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NAVAJOS: WHOSE PROBLEM?

Erna Fergusson

I use the plural Navajos. Bernard DeVoto, in his marvelous Across the Wide Missouri, dubs the ethnologist’s preference for the singular his “medicine which neither logic nor a decent sensitiveness to style will move him to violate.” DeVoto admits having written “not only twenty-one Arapaho, but also thirty-eight Crow and even, God help us, one hundred and two Blackfoot. But at last,” he writes with relief, “I have encountered an ethnologist who is willing to defy the rules committee, and one is all I need. ‘There is no more sense,’ George E. Hyde writes, ‘in writing seven Oglala than in writing seven Spaniard or even seven western state.’ Check!” exults Mr. DeVoto. “I intend to write Blackfeet from now on.” One and DeVoto are all I need and I propose to continue writing Navajos as I have always done.

The nation-wide stir about the emergency on the Navajo Reservation in the fall of 1947 has again high-lighted the dilemma of that fascinating and hapless tribe and given sensation mongers another chance to air their prejudices. Haters of the New Deal, Harold Ickes and John Collier, the Indian Service, Indian agents, missionaries, associations to aid Indians, and other do-gooders, have all had their say. Blame has been, in the turmoil, fairly evenly distributed; everybody has wronged the Navajos. Certain shrill voices amid the din insist that the Indians too have done wrong. Yet this is a situation that cannot be lightly passed over; that should not be forgotten. Sensible observers agree that there is poverty, sickness, illiteracy, and despair on the Navajo Reservation far beyond anything else in our country; that this fall’s situation was a crisis in which dire need in many cases meant dangerous undernourishment if not actual starvation.

Relief was needed, and it is very creditable that relief was so quickly and so generously sent. True, there was dramatization. People arrived
with truck- and even plane-loads of food which they insisted upon hand­
ing out in person while a camera caught them doing it. A movie star dropped packages from a plane. Certain well-wishers refused to deal with the Indian Service or properly constituted agencies and set out across the reservation to succor the Navajos, innocent of the fact that Navajos do not show to the casual eye as one crosses those miles of empty space.

Soon good sense took command. The Navajo Tribal Council voted $143,000 of the tribal funds for immediate relief; the Red Cross sent in two trained workers, who found the need so great that they waived their usual methods and dispensed $4,325 within a few days to a hun­dred families who could not wait on slow investigation. Congress appropriated $50,000. Committees were formed in Winslow, Flagstaff, and Gallup; club women worked long hours sorting clothes and putting aside high-heeled slippers, feathered hats, and tuxedos. They worked closely with Superintendent James Stewart who got lists of needy fami­lies from agents, missionaries, traders, and teachers in twenty districts. Thus it was hoped that supplies would reach all the really needy and few at least who were not.

The tribe was grateful, and gratifyingly ashamed. Sam Akeaha, Chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council, speaking to a meeting of the Congress of the American Indian in Santa Fe, used that word. “We are ashamed to have to ask for help; we wish to be self-supporting as we have always been.” The same phrases occur in a letter from the tribal secretary, Peter Yazza, to the Albuquerque newspapers. It is perhaps even more impressive that individual Navajos speak similarly. An illiterate coal miner with no English insisted to me that he needed no aid nor did his sons; he said, as all Navajos do, that the great lack is education and jobs.

There is, of course, concern that relief dispensed freely and without proper checks may pauperize a proud people who still dislike charity. Sensible Navajos as well as others recognize this danger and are trying to avoid it by proper distribution and by continued reiterations of the sort of help they really need. They recognize that the greatest danger of all is that we, the American people and especially the people of New Mexico and Arizona, will settle back in our complacency at having sent out some old blankets and cans of milk and forget all about the Navajos until another series of mishaps, droughts, and crises brings on another emergency. Navajos, and people who know Navajos, are trying to pre-
vent that and to arouse and inform public opinion on the whole Navajo problem. The conditions that created this emergency still exist, many of them are growing progressively worse, and we are likely to be blinded to a bad situation by people who insist that the Navajos, with money at the traders, sheep on the range, jobs on the railroad, and mutton—if not two chickens—in every pot, are as well off as Oklahoma oil Indians.

