it was not at the pueblos. Clearly, at times Collier's ideas conflicted, but in general he was able to advance each one in its own right. Aberle was also concerned with both of these concepts. She wanted pueblo government to reflect pueblo tradition as much as possible. Believing that the Indians could settle factional disputes through the IRA process, she continued to work for constitutions at all of the pueblos. Collier's stand against the Taos council, and the peyote users' fear of the council gaining more control through the IRA, doomed any attempt to constitutionalize government there.

In addition to implementation of the IRA at the pueblos, Aberle took an active interest in securing voting rights for Indians in New Mexico. In 1939 New Mexico was still holding out against granting Indians the right to vote, citing state law that denied the vote to "Indians not taxed." That year the All-Pueblo Council, a representative

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<sup>29</sup>Iverson to Blair, Oct. 3, 1936, Aberle Papers.



group with members from each pueblo, officially advocated suffrage by issuing a public statement in support of Indians' right to vote. They called for the U.S. Supreme Court to make a decision regarding the constitutionality of the state provision denying them the right to vote.<sup>30</sup>

Collier, however, remained uncharacteristically neutral on the issue of Indian suffrage. He had doubts about whether the All-Pueblo Council's press release truly reflected a consensus.<sup>31</sup> His assessment was probably correct. One dependable feature of Pueblo relations was that unified stands on any issue were rare. Opposing factions in every pueblo, and the political autonomy of each individual pueblo, made unanimous decisions almost impossible. What was unusual was Collier's decision to remain neutral. Typically he had opinions on everything and, as has been seen, was not hesitant to oppose Pueblo leaders when he thought he was right. Aberle, on the other hand, did not follow his lead in this matter.

Aberle believed that suffrage was the Pueblos' legal right and she advised them to pursue it. She was familiar with the tension between Hispanics and Pueblos, which originated over competition for land. Disgruntled Hispanics

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<sup>30</sup>Carol A. Venturini, "The Fight for Indian Voting Rights in New Mexico" (Master's thesis, University of New Mexico, 1993), 110. Two of Venturini's chapters cover Aberle's involvement with Indian voting rights.

<sup>31</sup>Venturini, "Fight," 112-113.



indulged in an inappropriate political response by blocking efforts to enfranchise New Mexico Indians. She also knew that some Pueblos thought enfranchisement would obligate them to pay state land and livestock taxes. To counteract those fears, Aberle solicited testimonials from Indians in other states who did vote. As Secretary of the Southwest Superintendent's Council, she contacted her peers in the region asking them to obtain statements for the Pueblos. She received some replies from Nevada Indians, which she presented to the All-Pueblo Council as evidence that they did not have to be concerned with taxation after suffrage. It would be a few years more, however, until the state in 1948 conceded voting rights to the Pueblos and other New Mexico Indians.<sup>32</sup>

Outside of New Mexico, a more general anti-tribal movement was growing, even as the Indian New Deal was barely underway. After a brief honeymoon period in Washington, Collier began to face opposition from Congress, not only to him and his programs, but broader national level opposition to the BIA itself. One of New Mexico's senators, Dennis Chavez, actively supported his non-Indian constituents by fighting the BIA. This affected the UPA in several ways.

Chavez worked to protect non-Indian land interests, at a time when both the UPA and the Navajo Agency sought to

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<sup>32</sup>Venturini, "Fight," 116, 133.



consolidate tribal land holdings. He was instrumental in defeating the Navajo Boundary Bill, which would have extended reservation boundaries and eliminated much of the checkerboard area of alternating Indian and non-Indian lands. After significant success in defeating Indian land interests, Chavez expanded his agenda by opposing funding for the BIA and restricting how the Pueblos could spend their own funds.

In 1937, Chavez used the IRA as a weapon against the Pueblos. Arguing in Congress that funding for New Mexico tribes to organize under the IRA should be denied, Chavez claimed that none of the Pueblos showed interest in the IRA and that none had voted to adopt it. In response, Oliver LaFarge wrote to New Mexico's other senator, Carl Hatch, accusing Chavez of obstructionism and outright lying on the Senate floor.<sup>33</sup> Chavez later corrected the congressional record to show that eighteen of the nineteen New Mexico pueblos had adopted the IRA, but it was too late.<sup>34</sup> The appropriation bill suffered defeat. After the bill's defeat, Chavez claimed to have, "...Mr. Collier on the run now....This is nothing to what will happen to the Bureau when the Interior Department Appropriation Bill comes up."<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup>LaFarge to Carl Hatch, June 19, 1937, Chavez Papers.

<sup>34</sup>Chavez to LaFarge, June 22, 1937, Chavez Papers.

<sup>35</sup>Chavez to Kelsey Presley, May 17, 1937, Chavez Papers.



