

4-1-1948

Henry Chee Dodge, The Last Chief of the Navaho Indians

Francis Borgman

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr>

Recommended Citation

Borgman, Francis. "Henry Chee Dodge, The Last Chief of the Navaho Indians." *New Mexico Historical Review* 23, 2 (1948). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmhr/vol23/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in New Mexico Historical Review by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact amywinter@unm.edu, lsloane@salud.unm.edu, sarahrk@unm.edu.



Chee Dodge

NEW MEXICO HISTORICAL REVIEW

VOL. XXIII

APRIL, 1948

No. 2

HENRY CHEE DODGE
THE LAST CHIEF OF THE NAVAHO INDIANS

By THE REV. FRANCIS BORGMAN, O. F. M.*

ON a wind-swept and lonely knoll in the Veterans' Cemetery near the road to Fort Defiance, Arizona, lie the mortal remains of a man whose memory will never be forgotten by the Navaho Indians as long as they exist as a Tribe. He was a man who started life the hard way and who seemed destined to continue life in a way similar to the very country in which he lived, a hard land, dry, and filled with barren wastes of sand and sage. In fact the country found in this man a reflection of itself, but differed in this that while it will ever be the same, this man turned his poverty to riches, found gold where others found only dross, and conquered native nothingness with vast sums of earthly possessions. This man whose life reads like a fairy tale unless we know the actual story, is none other than the last of the Navaho Chiefs, the snowy-haired, venerable-looking Henry Chee Dodge who passed from this life on January 7, 1947, just as the eternal sun was rising to usher in another day. Chee never saw that sunrise as he lay unconscious in his bed at the hospital, but he had seen many sunrises in his long and fruitful life, for he died at the ripe old age of eighty-seven years. Chee's life history will linger around a very, very, long time, and it will be as a legend to be repeated many times over by the elders of the Navaho tribe for the benefit of the young ones of the tribe, something as the old legends of the Germanic and Nordic races were made to live in their

* St. Michael's, Arizona.

retelling. Chee is dead, in fact, he has been dead for over a year, but not so his memory or his life's history. I think it worth while from an historic standpoint at this time, the anniversary of his death, to recount the life of a great man, even if he was great only to his own tribe, and perhaps just because he was great to his own people, a tribe of Indians numbering some 60,000 strong.

Chee Dodge first saw the light of day at Fort Defiance, Arizona, a small military outpost where his mother had been incarcerated by the soldiers guarding the Fort. The date of his birth is in the month of February, the day, the 22nd, the year 1860. We will recall that this is a national holiday, the birthday of that great leader of all times, George Washington. And like this great man, Chee was also to be a leader, although nobody would have thought so in consideration of the lowly state of his birth in a guard house.

Chee's father was a Mexican, by name, Juan Anaya, his mother a full-blooded Navaho, by name, Bisnayanchi. The clan to which Chee belonged is the maideshgizhni clan, meaning, "the coyote pass people." Chee's father had been captured by the Navahos on one of their many raids, and had been raised by them. Juan was only a small boy then and had to learn the Navaho language at which he became so proficient that he was interpreter to Captain Henry Dodge, first resident Government Agent among the Navaho Indians at Fort Defiance. It is reported that Juan was killed in a battle in the year 1862 while trying to defend the country against a band of raiders.

When Chee was only two years old he was fatherless and was soon to become motherless—an orphan while very young. It came about in this way. While Chee was still just a tiny tot, his mother had fled with him to avoid capture by Kit Carson who had been sent to round up all the Navahos and take them to Fort Sumner, the Babylon of the Navahos. Chee's mother joined a band of Indians who fled toward the Tuba City country not so very far from the Grand Canyon. Here the Indians lived as best they could and Chee's mother provided for her little son, but finally provisions ran out and the group faced starvation. So like a good mother she de-

cided to go out and find food for herself and babe. Since the country of the Hopi Indians offered the closest and best source of food she headed for the Hopi country. With some jewelry and a little money she with a few others ventured up the path into the Hopi village of Walpi, but never returned. It is believed that the group was strangled to death by their mortal enemies whom Chee's mother had the courage to face only out of mother love for her son.

Perhaps Chee inherited his courage from his mother for of courage he had a plenty. Since Chee was now motherless his mother's sister took care of him and became his mother—a custom among the Navahos even today. The little group of refugees held out as long as they could, but Kit Carson's plan of attrition by slow starvation finally won out, and so the group had to surrender and give themselves up, conquered in body but not in spirit. Chee was just about four years old.