The facts, then, are these:

Draft boards rejected sixty-seven per cent of young Navajos called because they were found physically unfit due to tuberculosis, active or incipient, to malnutrition, venereal disease, and to various congenital handicaps. The illiterates and those who could not speak English they accepted and put into classes where they learned as rapidly as anybody and showed great willingness to learn. Among a people eighty per cent illiterate, rejecting illiterates with no English would have relieved the tribe pretty well of military service. Those who served did well, especially the Navajo Marine Platoon whose clever young men worked out Navajo phrases for the most complicated military terms and invented an unbreakable code of vast importance in our operations against the Japanese. Thirty-five hundred men and women served in the armed forces. Fifteen hundred did well in war plants, for hands trained to work with wool, silver, and turquoise are deft with machinery. Because of illiteracy and lack of English most of them worked on the railroad, on farms, and ranches.

Why all this illiteracy? Here the shame is ours, not the Navajos, for now with about 24,000 children of school age, there are schools for only about 6,500. Hundreds of hopeful families trek miles with their young hopefuls to enter them in schools only to find that there is no room or that the school has been abandoned. The old days when police were sent to fetch in screaming children are no more. Navajos want their children educated; in every report or plea they address to Washington they beg for more schools. Yet we calmly doom 18,000 children to illiteracy. And this is as of now; the tribe of about 60,000 is increasing at a rate of 1,000 a year. A bit of arithmetic will show that we are maintaining an average of illiteracy such as makes us feel snootily superior when we read similar statistics about other American countries with many Indians.

This school matter is a particularly shameful one for us as a nation, because in 1868, when the defeated and decimated Navajo tribe was
returned from the Bosque Redondo in eastern New Mexico to its familiar deserts, there was a treaty between the United States and the Navajo Tribe. In that solemn agreement our government promised to provide the Navajos with a teacher for every thirty children. This promise was never kept, not in the days of boarding schools run by the military, nor in the days of the New Deal and John Collier, nor now that they have thrown the "rascals" out. This is our shame. This is the sort of thing that public opinion can correct; perhaps only public opinion can. For the Indian Office depends upon Congressional appropriations, Congress heeds voters, and Navajos have no votes; they depend upon their white friends, their white agents. It is notable that much less is done for the Navajos, along all lines, than for other tribes, many of whom do vote. Clyde Kluckhohn, in his first-rate The Navaho mentions that "there are six agricultural agents for 55,000 Navajos whereas some tribes of less than a thousand have the full services of an agricultural worker. . . . In 1940 approximately $71 was spent by the government for each individual Navaho, whereas in the same year $300 per capita was spent on the California Indians." Kluckhohn also states that other tribes receive four or five times as much in medical services as do the Navajos, and that there is only one federally paid dentist for the entire tribe.

The whole matter of health is quite as shocking as that of education. In a high, sunny and semi-arid land, a very health resort, the incidence of tuberculosis is nine times that of the national average. Why? Bad living conditions and malnutrition. People of all ages sleep on the dirt floors of hogans where everybody spits freely. Doctors find that a majority of patients received in the hospitals for whatever cause are suffering from malnutrition. A report of the Office of Indian Affairs, dated July 30, 1947, estimates the average Navajo diet as 1200 calories a day. Compare this with the 1500 calories which our government allows our defeated enemies in Germany where it plans to increase the allowance to 1800—and with our own minimum diet of 2550 calories. In such conditions it will be no surprise that infant mortality is 318 per 100,000 living births compared with 44 per 100,000 for the nation. In spite of this, the tribe is increasing at the amazing rate of 1,000 per year; and birth control, the obvious and humane way to limit children to the number that might have a fair chance to survive and to eat enough, is impossible because of certain prejudices. The Navajo death rate is the highest in the United States.
To meet such conditions, the government has provided no consistent health education, only three doctors, one traveling nurse, and ten small government hospitals. These are supplemented by a couple of good mission hospitals, giving a total of 965 hospital and 182 tuberculosis beds for about 60,000 Indians. Sick people cannot learn, advance, adjust to new conditions and a new culture. Lack of education and lack of health are two walls that pen the Navajo in.

