Navajo Trading Posts

Frank Waters

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NAVAJO TRADING POSTS

Frank Waters

I TWO BOOK REVIEWS

MANY YEARS AGO in Colorado Springs my Columbia Grade School
teacher was a tall, slim young woman named Ruth Jocelyn Watt­
tles. Her penmanship was exquisite and she knew Navajo. Aside from
these accomplishments she must have been a remarkable woman, for
the debt I owe her seems to gain interest daily.

The school was on the edge of town, its windows opening to the
empty prairies on one side and to the shining mountains on the other.
We were an unruly class. Miss Wattles cured our predilections for both
misbehavior and daydreaming by the most novel of expediencies. In­
stead of punishing us, she rewarded us at the end of the day for good
behavior by telling us stories of the Navajos. Gradually we quieted
down to earn this last half hour.

As far back as Miss Wattles could remember, there were Navajos
sitting about the big fireplace of her home ranch waiting to be fed. But
inevitably we learned that many of the stories she told us were taken
from letters being written her by her cousin. At times she even read us
excerpts directly. Who this cousin was we never learned nor cared. It
was the stories themselves which held us, amplified by Miss Wattles'​
own personal experiences, her eye for significant detail, her immense
feeling for life and her unbounded enthusiasm.

When school let out I forgot her stories completely. Life replaced
them. I found myself for a time on the Navajo Reservation too; then
in Wyoming, California, Mexico.

Miss Wattles meanwhile had been busy. Enthusiastic over our
reception of the letters from her cousin she had sent excerpts of them
to Harper's Magazine. Published here, they roused the enthusiasm of
Little, Brown and Company who persuaded her cousin to arrange them in book form. The book was released in 1928 under the title Desert Wife by Hilda Faunce, Miss Wattles' cousin. Not until it was reprinted in 1934 did I run into a copy; and then, over twenty years later, it all came back to me—the quiet schoolroom at the close of day, and the snow beating like moths against the windowpanes; Miss Wattles' tall figure and resonant voice; the simple, homely stories themselves, oddly familiar and amply confirmed by my own experiences at Shallow Water.

It is a beautiful, terrible, compelling book, one of the best that has ever been written on trading posts.

Ken and Hilda Faunce are living in Oregon. The fog and perpetual rain are depressing. The bank fails. The wife can endure these reverses and discomforts. But not the man. He was desert-bred, had once been an Indian trader in New Mexico and Arizona. That is the trouble. Homesickness. The land had touched him, he had to go back as we all do. Such a strange man! In seven years of marriage the woman had never understood him.

They abandon the place, pack supplies in a light road wagon, and start driving back the old Oregon Trail. Up to the top of the Coast Range, down the eastern slope. Oregon. Idaho. Utah. There are few automobiles, few fences. The ground where the ox teams had formed a square by the water holes is still trampled flat. The woman cooks over a campfire, sleeps beneath the wagon, disconsolately eyes each small village with its tidy homes and shady trees. The man drives steadily on. He is moody, taciturn, stranger than ever to her. It is 1913; it might have been 1848.

At last they reach the Four Corners. Hilda is terrified. The vast emptiness and barrenness threatens her as it always threatens the white. "To keep from going mad in the stillness," she closes her eyes and keeps muttering a silly jingle about the Eohippus:

There was a little animal no bigger than a fox,
And on three toes he scampered over these Tertiary rocks.

Ken is home. From a prosperous trader at Lugontale he leases the abandoned trading post of Covered Water. It is twenty miles from the trading post at Chin Lee, their nearest neighbor, and 105 miles from Gallup, the nearest town.
The post is a decrepit two-room shack of rough planking held together by box boards, with battens covering the cracks. The back door opens into a storage tent for goat pelts, sacks of wool, supplies. In front, the seepage from a spring fills a hole covered with boards: "Covered Water."

There is not a tree, a blade of grass, a house in sight. All around, interminably, spreads the vast naked plain. From it into the post seeps snow, sand, loneliness—the strange place-spirit of America so inimical to the alien newcomer.

With the Navajos comes stark fear. Those strange dark faces. Queer customs. A language Hilda does not understand. Threats; the place has a bad name. . . . The sheathed animosity between the white and the red races.

Ken ignores his wife's terror. He speaks Navajo, feels perfectly at home. He keeps busy trading, making friends. Hilda huddles in the other room, but there is no door to give her privacy. Through a hung blanket she can always hear the Indians begging coffee, glimpse them spitting on the floor and picking lice from their hair.