Then began the long march to the Bosque Redondo, or Fort Sumner as it is called, a place situated on the Pecos River in the eastern part of New Mexico—Babylon to the Navahos. This march is called "the long walk," and the old Navahos remember it only too well. In order to understand why it is called the long walk, just take a map and put your finger on a place near the Grand Canyon, then put another finger at the place called Fort Sumner in New Mexico and you will understand why it was really a walk and not just a Sunday afternoon's saunter through the country. I wonder what were the feelings of these people used to the great open spaces and a life free to roam as they pleased now forced to march to captivity under the soldiers, their mortal enemies, the white men. If the Navahos could have written and if they could have had a poet or song writer what a masterpiece of sorrow would have been recorded for posterity.

As the Jews must have remembered Sion in their captivity by the river Babylon, so these Navahos must have thought of their hunting grounds in New Mexico and Arizona and longed to run and run until the soldiers guarding them would have been just a memory. Theirs was a bitter pill, indeed. So thus we see that the life of Chee Dodge from

birth to childhood was a sad one and gave no portent of future greatness. The scenes of the guard house at Fort Defiance, the loss of his father, the flight from Kit Carson, the loss of his mother, and now the long march to captivity, all these must have made a sad impression on an impressionable youngster. Practically from the time of his birth till he was eight years old Chee had lived either as a fugitive or a captive.

For four years the Navahos were kept in captivity until they would promise to give up all raiding and attacks on other Indians and the Mexicans and on the soldiers themselves. Finally this was accomplished when the great Navaho war chief, Manuelito, gave up his war-like intentions, submitted his onetime indomitable spirit at the feet of the white man and satisfied the Government that he had nothing but right intentions. Then only did the captivity end and the Navahos were permitted to return to their reservation.

About 2,000 strong the Navahos started out for the reservation—now no longer the scourge of the plains, the marauders of the Mexicans and other Indians—but wards of the Government—to try to eke out a peaceful living in a barren land. They were never to go to war again as a tribe, but must forever be a conquered people. The Government gave the Indians their freedom but sent them back to a land they loved even though it was filled with arroyos, sand, sage and nothingness. At this time little did Chee realize that he would one day become the chief of these people with whom he now returned. Little did the Navahos think that the little boy walking along with them would one day be their chief.

In about the year 1868, when Chee was eight years old, he arrived at Fort Defiance in the company of his aunt, another of his mother's sisters since his other aunt had passed away, probably at Fort Sumner. Chee became errand boy for the soldiers and it seems that the soldiers grew fond of the little red boy and they began to call him not Henry, but Chee, meaning "red" in Navaho. These years were uneventful and during this time Chee picked up the English language, and he did a very fine job of it, although he must

have picked it up in the rough with some of the "juicy" language of the soldiery. Soon Chee was interpreting for the soldiers and later became the official interpreter of the Agent at Fort Defiance. In fact to this day Chee is called by his own tribe not so much Chee as Hosteen Adicai, meaning, "Mr. Interpreter." Chee's knowledge of English came not only from his associations with the soldiers and other white men, but also from a sort of education given him by Perry H. Williams who became his guardian. All this helped Chee in a big way, for later when Manuelito was no longer able to remain as chief of the Navahos he thought of the young man who knew English, and realizing that this would be a very great help for the tribe in their dealings with the Government, Manuelito appointed Chee to take his place and become the new chief of the tribe. Chee was then only a young man, about 24 years old, when he became not the Navaho Tribal Representative, or a delegate to represent a certain district on the reservation, but the tribe's very chief. Of course this appointment had to have the consent of the Agent of Washington, and this was readily given by Dennis M. Riordan, of Fort Defiance. It is known that Chee did so well in his new office that later on he became the chief of the Navahos by popular acclaim.

When Chee was about 26 years old he began the most profitable venture of his life, for it was then that he started in most energetically to raise sheep and cattle. It is said that Chee began with only two sheep, and by constant care and know-how he raised large and profitable flocks. He once told Richard Van Valkenburgh, "Sheep, horses and cattle are the life. In them the Navaho can prosper—for he understands how to care for them. Livestock is the backbone of Navaho life, even today."¹ Mr. Riordan, the Agent, taught Chee how to save his money; later on Chee bought about eleven cattle, and from then on Chee was beginning to see the light of financial prosperity and independence. It is reported that Father Anselm Weber,²O. F. M., of the Franciscan Fathers, St. Michael's, Arizona, also taught Chee

1. *Arizona Republic*, Phoenix, Arizona, Jan. 10, 1947.

some very good lessons, among them the necessity to save his money and to bank it so that he would not squander it as the Navaho loves to do.