As dishearteningly high is the economic plight of the tribe. The Navajos are suffering from the lowest standard of living in our country. The tribe's actual income, including produce they consume, is estimated at about $4,000,000; that is an annual income of less than $400 per family. Not person. Family. And Navajo families average six to eight people.

We think of Navajos as producers of fine rugs and salable silver jewelry. But they are primarily an agricultural people, depending on flocks and herds and small farms where irrigation is possible. This vast reservation is semi-arid land, able in 1868 to support the people at a low standard of living. But the Navajos then numbered less than 10,000 people. Now the estimates run from 55,000 in 1940 to 65,000 by 1950. All figures are estimates in dealing with Navajos; they are as hard to count as fleas. But a tribe that increases about 1,000 a year cannot live on what provided poor living eighty years ago. True, the reservation has been extended and leased lands have been made available for the people; but stockmen estimate that the reservation with its present resources would not support more than thirty-five or forty thousand people at a decent standard of living.

The Navajos' principal dependence has been on sheep. As the tribe increased, so did the sheep—eating the grass ever closer and closer until they were browsing on the grass roots. This, in our typical pattern of southwestern destructiveness, loosened the topsoil, hastened runoffs, and increased erosion until the reservation became, in many parts, a picture of desolation.

All this time white agents were presumably looking after the affairs of the Navajos, guarding their rights, seeing that their children were educated. But the Indian Service let these things happen. There is no excuse for this. An explanation may be that Indian agents were unaware of the needs, unaware of what was going on under their eyes and of the certain results of land erosion and human waste. Too often the guardians of the Navajos were timid about demanding from Congress...
what was needed, unable to do so forcefully, and at last naturally beat down by years of frustration. Closing the eyes became the easy way for men and women who were not well paid and who were too often quite unfit for the complicated job they were expected to do. We all know the Indian Service man who proudly trots out an Indian School graduate who is a clever interpreter, clerk, or artisan, but who remains quite blind to the horde of illiterates behind his exhibit. We also know too many men in power who say: “Oh, well, these Navajos!”

These Navajos, then, have been for eighty years dependent upon what we, through the government of the United States, have done for them. They have been self-supporting, but our neglect has made constantly harder the already hard conditions in which they have maintained themselves. We have failed to give them the basic tools of our culture—education, health, opportunity. What opportunity has a Navajo today, in 1948, in the conditions that face him? Ignorant people cannot overcome either sickness or poverty at home. Off the reservation the ignorant sick man finds only poor jobs; when hard times come he is, of course, the first fired. What chance has he in such a fix; why is he the worst treated of all Indians? The answer is probably in two small words: no vote.

The citizen’s primary weapon is his vote. And in New Mexico and Arizona the vote is denied to “Indians not taxed,” despite the fact that the United States recognizes all Indians as citizens, that they vote in all other states, and have served with credit in all our wars since, as scouts, they led our armies against the Apaches. Put down their plight largely to this fact; non-voters are sure to be disregarded. A test case is now before the courts, protesting the refusal of a McKinley County official to permit Navajo and Zuñi GI’s to register and vote. Indians protest that they are taxed—plenty—for food and clothes, for transportation, tobacco, and amusements. The states naturally insist that if Indians vote they must assume all the responsibilities of citizenship and surrender the special privileges of federal wardship. It is a complicated and anomalous situation. It also is complicated by the Navajo’s special handicaps. For even bright Navajos are quick to shake the head at the idea of granting the vote to a tribe three-quarters illiterate. Most of them would prefer a literacy test, recognizing at the same time that many of the most intelligent, influential, and valuable Navajos cannot speak or write English. Like many Navajo problems, discussion of its solution brings one to the conclusion: “Yes—but no!”
So this is the fix the Navajo is in. What has been done, what can be done about it?

Many efforts have been made; some intelligent, some quite out of keeping with modern thought, though well intentioned at the time. In education, for instance, the government forced Indian children into boarding schools where they were held under military discipline, forbidden to speak their own languages even on the playgrounds, and given white man's education to try to fit them for the white man's life. Many Navajos, baffled by later efforts, look back nostalgically upon these boarding schools, but they were grim barracks with severe punishments, and they did not succeed—the point for us now—in educating as many as two thirds of the Navajos.