How wonderfully, terribly, Hilda's fear is built up to its climax. She becomes seriously ill. She cannot eat. Her hair falls out. She "seemed to be turning into an Indian," becoming "a deep, burnt orange color all over." If she died in the house, the post would be a total loss. No Navajo would ever step inside it. They might burn it; that is their way. The Indians have stolen the shovel; Ken would be unable to dig her grave outside. There is no escape even in death. So she worries in moments of consciousness.

The doctor arrives from Gallup. He stays twenty minutes and charges $225. It is not too much for the 105-mile ride. He leaves some pink pills and advises an operation in Gallup if she lives.

Hilda lives and undergoes the operation. A month later she walks out of the hospital. Ken has not written nor come to see her. Yet she knows he loves her. She returns to Covered Water, and asks him if he would have come to her funeral if she had died. "No," he answers. "I would have ridden the other way." That, she realizes, is what makes him so strange. It is the Indian way. Not to fail when they can help; when they cannot, to ride hard to forget.

This is the psychological turning point in the book, as it is the psychological turning point of every alien race on a new continent. To meet in mortal combat the inimical spirit-of-place. To succumb to it
and die. Or to accept its terms and henceforth be molded by its invisible forces.

How wonderfully now throughout the rest of the book Hilda opens up to the land and its people. She sees its naked beauty, its subtle colors, feels its strength and rhythm. She learns Navajo, makes friends with Old Lady, Slender Girl, Hosteen Blue Coat. En-Tso's tonic restores her hair. She sees ceremonies, learns to estimate the amount of sand the Indians put in their sacks of wool.

Trouble comes too. The Navajos kill one of their young school Indians for selling turquoise stolen out of a grave. They threaten to kill Ken for befriending some prospectors hunting for gold. Smallpox wipes out family after family. Hilda rides from hogan to hogan to persuade them to let her immunize them with vaccine. She allows Ken to sell her favorite Navajo blanket to a rich tourist in order to save money for a small place of their own some day. The First World War comes and Ken averts a massacre of all the whites around before soldiers like Kit Carson and his troops come. . . . Episode after episode, they all show a deepening awareness of The People and the land.

And finally, having saved their small stake for a ranch, they leave. Parting with mutual respect and understanding and sorrow; but still heeding the call of their own irrevocable destiny and leaving the Navajos to theirs, members of two races whose trails have crossed but lead yet in opposite directions.

In *Spin a Silver Dollar*, by Alberta Hannum (Viking Press, 1946), there's none of this. No intuition of the dark wings hovering over America. No overtones, no depth, nothing coming from the inside out. It's all surface whitewash, like Tom Sawyer's fence.

But it is a remarkably strange parallel. It too has an interested third party, Alberta Hannum, the author. It too developed from a magazine article, this time in *Collier's*. And it also covers a short time before a World War, number two.

Ken and Hilda Faunce in this case are "Bill" and "Sallie" Lippincott. They have made the long trek across the continent from New York to the wilderness of the Four Corners. Here they discover an old Navajo trading post. The post of Wide Ruins, eighteen miles north of Chambers, on the road to Ganado. They promptly buy it. It is an adobe building in simply shocking condition. It is even "without bathtub or shower." There is some sort of an individual there selling and trading
things to Navajos. But just what sort of a character he is we never know; he is kept in his proper place behind the counter.

The struggle begins to make the place habitable. The adobe is rebuilt with a nine-foot wall around the patio. An electric power plant is installed; butane gas is put in. One of the ancient terraces of the thousand-year-old ruins is converted into a badminton court. A swimming pool is made in one of the lower excavations used for ritual ceremonies.

At last it is livable. Bill and Sallie move in. Now come the Indians: a Navajo maid, a cook, and handyman Joe. Other Navajos come too, from across the arid plain. That character behind the counter takes care of them. For “the Lippincotts had not been in the trading post business very long before they realized it was not one they could revolutionize overnight.”

This trading post business is not very important, really. For handyman Joe has a small son, Jimmie. And Jimmie likes to draw. He is given pencils and allowed to draw just what he likes and just the way he likes.

After this break in the narrative the book resumes its course and so do the Lippincotts. They go to the Broadmoor Hotel in Colorado Springs to buy Palomino ponies; for Kentucky thoroughbreds.

When they come back it is to see that Jimmie’s drawings are excellent, quite excellent. He has a sense of form and rhythm and life. For a child and a Navajo this is astounding. They give him a set of colored crayons.