As Chee's flocks of sheep and herds of cattle grew he sold the surplus stock and even attracted buyers from the East who wanted the stock for market. Chee had some very good pasture land around Tanner Springs, Arizona, and his stock must have been fat to attract the Eastern buyers. It is said that Chee made friends of these buyers and that the name of Chee Dodge was heard in the markets as that of a successful rancher.

Chee was so delighted with his success that he began to tell other Navahos the secret of his success, and wanted them to do as he had done, so that they, too, could some day become financially independent. Whether this would have been possible is largely a matter of conjecture, for the Navaho range land would hardly have been able to supply feed for the large number of sheep and cattle which would have resulted from such wholesale stock raising. Even off the reservation it is doubtful that such large production of stock would have been possible. In any event Chee meant well, for he wanted his people to advance and come to that state in which they would have no worries about their daily bread and wherewith they should be clothed. Chee wanted the Navaho to be like his white brothers who were quite comfortable and much better off than the Indians.

One of Chee's virtues was his bravery, and in fact he used to be called the "brave boy" by Mr. Riordan because he was not afraid to tackle anything no matter how hard or impossible it seemed. Evidence of this quality was seen especially at a time about 60 years ago when the wayward Navahos used to do things which provoked the anger of the Government. (Perhaps some still liked to go on an occasional raiding party into the land of the Hopis or Mexicans). Chee rebuked these Indians and their practices and reminded them that such things would lead only to trouble and possible bloodshed.

Chee was made Chief of Police and had other policemen appointed at various parts of the reservation to keep law

and order. Many Indians resented this curtailment of their liberty by one who had himself been a captive when a boy and thought that he should rather take their side than that of the Government. Resentment against the Government did not die easily. But Chee stuck to his guns, and with much prudence and patience dealt not only with these wayward Navahos but also with the policemen who had no written law to guide them and had to receive all their instructions by word of mouth only. There must have been some very amusing incidents to try to keep order with such a raw police force, but the plan certainly succeeded and helped much to bring law and order on the Reservation.

About this same time the railroad was being extended farther West, and this was a source of trouble for the Indians and the white men, and resulted in bitter quarrels and fights. In fact these quarrels sometimes led to bloodshed, and it is reported that many of the Indians were killed by their white brothers. Chee again had some work of conciliation to do and he was not found wanting. His sense of humor, of which he had an abundance, his typical Indian patience and his knowledge of the white man, all combined to spread oil over the troubled waters of strife and bitterness. It is certain that if Chee had never lived, the period of adjustment of the Navaho after captivity would have taken much longer, and would have been accomplished only after much rancor.

Those days were trying ones for the Navahos who felt that they had been wronged and that injustice was on the side of the Government, and certainly not on their side. Without a conciliator of their own race the Navahos would have suspicioned every move of the Government, and would have resisted almost every effort, no matter how good, to civilize them. Chee knew the Navaho mind (something white men never really understand), and he also knew the white man and his way of thinking. He was bright enough to realize the differences between the two and knew how to speak at the right time and what to say with a minimum of offence to either party. One can easily imagine what would have happened had not Chee been there to conciliate, and

if the Navahos were led by someone less prudent and cautious. Double dealings, misunderstandings, and perhaps futile open rebellion would have been the result with most injury going to the Navahos, because the Government was powerful whereas the Navahos were weak, because the Government had a great army whereas the Navahos had none. Perhaps it is only now after Chee's death that his qualities of bravery and conciliation are fully appreciated.

Chee's qualities as a leader were always recognized by the Government and about 24 years ago when delegates were chosen from the various parts of the reservation to represent the people of their district, Chee became the first chairman, and was to preside at the meetings of this organized body. Since that time until his death the office of actual chairman was not held consistently and continuously by Chee, but even when he was not "ex officio" chairman he still remained the "Chief," and very little was done without his council and advice. Indians from all over the reservation went to see him, especially whenever there was anything weighty or with far reaching effects pending before the Council. At these times the path to Chee's door became well worn. His place located at Crystal, New Mexico, called "So sela," meaning "two stars" (two buttes back of Chee's place), became a veritable hot bed of politics. Chee was always the gracious host on these occasions, and was always ready to help even though some might disagree with him. Some came obstinate and left the same way, but others realized that Chee knew whereof he spoke and left better informed and more willing to cooperate for the good of the tribe. When it was impossible to get to Crystal on account of the bad roads or the deep snows, the Navahos used the "speaking wire" or telephone to explain their troubles and ask help.