True to his word, Chavez supported general reductions in BIA appropriations and continued to favor legislation aimed specifically against the Pueblos, such as excluding them from certain BIA programs. This sort of opposition from Washington added to Aberle's difficulties in implementing economic and governmental change at the Pueblos.

Aberle found herself facing opposition from several other quarters as she worked with the Pueblos to implement the IRA. Locally, opposition to consolidation of the Pueblo agencies under the UPA resulted in attacks against her and her administration. In some cases her opponents among the Pueblo leadership expressed their antagonism for her and the new system by opposing the IRA. That was a factor in the case of Taos Pueblo. On the national level, Dennis Chavez represented non-Indian citizens of New Mexico by limiting the Pueblos' chances to participate in the New Deal. He reduced the opportunities available to them by restricting their participation in some programs and reducing funding for others. This type of resistance to the IRA made Aberle's task more difficult, but it was not the main obstacle.

Tradition and conservatism obstructed implementation of the IRA more than any other factor. The success at Santa Clara could not be repeated anywhere else under Aberle's administration. The conditions that enabled the progressive coalition to dominate Santa Clara politics were unusual.



Elsewhere, factions tended to break down into smaller groups competing for control of government, as at Isleta, rather than band together in favor of a new system.

Aberle believed that the Pueblos would accept the IRA because their social and economic environments were changing. As the Pueblos moved toward an expanded economy, including more productive agriculture and new jobs, they also acquired more modern living conditions. While Aberle thought that this would inspire political change as well, she underestimated the Pueblo resistance to change. Traditional Pueblo culture developed over centuries to protect the community from enemies and natural disasters. She understood that authoritarian control tied the community together. However, she speculated that individualism, driven by modernization, was on the rise in the pueblos and that individualism demanded American-style government.

In Aberle's estimation, the Pueblos needed to update their governments in order to get by in the modern world. She still believed that Pueblo tradition should shape Pueblo government, but that with constitutionally guaranteed legal authority, they would obtain the social and economic benefits available under the Indian New Deal. Appraising the situation from her scientific point of view, she thought she could convince them of the advantages of self-government in the American tradition. When she left



the UPA in 1944, Aberle thought that the Pueblos were advancing toward self-determination. Later she remembered, "I left with a feeling of deep satisfaction....Everything seemed to be progressing full blast, and I thought from there on the Indians would be self-sufficient. We said nice things about ourselves and our work."<sup>36</sup>

Aberle's assessment of the potential for implementing IRA-type governments at the pueblos was overly optimistic. Resistance to change was too strong. Although there were Pueblos who agreed with her evaluation, many progressives lived outside of their villages pursuing job opportunities elsewhere. They had little influence, or did not take part in affairs back home. Progressive interests remaining in the pueblos confronted intense resistance from traditional authorities who, understandably, did not care to relinquish control.

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<sup>36</sup> Aberle, "Roots," 409.



## CONCLUSION

Sophie D. Aberle utilized her formal education, first-hand experiences, personal vitality, and intellect in her administration of the United Pueblos Agency. There she directed the federal response to problems confronting the Pueblos between 1935-1944. Applying her scientific training, along with her field work, she demonstrated a solid understanding of the Pueblos' needs and concerns. Despite limitations and the persistent complaints that hampered her administration, she accomplished a great deal.

Aberle's tenure as superintendent of the United Pueblos Agency ended in 1944 with her transfer to the National Research Council, Division of Medical Sciences. She was asked to go to Washington, D.C., to research malaria, an illness caused by mosquito-borne parasites that killed thousands of American soldiers during World War II. She readily accepted the four-month temporary post in Washington, although she gave no prior indication that she wanted to leave the UPA. Apparently, she enjoyed being back in a research laboratory, for at the end of the initial term, she decided to stay. Her formal resignation from the BIA cited progress on malaria research and her desire to see the work completed. Despite UPA activities designed to support the national war effort, she thought that she could contribute more effectively by working in the field of medical research.



Aberle took advantage of the opportunity presented to her when John Collier selected her to head the UPA. As a white, single, well-educated woman, she represented the typical professional woman of her time.<sup>1</sup> Her male colleagues in the fields of medicine and government administration found it relatively easy to accept a well-qualified woman with no family responsibilities to distract her from the job. Like other women doctors, she earned the respect of male physicians by applying her tactful and imperturbable manner, as well as demonstrating her intelligence.<sup>2</sup>

Typically, professional women in the first half of the twentieth century went into a "service" field. Medicine was seen as an appropriate extension of women's nurturing and care-giving roles, although most women in medicine were in lower-level positions such as hospital aids and nurses.<sup>3</sup> Aberle's first interest, human biology, was unusual. She obtained her medical degree to assist in her field research and never intended to be a clinical physician. Aberle concentrated on the areas of women's and children's health, both typical of women doctors and socially acceptable

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<sup>1</sup>Mary P. Ryan, *Womanhood in America*, 186-187.