So throughout the book the two subjects alternate: little red Jimmie and the white Lippincotts. There is no real meeting of the two, no clash, no fusion.

Bill goes to San Francisco, California, to give a radio talk at the World’s Fair on life in a Navajo trading post.

Jimmie does pictures of wild animals in colored crayon.


Jimmie comes in with more pictures; they are getting better and he has had no lessons either.

Bill goes to the Art Center at La Jolla, California, to show Jimmie’s pictures.

The trading post at Wide Ruins is becoming well known now. It is nurturing Navajo Art. The Government doesn’t mind. Perhaps
it doesn’t know. In four years the post has been visited only once by a government inspector.

The book ends as World War II breaks out. There is a surprise finale: the Lippincotts discover that they had bought not only the trading post but a considerable piece of land around it.

That is the book. Some of the beautiful drawings of Beatien Yazz reproduced in full color, well worth its price, and the narrative of the new owners of Wide Ruins thrown in free. There is no vital inward connection between them at all.

The great difference between these two strangely paralleling books is not in the superficial living conditions imposed by their times and circumstances. It is in tone and perception. And this throws into relief not only the life and needs of the Navajos, but the traditional function of the trading posts as a bridge between them and the impinging whites.

II THE TRADERS

The usual trading post was a utility building rather than a country home. It was built to trade in and to live in, miles from any town or human habitation. It was necessarily built crudely with Indian help and from native material, and it was built strong to withstand driving sand and wind and rain, heavy snows, and possible trouble. There was no set pattern. But with all their variations, they conformed to a general type. The post at Shallow Water, remembered from boyhood, differed little from those found almost anywhere in the Four Corners. Smaller or larger, they were all solitary oases in the desert; sturdy little forts on the frontier.

The walls were of sun-baked adobe bricks, from two and a half to four feet thick. No bullet could pierce them; they retained the heat in winter and the coolness of night in summer. The roof beams or vigas were huge logs of pine or spruce hauled down from the mountains. Stripped of their bark, well seasoned, and cured like hams from the fireplace smoke of many years, they gleamed dark and smooth as honey. The roof itself was a layer of cross boards heaped with earth. The floor was of hard pressed adobe until flooring could be freighted in, covered with innumerable Navajo blankets grown into rugs with the coming of the traders, and so durable that they outlasted the floor. There was a fireplace in every room.
The main room was at best a huge hall. The walls were flanked with shelves of trade goods—bridles and Spurs, bolts of flowered gingham and solid-color velveteen, canned goods, staples, Stetson hats, knick-knacks, articles of clothing. Down one side, and across the back, stretched the long counter and showcases. The floor was littered with bushel baskets of onions and pinto beans, bags of flour, salt and sugar put away from mice each night. Strings of dried chiles and coils of rope hung from the rafters. In the center of the room sat a squat-bellied stove surrounded by boxes of sand to spit in.

Adjoining this was the rug room, often serving as a general store-room. Its windows, if not every window in the post, were stripped with iron bars. Here were piled stack on stack of rugs, perhaps 200 averaging $50 apiece and representing $10,000. There was an iron safe full of silver currency and valuable pieces of pawn silver, a few loaded rifles.

Behind the big room and built at right angles to it were the living quarters of the trader, one room to a half dozen depending on the size of his family and the help he required. In one of these might be a woman working on a loom or a man pounding silver if the trader was trying to improve the design and color of the wares in his district.

At sunrise the doors were opened. All day The People straggled in from the vast pelagic plain. Riding their shaggy ponies. Bumping along in their springless wagons, the man slimly erect in front, the woman slumped in her blanket beside him, the box full of children. In the post they stood spitting around the stove and sitting on the floor picking lice from each other's hair. The children knelt at the candy case rubbing dirty noses against the glass, silently staring at the peppermint sticks inside. A woman would inspect a dozen bolts of velveteen before dickering for a piece of calico.

Outside, the horses and wagons multiplied. People stood or squatted against the sunny walls—rolling cigarettes. Talking. Saying nothing. Everything was relaxed and easy. But pervaded too with a lurking tenseness, a sharp awareness. The trading post was a country store, but it was also the verbal newspaper of the region, a common meeting ground, and the focal point of perhaps a thousand square miles.