One of Chee's best friends and political cronies was Frank Walker, an Irish Navaho who lived at St. Michael's for many years as interpreter. Frank had many and lively battles with the "old man," as Frank used to call him. When Frank felt the need of a good conversation on some of the political questions of the day he would ask one of the Fathers to take him over to see the "old man." And Chee often came

to St. Michael's to see Frank and talk things over with him. They would sit for hours on end conversing in English and Navaho about such things as soil erosion, stock reduction, range control and many other questions.

On one occasion I visited Chee in the company of Frank Walker, and although we were unexpected Chee welcomed us with genuine hospitality and served us a very appetizing meal, and when that was finished he and Frank discussed politics and more politics. Time did not seem to concern them and it was late before we said, "Goodbye."

It seems that in all of Chee's political convictions one could discern not the well-scholared type but rather the self-made man, one who had observed much and who had learned to think for himself. His ideas were keen, full of common sense and were formed only after deep thought and attention to the problem. Chee knew what the Government wanted him to do, and he tried to please, if possible. He knew what his tribe wanted him to do, and again he tried to please, if possible. Oftentimes this struggle for a balance between two opposing factors caused Chee to do things that were considered by some the result of inconsistency and lack of oneness of purpose. But Chee was in the position of a man who is forced to ride two wild horses at one and the same time.

As an example let me give a little attention to the question of stock reduction. By all those who knew much about the condition of the Navaho range land stock reduction seemed to be a "must." The Government wanted a plan of stock reduction, but most of the Navahos were opposed to it, and they resented it. They argued that stock was the very backbone of their existence and that they needed all the sheep and cattle which they now possessed. Some of the Navahos spoke out in no uncertain terms against the Government's policy of reduction. Chee was asked to help out in this emergency and to make the Navahos see that such a plan was for their own good if they hoped to stay on the reservation as one tribe. By meetings, speeches, arguments and individual tutoring Chee used all the wit and humor at his command to get the idea across as painlessly as possible.

He also gave the example by reducing his very large flocks down to the number allowed by the Government. Chee must have done much and accomplished what he started after, for when the smoke of battle cleared he held the respect both of the Government and his people: there was no violence worth mentioning or bloodshed, and the stock reduction plan became law.

Although Chee never went to school he clearly recognized the need of education and set the example by sending his own children to school. He told the Navahos that they must take every opportunity to use the schools they had at that time, so that the Government would eventually build bigger and better schools for them. It was not easy in those early days to convince the Navahos that their children ought to receive an education in the white man's school. There is at least one case on record where the Indians became violent with the Agent of the Government because he tried to force them to send their children to school, and the Agent was fortunate to escape with his life from the meeting place. Certainly Chee deserves credit for braving the criticism of his own people by insisting on the necessity of education.

It has been told to me that Chee also realized the value of hospitals long before the other Navahos, and that he made use of them whenever his health demanded it. I myself visited him a number of times when he was hospitalized and he always had praise for the white man's medicine. It is also rumored about that he never once called for the services of the "singer" or "Medicine man" when he was ill. He must have realized the inefficacy of the native incantations to restore a person to health even at a time when practically everybody else in the tribe thought differently. Even today the "singer" is in great demand, and his presence is essential in practically every case of illness and misfortune. His own reluctance to call for the "medicine man" did not, however, prevent him from doing this service for others, for it is said that Chee helped out and paid for the "singer" service for others.

Chee was a very good friend of the Franciscan Fathers at St. Michael's, and was a very frequent visitor and guest.

In fact, he was given a room in the Fathers' house whenever and as long as he desired to stay. He was guest at the table and used to tell many stories about the Indians.

One of Chee's favorite stories was about the match. The Indians had not at that time seen a match or knew of its uses, but had made fire only in the old way by rubbing. But the white men were using matches quite regularly to the wonderment of the Indians. When a white man wanted to light a cigarette he would scrape the match along the seat of his pants and produce fire, so many of the Indians used to call the match, "fire on the pants," or, "he scratches his buttocks," because that was the original idea they had of the new invention, the lowly match.