Always the most thoughtful attitude toward Navajos has been that of certain private associations. Heeding the studies and recommendations of anthropologists, they have taken the lead in looking upon Indians as people with a culture of their own, perhaps worth preserving, certainly essential to consider in trying to adapt the people to modern life. Often ridiculed as "impractical do-gooders," these associations studied conditions at first hand, got some good laws on the books, blocked some bad ones, and if they could not always stop at least showed up some flagrant efforts to steal Indian lands. Finally, in the early twenties, they brought about a changed attitude in the Indian Office. The new policy considered Navajos as people with a distinct culture and habit of thought, as well as people with a living to make in an arid and rapidly degenerating reservation. It seemed that a perfect consummation had been achieved with the appointment of John Collier, one of the most aggressive of the critics of government, as United States Commissioner on Indian Affairs.

Mr. Collier carried all the ideas to a logical conclusion; he built small schools to permit children to live at home or to see their parents often. Teachers were encouraged to consider the Navajo's background in teaching the fundamentals and to train children to live as Navajos as well as whites. The Navajo language was no longer forbidden, their folk tales and myths were used; respect was paid to their ancient beliefs. This policy naturally offended everybody with old-fashioned ideas. Rigid teachers and administrators found the new methods more taxing than the old rote teaching out of books. Missionaries of all faiths were incensed at applying the Constitutional provision about freedom of religion to a "pagan belief." Among them they convinced many Navajos.
that anything new was bad. Boarding school Navajos forgot their child-
ish loneliness and despair and thought their children were not being
taught if no stern disciplinary measures were used.

Now that it is fashionable to decry Mr. Collier and all his works,
he is perhaps most derided for the stock reduction program. The
Navajos' range was not only being rapidly depleted to the danger point,
but the tearing down of its topsoil was so congesting certain streams
with runoff mud that they were rapidly filling up the Elephant Butte
Dam. So 3,500 head of sheep and comparable numbers of horses and
cattle were killed or forced into sale. An elaborate system was worked
out by which Navajo families might own livestock only on permit.
Critics of the Indian Office, including many Navajos, blame all today's
ills on this killing of the sheep. Milder critics complain that it was
badly done, at the wrong time of year, and that it removed some two
thirds of the tribal wealth without proper cash compensation or provi-

sion for substitute income. Worst of all, it was done too quickly to
consider the Navajo's way of thinking or to win his complete and under-
standing assent.

The plan did include a works program to give Navajo men wage
work at bettering the reservation. Roads to get people to market and
children to school; schools, hospitals, vocational training centers, and a
"Navajo capital" at Window Rock; dams and wells to increase and
improve farming. It is perhaps typical of our way that the administra-
tive center at Window Rock got the priorities. Too much of that fine
planning remained on paper. But a valid explanation is that war came.
The administration changed. Again the Navajos have suffered from
lack of continuity in the Indian Office. One does not halt soil erosion
and bring thousands of acres back into productivity, build dams to pro-
mote agriculture, nor educate a whole tribe in less than decades. It was
a good long-range plan halted in mid-flight. The emergency of 1947
then came along on schedule just when the GI's Army allotments and
retirement payments ran out, and when a summer of drought was fol-
lowed by an autumn with no piñones.

What to do? What is the Navajo to do? If he is educated he can
probably get a job in some town. Employers in the towns find that as
workers Navajos are as good as the average, though with a tendency to
go home. This does not seem so much a Navajo as a human trait. Men
of all tribes, including the Scandinavian, have a tendency to go home
when harvest time comes and there is no man at home to help the
women with the crops. We should remember, too, that the Navajo suffers the terrific homesickness of a man who does not speak the language or understand the ways of the people among whom he works; he needs the refreshment of his own folk. Employers in Albuquerque have most success in holding their workers if they help them find decent living quarters where their families can live with them. Illiterates can find jobs too. Employers on ranches and the railroads have done little to provide decent housing, but they will employ those with no English if they can get one English-speaking man to about twenty-five others.