The undeniable master of all this was the trader. He supplied all the staples necessary for a people's changing existence, and was the only outlet for their wool, blankets, and silverwork. Loaning money on goods or articles given him for pawn, he tided them through drought and famine. He was their only contact with an alien, encroaching civili-
zation. He interpreted this to them and them to it, excusing the igno­
rant foibles of greedy Government Indian agents and sheriffs. He acted
as a lawmaker, a judge and jury, a schoolteacher. At any hour of the
night he might be awakened to set a bone or break a fever. He was often
called upon to bury the dead, as Navajos would not approach a dead
body. He contributed to all “sings” or ceremonials held in his area.
. . . All this required courage, absolute self-reliance, a quick wit, and
a diplomacy as subtle as ever existed.

This writer could never subscribe to the obsession held by Oliver
La Farge and other extreme romanticists that the traders were invented
by Satan expressly to plague and cheat the Navajos. Among them, as
among other groups, there were some who did cheat and contrive trou­
ble of all kinds. They were few and they did not last. If they were not
killed outright, they suffered peculiar accidents, went broke, or disap­
ppeared. The traders were the first group of Anglos not expressly bent
on obliterating the Navajos. Individually, each became to all purposes
the Great White Father in his wide domain.

The best proof of this is the simple fact that during the first
thirty years after the Navajos moved back from Bosque Redondo to
what was now a reservation, twenty successive men held the post as
Government agent—a comedy of Indian administration.

What would have happened had the traders suddenly been ex­
pelled from the country as were the Chinese in Sonora? The two groups
are interesting parallels.

By some strange series of circumstances, it was a group of rural
Chinese storekeepers who established themselves among the Yaquis in
the remote slopes of the Sierra Madres. Existing mainly by barter, they
carried in their tiny ledgers the debts of one generation into another.
Parsimonious, scrupulous and unforgetting, they built their humble
stores into the only banking structure of northern Mexico.

Late in the 1920's, if I remember correctly, Mexico suddenly be­
came self-conscious. “Mexico for Mexicans!” It was decreed that all
Chinese should go. I was in Sonora when they were driven out. They
had no time to balance their accounts or appeal for help. Some were old
men to whom China was but a dim, childish memory. Their sons,
affluent in Spanish and Yaqui, could not speak Chinese or English.
Their wives, Mexican women, were giving up their homeland with the
traditional faithfulness of their kind for their husbands. At Buena
Vista, Cumuripa, La Dura, and Navajoa I saw them camped beside the
tracks, waiting days for the train. They were surrounded by heaps of
squash and melons and Mayo blankets, the farewell offerings of their
grateful Yaqui and Mayo neighbors. At Nogales I saw the first group
ejected from Mexico. Hill-traders with thousands of pesos in beans and
corn and beef in their ledgers, they did not have the price of a single
tortilla.

The result was predictable. With no one to supply goods on credit,
the abandoned stores were pillaged, groups of bandits formed and ran
riot through the tiny villages, and another Yaqui uprising was in the
making. . . .

But in the Four Corners the traders were unmolested by the gov­
ernment, and it was they who enabled the Navajos to come through the
difficult period following Bosque Redondo.

Probably the first trading post devoted primarily to the Navajo
trade was established at Lee's Ferry, the principal articles exchanged
being Mormon horses and Navajo blankets. Al Lee, grandson of its
famous Mormon founder, John D. Lee, started the post at beautiful
Tselani which his son, Art Lee, now runs. His other son, Hugh Lee,
operates the post at Ganado and is president of the United Indian
Traders Association.

"Old Man" Leonard about 1875 opened the first post at Ganado.
J. Lorenzo Hubbell first worked for a Mr. Coddington at Fort Wingate.
In 1876 he opened a post three miles upstream from Leonard on the
Pueblo Colorado wash—probably the site of the former Fort Canby and
the anciert Pueblo Colorado. Three years later he moved down to
Ganado, bought out Leonard and took C. N. Cotton as partner. Later
he moved to Gallup, founding the oldest and largest Indian trading
firm in the Southwest. Hubbell was by all odds the most colorful trader
in the area. For half a century his post was a mecca, his hospitality a
legend.

In 1876 there was but one licensed trader on the reservation proper,
Thomas V. Keam, a former government interpreter. In 1882 he took
up a homestead and established a post in the canyon now named for
him. It was in Hopi territory, just ten miles east of First Mesa, but drew
Navajos as well. He later sold out and retired to his old home in Corn­
wall, England.