<sup>2</sup>For individual portraits of women doctors in New Mexico and their relationship with the male-dominated medical community, see Jake W. Spidle, *Doctors of Medicine in New Mexico* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1986), 171-220.

<sup>3</sup>Ryan, 187.



specialities for them.<sup>4</sup> Women physicians were inclined toward the fields of gynecology and pediatrics more because they were women themselves than because these were acceptable areas of practice. Nonetheless, as women moved into professional fields, they carried their nurturing and homemaking roles with them. Aberle was similar to her peers, concentrating on fields deemed appropriate for women and taking an active interest in women's health issues. She focused on female hormonal research in medical school, was a life-long advocate of reproductive freedom, and devoted much of her published research to maternal and child health and nutrition.

As an applied anthropologist, she chose to work with the Pueblo Indians. This was not an uncommon choice for a woman. The Pueblos were viewed as a safe area of study for women because of their agricultural village life-style and close proximity to the towns of Santa Fe and Albuquerque.<sup>5</sup> Aberle was one of several women in anthropology researching at the pueblos in the 1920s.

Social limits, however, did not affect Aberle when it came to the subject of her study. She chose first to work in the new field of sex research. This was a controversial

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<sup>4</sup>Nancy J. Parezo, *Hidden Scholars*, 199. "Women Scientists in the Southwest," *New Mexico Historical Review* :48-49.

<sup>5</sup>Barbara A. Babcock and Nancy J. Parezo, *Daughters of the Desert* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 25.



area of study, especially for a woman, but she was confident that her academic background in anatomy and genetics sufficiently qualified her for such research.

This self-confidence and a strong personality helped Aberle in her career. Her poise and stamina in public often served her well during her superintendency. She relied on the influence of dynamic women role models throughout her life: her grandmother, Sophia Herrick; her aunt, Jessica Westfall; and her friend, Edith Mirrielees. From them she learned to heed her own will and to trust her own instincts. She also learned to present a firm and confident public persona, which awed Mirrielees herself when she saw Aberle in action at a pueblo meeting.

Aberle also demonstrated that she was not timid about confronting other strong women when she disagreed with them. She mostly stayed out of the public controversy over her appointment, opposed by Anna Ickes and Mabel Dodge Luhan. In response to their charges, she maintained her composed professional public demeanor, refuting each attack with specific, informational statements. In this way her public response to the situation was far more confident and rational than John Collier's reaction. As a woman, Aberle did not dare show any weakness in her character, lest she invite further attack.

Seeing herself more as scientist than administrator, Aberle adjusted as best she could to her role within the



BIA bureaucracy. Her personal interest, stemming from her academic background and research at the pueblos, was always on health issues. The overriding emphasis of her administration, therefore, was on health and sanitation. Circumstances caused her to address many other pressing concerns as well, such as problems of administering the diverse agency, Collier's emphasis on economic and political issues, and the need to expand the land base. She tied health in wherever she could in terms of education and economic development. Breeding larger and healthier livestock and growing and preserving more diverse crops led to improved diet and nutrition. Economic development programs served these ends through better distribution of stock, improved range, expanded gardening and canning programs. In addition, instruction for Pueblo women on food storage and preparation techniques provided a healthier and more varied food supply free from contamination.

In similar ways, other economic programs improved sanitary conditions. Monies for labor and supplies to develop the pueblo infrastructure also addressed health needs. Sanitary facilities, including clean drinking water supplies, better access to water for cleaning and bathing, and safe waste disposal, advanced overall health conditions in Pueblo villages.

This emphasis on sanitation and nutrition, a combination of public health and preventive medicine, was



generally recognized as a practical approach to improving Indian health. The focus on improving conditions kept people from becoming sick in the first place. Aberle used her own research and observations to justify placing as much emphasis as she could on health issues. Often forced, however, to limit such activities due to lack of resources, she relied on her field experience and medical training to identify and address the areas of greatest need. Aberle was able to help the Pueblos take advantage of opportunities provided by New Deal programs. This contributed to significant advances in general health conditions during her tenure at the UPA.

Land acquisition and use was another area of focus for Aberle's administration. Faced with resolving the last claims under the Pueblo Lands Act, she also realized the traditional and economic importance of land to the Pueblos. She concentrated on efforts designed to strengthen traditional land use, rather than to diversify or introduce non-traditional economic opportunities. UPA land policy focused on supporting Pueblo people who wanted to return to their villages and providing better economic resources for those who had remained. Ironically, this was happening as greater economic opportunities opened up outside of the reservations, especially after the onset of World War II.

Aberle accepted the rationale of scientific management strategies for land use and development. Her administration



emphasized expanding land resources and improving land quality. Utilizing methods such as land purchases and exchanges, range and stock management, reclamation, and flood control, she saw the land base and production levels increase. The UPA land programs served to reinforce the pueblos' agricultural base, but also largely limited their economy to agriculture.

