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THE NAVAJO SWEAT HOUSE

By GORDON B. PAGE

Throughout the Navajo Reservation the present day traveler may find a curious structure built near or in the sandy washes of the canyon and mesa land. A brief inspection might lead one to believe that the tiny hogan, for such it appears to be, had been built by Navajo children while herding their sheep; but the house has a purpose. In the

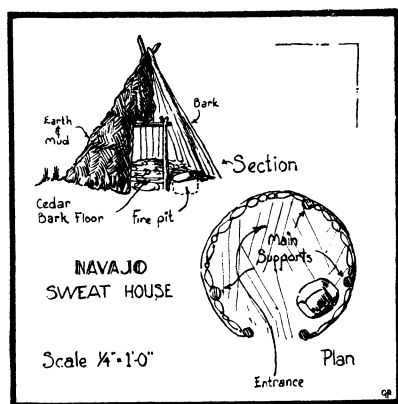


FIGURE 1.

desert habitat of the Navajo, water is scarce and that available must be carefully conserved for domestic purposes. The sweat house, therefore, fulfills the functions of a bath with a minimum use of water. To the Navajo it is a combination Turkish and tub bath. Once or twice a month, members of the household, men and women at alternate times, go to the sweat house. The cedar bark floor is shaken free of dirt and the fire pit just inside the door is cleared of drifted sand. As soon as the rocks (piled in a fire outside) have heated sufficiently they are rolled into the pit with a green forked stick which is tossed outside the sweat house when the pit is full. The house is usually small and can accommodate but a few at a time. Each strips off all clothing but a loin cloth,

stoops and crawls carefully in, turning to the left to avoid the fire pit and sits crosslegged near the outer edge of the structure. The individual nearest the low doorway carefully adjusts a blanket over the door that the heat may not escape. The occupants sit in the darkness and gossip while the small space becomes solid with dry heat. The skin soon crinkles and pops with moisture. One rubs the body with the hands and takes short breaths of the superheated air. Ten or twelve minutes are sufficient and the occupants dash out and sprint up and down the sunny draw, rub down with dry sand and drink warm water from a bucket near the sweat hogan to induce perspiration. Again they enter and bath until the rocks cool. The sweat house built by Hoske Haswood and the author near their camp in Marsh Pass, Arizona, held enough heat for three ten minute periods.

The procedure in making the sweat house in Marsh Pass was much like that followed when building its larger counterpart, the hogan. Three forked sticks, three or four inches in diameter and approximately eight feet long, were arranged around a cleared circle six feet in diameter (see Figure 1) with the butt ends imbedded a few inches in the earth on the periphery of the shallow excavation (see Figure 1). On the tripod thus formed other sticks were piled. For the entrance two poles, four feet long and three or four inches in diameter, were sunk one foot in the ground leaving three feet of their length above ground. These poles had a fork at the upper end. Into these forks a pole was laid to form the door lintel (Figure 1). More poles were piled against these posts in order to close in as many gaps as possible. Shredded cedar bark was now laid over the framework and adjusted to cover cracks between poles. Damp earth was then thrown over the whole structure and tamped with the back of the shovel or wooden scraper. More earth was thrown on and tamped until an earthen wall six or eight inches thick had been formed. One man then entered the sweat house and looked for light cracks; those located by this method were covered by the man on the outside.

The interior was carefully cleared and smoothed and a layer of shredded cedar bark laid as a floor. A blanket was folded twice and laid over the opening; several large rocks were placed to hold the upper edges fast. The sweat house was now complete.

Rocks about a foot in diameter, preferably round, were gathered from the nearby wash. Wood was cut. A layer of logs, then rocks, then another layer of logs formed the fire for heating the rocks. Over this pile more wood was thrown. The mass was ignited and burned for some hours, the rocks slowly becoming hotter and hotter until they were thoroughly heated. The rocks were rolled into the fire pit, the curtain adjusted, and a new sweat house received its sand encrusted occupants.



CALENDAR OF EASTERN PUEBLO FESTIVALS, SEPTEMBER TO DECEMBER

By JOHN M. GOGGIN

September 2, Acoma, the Fiesta de San Esteban, Corn Dance.

September 18, Jemez, the Hopi dance. This is probably one of the most rhythmic and best danced of all Pueblo dances. It is danced to the accompaniment of singing and maraches, by a single line of about thirty dancers. Between the dances, Koshari burlesqued the Navajo Yei bechi and went from house to house collecting gifts of cloth, fruits, melons, bread, etc.

September 19, Laguna, the Fiesta de San Jose. This year two groups danced alternately during the day. One was the Laguna group which gave a very degenerate corn dance. The steps were imperfectly known and mistakes were common. The costuming was sloppy as the men dancers wore trousers and shirts, and some wore kilts over the rest of their clothes. However, most of the women wore the typical dress of black wool. The other group was visiting Hopi who gave a buffalo dance completely costumed with Buffalo Head masks. This dance was very good. Late in the afternoon, after all the other dancing was ended a young Acoma Indian gave a Plains dance. The previous night, visiting Navajos gave a squaw dance, and many small groups of them sang all night to a drum