This will not solve the problem. The reservation will not support the tribe; it would not support 5,000 whites at our standards, even though soil erosion has been stopped in places where more livestock can be run. But that is not enough. Dams must be built, farming developed and modernized wherever possible. That is still not enough. There are limits to the amount of farming possible even with irrigation and modern methods. It is proposed to tempt many Navajos with other lands in southern Arizona. This seems feasible to most informed observers, but still inadequate. The reservation’s resources must be developed. Coal is worked now and the tribe owns one small sawmill. Copper and oil are in prospect and possibly other and more precious minerals like holium, vanadium, and uranium. But they lie underground doing the tribe no good. Even resources now available can be of real use to the Navajo only if he gets out of the production of raw materials and begins to process such materials as wool, leather, wood, and metals for the commercial market. His handiwork in wool and silver is specialty work for a special market. But they prove that Navajos could be quickly trained to factory work—given English and literacy. Small factories on the reservation where workers could live at home and among their own people would help solve the problem of personal adjustment.

This would also be one excellent way to develop and use the Navajos’ greatest resource—the people. Up to now the government has been most intelligently helpful in matters of range management, stock improvement, and farming methods and most unintelligent to the point of dense stupidity in all matters pertaining to the human needs, desires, abilities, and educability of the people concerned. Again, sick, illiterate, and maladjusted people are not an asset. The greatest need of the Navajos is the development of the Navajos as people. All these programs—well recognized by the Indian Office and presented in a ten-year plan—
require large financial outlay, a steady consistent administration, and time.

This is where we come in; we, the people. We must always remember that Congress makes appropriations and that Congressmen cannot as a rule visualize such conditions as the Navajo faces daily, that the Navajo has no vote, and that many white men covet his lands and especially his subsoil wealth, and that such men often operate through powerful lobbies working on Congress. It is easy to damn the Indian Office for all that is wrong. But Indian agents and their workers are human too; Dr. Kluckhohn suggests that we need an analysis of their mental processes as well as those of the Navajos. In any case, they are not paid enough to attract the most effective workers in such a complicated and trying field, they have suffered long and known frequent set-backs, they have become timid. They too, in effect, have no vote. Many need their jobs more than they need to see the Navajos advance.

Yet we must have an Indian Service—at least for a while. Criticisms indicate that the entire Indian Office needs reorganization from top to bottom. Several excellent plans have been proposed, notably one by Mrs. Ruth Kirk of Gallup. The most thoughtful people in the Indian Service would welcome changes that would tighten up administrative methods, allowing more freedom to deal with affairs in the field promptly, paying more attention to the Indian's psychology and his ancestral ways, and consulting him about every policy that affects his tribe. But nobody who thinks the problem through would advocate turning loose 40,000 illiterates with no adequate means of livelihood, and with no protection against the predatory elements in our population. They would lose their lands in jig-time. Somehow we must prepare them to meet the vicissitudes of life among the whites, and that means an Indian Service to look out for their needs—at least until a majority of them are educated and provided with a decent living. That we have not so prepared them in eighty years is no reason why we cannot do it now within a generation. If we educate all the children now on the reservation, teach them citizenship and a vocation, as well as reading and writing, we shall be able to consider withdrawing the agents and liquidating the Indian Office. So we come back again to the greatest need for schools and a sensible education adapted to the needs and abilities of the Navajo.

But the transcendent need—especially in New Mexico and Arizona—is for a public opinion, informed, fair-minded, both aware and
ashamed that we have allowed this crisis to arise. For we, acting through our government, have denied these people the basic rights of our civilization—education, health, a chance to make a living, and the vote. And in doing that we have violated a solemn treaty. What happens to the Navajo from now on depends equally upon us. This emergency will not be the last unless we, the thinking citizens of New Mexico, see to it that these fellow citizens of ours are given a fair chance.

§

POEM IN CHICAGO

There is a strange city
Where a man can sit alone
And wait.
There is a place
Where the sky is not as it used to be
And the streets are dark
As if they were not there.

A man can sit alone in many places
Waiting for death
When he has no home.

ALEX AUSTIN