Aberle tried to encourage communal efforts, but these were mostly ineffective. Although she viewed the Pueblos as traditionally communal in nature, they were also bound to ancient patterns of social and political authority. These precluded experimenting with new communal patterns, even when the results might have economic benefits. Thus, only Sandia and Isleta pueblos tried tribal farms, while the other pueblos all opted to distribute new farm land to individuals.

This resistance to change, along with the shift to a cash economy, clouded Aberle's efforts to encourage strong economies at the pueblos. Just as efforts were underway to develop and improve the traditional agricultural economy, the opportunities for jobs outside the pueblos increased. Coincidentally, as more people went outside the villages for work, education, and social activity, a conservative reaction within the pueblos renewed rigorous factional disputes.

Internal political tension between conservative and



progressive Pueblos forestalled Aberle's efforts to encourage adoption of the Indian Reorganization Act. Discord led to polarization over the issue. It became a matter of change or tradition, modernization or custom, with no room for compromise. Aberle and Collier tried to foster dramatic changes in Pueblo government with the IRA, but were ultimately successful only at Santa Clara, where the progressives managed to pull together a majority coalition.

During the negotiations over the Santa Clara constitution, Aberle and Elizabeth Shepley Sergeant were the only two women participating. They both represented the Bureau of Indian Affairs, for Pueblo women were excluded from the process. Similarly, Aberle was the only woman at meetings of the pueblo councils, except on occasion when other women BIA personnel were present. The majority of Pueblo men, however, were not annoyed by a woman representing the federal government.

In the Pueblo world, civil matters were strictly a male domain. Nonetheless, most of the governors and councils were able to accept their working relationship with Aberle. Stepping outside of their own communities to interact with federal bureaucrats was necessary to benefit their people. By the 1930s they were accustomed to dealing with a dominant culture that was very different from their own. Perhaps a woman administrator was just another strange



but tolerable aspect of the situation.

The conclusion of Aberle's term at the United Pueblos Agency brought mixed reaction from the Pueblos. Her resignation instigated a flurry of letters from Pueblos, some of which lauded her tenure, others expressed relief at her departure. The wide range of reactions to her leaving was reminiscent of the controversy surrounding her entire term. Old adversaries in the pueblos of Zuni and Taos were glad to see her go, as were her opponents in other pueblos. These men did not allow her to leave without taking a few parting shots.

In March 1944, the councils of San Felipe, Santo Domingo, and Cochiti adopted a petition reiterating many of the old charges against Aberle. Furthermore, the councils not only favored loaning her to another agency, they also requested her permanent transfer to the National Research Council, "with the solemn and sincere aspiration that God help them."<sup>6</sup> By April, Secretary Ickes had received other letters, signed by individuals as representatives to the All Pueblo Council, endorsing Aberle's departure from the UPA.

The official reaction from the All-Pueblo Council was sent to Ickes in mid-April. Signed by Abel Paisano, Secretary of the All-Pueblo Council, it contained a

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<sup>6</sup>John Bird, Don Sanchez, and Reyes Quintana to all Pueblo governors, March 20, 1944. Collier Papers.



statement expressing regret at losing Aberle and spoke highly of the accomplishments under her administration. It ended with a request that, "Dr. Aberle be reappointed to the same position after the present emergency."<sup>7</sup> In a separate document, sent on the same day, Paisano disavowed letters sent to Ickes from individual pueblo representatives as having come from the APC. He informed Ickes that individual APC members were not authorized to make official statements for the All-Pueblo Council.<sup>8</sup>

In spite of the official APC statement, there were many who still carried animosity toward her. Much of this stemmed from resentment over the restructuring of the Pueblo agencies into one large agency. Other Pueblos were indignant over uneven funding distribution which, though based on need, seemed to short-change them. Most individual pueblo councils and the All-Pueblo Council, however, praised Aberle's administration and were pleased with the advancements made during her tenure.

Aberle herself was satisfied with her leadership. Under her management, the UPA fostered economic development and health improvements at the pueblos. She was less successful in helping them balance tradition and modernization through an IRA form of government. However,

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<sup>7</sup>Abel Paisano to Ickes, April 18, 1944. Collier Papers.

<sup>8</sup>Paisano to Ickes, April 18, 1944. Collier Papers.



she left believing that she had helped the Pueblos establish a foundation for self-determination in the contemporary environment.

Aberle proved to be a straightforward and proficient administrator who directed her energy toward making practical decisions and solving problems. By the time she arrived at the United Pueblos Agency in 1935, she was already used to working in non-traditional fields. She viewed the offer to head a large Indian agency as a chance to help the Pueblos, as well as a personal challenge. Characteristically, she accepted both.

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