When his services were needed to help prepare the Catechism for the purpose of instruction in the Catholic religion Chee offered his help willingly, and his knowledge of English and Navaho came in most usefully. It was necessary to "invent" words since these did not exist in the Navaho language, and the words that were already in use did not satisfy the Fathers in many instances. Words like "immortality," "original sin," and others were very difficult to render in Navaho. Chee helped here and gave good readings for these words. Even the word for "God" had to be invented. The Fathers were using the word, "do datsahi," meaning, "one that doesn't die." Chee said the word could be used all right, but the Navahos might think that a person might be talking about someone in the "sticks" who goes by that name. So Chee said he would think the matter over and after much work and discussions with the head men of the tribe Chee introduced the word, "digin ayoitei," which means, "the Great Holy One." Anybody who knows anything about the difficulty in transposing from English to Navaho will readily understand the great service that Chee rendered in this matter.

Chee was a baptized Catholic and he entered the Church when very ill at Fort. Defiance hospital, December 4, 1932. He called for Fr. Arnold Heinzman, O. F. M., the Superior of St. Michael's, and received the Sacrament from his hands. Chee did not understand all the obligations of the Church

at the time of his baptism, but desired to enter the Church at this critical time of his life owing in great part to the teaching he had received in his former years through Father Anselm Weber, O.F.M., and from some of the other Fathers. During his last illness as he was suffering from pneumonia he again called for the priest and the writer of this article was at his side to administer the last Sacraments.

Chee Dodge's funeral was one that any white man would have envied and desired to have. The Bishop of Gallup was present in the Sanctuary while Father Berard sang the Mass of Requiem for the repose of Chee's soul on Thursday, January 9, 1947. At the Mass Father Berard, the greatest living authority on the Navaho language, preached in Navaho amid the sighs and tears of many who were present to pay their last respects to their last chief of the Navahos. The Chapel of St. Michael's was crowded to overcapacity and many Navahos overcame their native "taboo" and fear of the dead by being present at the funeral. The Bishop of Gallup pronounced the final absolution and asked God to grant Chee eternal rest. The funeral procession from the Church to the grave consisted of a mile long line of cars carrying the hundreds of people who wanted to be there while Chee's body was laid to rest in the Military Cemetery. Nobody could have expected a more prayerful and fitting funeral than was given to him by his old friends, the Franciscan Fathers of St. Michael's.

In the course of his long life Chee had a number of children, and these are still living with the exception of one, Veronica Dodge. Chee leaves the following to sorrow for him: Tom, Ben, Antoinette, Anna Dodge, Josephine Watchman, and also a ward by name, George Dodge.

After Chee's death it was decided to open the safe at his home in order to carry out the provisions of his last Will and Testament. It is said that he forgot to write down one of the numbers of the combination to the safe, and that his son, Tom Dodge, had to hire a professional "safe cracker" to open it. Chee left about \$200,000 in money, Government bonds and rugs—a tidy sum for any Navaho to have accumu-

lated. Chee left this life very much richer than he had entered it.

It may be well here to quote Mr. James Stuart, the present Superintendent of the Government at Window Rock, Arizona. He pays tribute to Chee in these words, "There is no question that Chee was a great leader of his people. And if material proof is needed it can be found in his leadership of the Navaho delegation which went to Washington last spring, presented the problems of the tribe to members of Congress, and won appropriations for the reopening of reservation schools."²

Father Anselm Sippel, O. F. M., the present Superior of St. Michael's, has this to say: "With the death of Chee Dodge the Navaho tribe has lost a great and colorful leader, and a staunch friend of everyone working for the rights and privileges of Indians."^{2a}

Now Chee is gone and we will see him no more on earth, but his memory will stay green as long as the Navaho tribe exists. Whether the Navahos walk with their sheep, or sit in the friendly hogans by the light of the fire, or thunder across the prairie on horseback, or convene for one of their many ceremonies, or gather at Window Rock for one of the tribal Council meetings, the memory of Chee Dodge will live with them, and his name will be spoken with reverence by the young and old alike. He was a great man to the Navaho Indians, their last chief, and to replace him will be very difficult, indeed.³

2. *Gallup Independent*, Tuesday, Jan. 7, 1947.

2a. *Ibid.*

3. Sources: *Scenic Southwest*, April, May, 1947; Gladwell Richardson. *Adahoonilthigii* (the Navaho Language Monthly) Feb. 1, 1947.