A man named Brown opened the first post at Manuelito, named
for Ute-scar-red-chested Manuelito, Mr. Blackweed, one of the two
famous Navajo chiefs and signers of the treaty at Bosque Redondo.
In 1882 J. W. Bennett and S. E. Aldrich also located there, soon branching out with another in Washington Pass. Elias S. Clark and Charles Hubbell were in charge. The Navajos objected to this post. Although promised a troop of cavalry from Fort Defiance to protect them, the two young men gave up the post.

Charles Hubbell, years later—in 1918, was killed and his trading post burned at Red Lake. Aldrich in 1890 then established a post at Round Rock on Lukachukai Creek. For a new partner he took Henry Chee Dodge, destined to be the last great chief of the Navajos.

The first store at the important trading center of Chin Lee, at the mouth of Cañón de Chelly, was opened by Hubbell and Cotton. It was not a success and was later replaced by one built by William Stag. The Lynch brothers in 1881 started a post at Navajo, the farthest west; George W. Sampson in 1883 located at Sanders; Billy Weidemeyer in 1885 at La Ciénega, later settled by the Franciscans and now called St. Michaels; Joe Wilkins, a freighter, the old post at Crystal in 1890. Near Gallup a man named Smith was killed by the Indians as a result of gambling with them to enliven business. But Charlie Fredericks opened a successful post at Navajo Church, the towering red cliff eight miles east.

By 1890, then, there were nine traders on the reservation and some thirty traders surrounding it. The main article of trade were Navajo blankets—the best obtainable. Apaches, Utes, and Piutes preferred them to the blankets issued by the government. Mexicans still used them for serapes and ponchos. American cowpokes and settlers used them for bed blankets and lap robes. For the first time an estimate was made of the yearly output valued at $40,000, of which $25,000 was sold to the traders and $15,000 kept for tribal use.

It was Cotton, of the Cotton and Hubbell trading post, who took the decisive step to create a market for them back East. With a mimeograph he “circularized the whole country” with such success that he soon moved to Gallup as a wholesaler. By a stroke of undeniable genius and shrewd salesmanship he suggested that the best grade of blankets, because of their durability, be used as rugs.

Hence about 1890 the Navajo shoulder blanket began to grow thicker and heavier. It became a rug. And with its change the trading post business grew to enormous proportions. Within fifty years there were 146 trading posts, most of them licensed and bonded under government control, paying in 1940 some $1,865,000 for Navajo products,
NAVAJO TRADING POSTS

serving $2,640,000 worth of goods, and advancing $190,670 on pawned articles.

During this time when Congress refused to authorize the marking of all authentic Indian goods for their protection against imitation and unfair competition, and the Beacon Manufacturing Company was advertising its machine-made bed blankets as "Indian," the traders revolted against cheap aniline dyes, synthetic designs, and cotton warp. Lorenzo Hubbell employed the artist, E. A. Burbank, to make color paintings of old Navajo blankets with which to encourage his weavers. Dick Simpson up near Farmington insisted on his weavers copying the old classical "Moqui" pattern of Navajo designs on the Hopi blue and black striped background. J. B. Moore at Crystal helped his weavers to evolve the intricate Crystal rug, and developed the famous Two Grey Hills rug on whose paramount excellence this writer was brought up to believe. Cosy McSparron, of the Chin Lee post at the mouth of Cañon de Chelly, revived native dyes and evolved the Chin Lee rug with its clear green-yellow.

The first quarter of the century: this was the "golden age" of the trading posts when for a brief span the integrity of Indian work and Indian thought achieved its only recognition. It was the traders who made this possible, and it is these old-timers I remember with a boy's love and respect for their high traditions.

Sam Drolet and Bruce Barnard at Shiprock. Walter Beck and Dick Simpson at Fruitland and Farmington. The Kirks of Manuelito and Gallup. Tom Patvetea at Polacca. . . . So many more too numerous to record here. Primarily and paradoxically they were not "business" men. Like the Wetherills at Kayenta, they made the most important archaeological discoveries in the Southwest. Like the Newcombs, they recorded some of the first sand paintings. Like Ralph Myers of Taos, they were accepted by ethnologists as authorities on Indian life as well as Indian handicraft. Their remote posts were oases in the desert, landmarks in an unmarked wilderness. They were bankers, doctors, interpreters, schoolteachers, art agents, representatives of an encroaching white civilization to the Indians, and champions of Indian tribes against an inimical government. Scarcely 150 men in an area over 25,000 square miles for a period of fifty years, the Indian traders were the media through which were exchanged the values of two ways of life.