Mary L. Eldridge: Serving God and Country on the San Juan

Robert A. Trennert

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By any definition Jewett, New Mexico, was raw country in 1890. Located on the northeastern edge of the sprawling Navajo Reservation along the San Juan River, it housed a few squalid trading posts and a small Presbyterian mission. Jewett was surrounded by a high desert that could be uncomfortably hot in summer and could reach temperatures below zero in the winter. The fertile bottomlands along the river held farming potential, but without irrigation the surrounding lands were a barren desert emptiness interrupted only by an occasional meadow. The town was situated about eight miles east of the ramshackle reservation settlement of Shiprock and some twenty-five miles west of the off-reservation farming village of Farmington. The nearest railroad ended at Durango, another fifty miles to the northeast. Travel to reservation headquarters at Fort Defiance, a hundred miles to the south, required a two-day wagon ride under the best of conditions. Mrs. Mary Louise Eldridge encountered this remote desert environment when she arrived at Jewett, New Mexico, in 1891. As a missionary to the Navajos, she would remain in

Robert A. Trennert is Professor of History at Arizona State University specializing in American Indian and frontier history. He holds a doctorate from the University of California, Santa Barbara, and is the author of four books on American Indian policy. His most recent book is White Man's Medicine: Government Doctors and the Navajo, 1863–1955 (University of New Mexico Press, 1998). He wishes to acknowledge the contribution of Kathleen L. Howard, a doctoral student at ASU, for her many hours of exceptional work on this project.
northwestern New Mexico the remainder of her life, working for what she believed to be the best interest of the Native population.

Mary Eldridge's life of service on the San Juan is significant in several respects. Her activities both as a Christian missionary and as an Indian Service field matron illustrate a number of aspects of the national assimilation program. Despite her dedication, her attempt to serve as an agent of change for the Navajo was plagued with the problems and conflicts typical of American Indian policy between 1880 and 1920. In particular, she found it necessary to navigate, not always successfully, between government programs and church efforts designed to transform the Indians into people more like their White neighbors. Her experiences characterize the confusion existing generally among humanitarian movements concerned with the welfare of the Native population. Eldridge's struggles also show that programs, such as the field matron service, initiated at the governmental level lacked clear definition and seldom worked as expected when confronted with local conditions. As Eldridge quickly came to realize, she had to modify fieldwork to fit the circumstances. In particular, matrons could not transform Indian women without first encouraging Native men to become farmers. Her work thus illuminates the way in which Victorian gender roles related to the kind of work she performed.

Mary Eldridge, a rather large woman of tenacious spirit, came to New Mexico by a circuitous route. Mary Louise Deming was born in South Williamstown, Berkshire County, Massachusetts, on 1 September 1849. She married a local farmer named William T. Eldridge at age twenty, and in 1875 the couple had a daughter named Ruth. The family left Williamstown in 1879 to relocate with her parents in Lawrence, Kansas. Soon thereafter her husband met an untimely death. Mary next appears in the historical record when she joined the Indian Service in the summer of 1889 to serve as a girl's dormitory matron at Haskell Institute in Lawrence. At the time, Mary's elderly parents and her daughter lived with her in Lawrence (the household was most likely supported on Mary's six-hundred-dollar-a-year-salary). But these were not happy times at the big government boarding school, which suffered from considerable controversy. When Charles F. Meserve became superintendent in 1890, he made wholesale changes “for the good of the service.” One change was not renewing Mary's contract for 1890–1891, Meserve believing that “Mrs. Eldridge was not the proper person to be matron of the girls building.”

During the 1890–1891 school year Eldridge worked as a matron on the Pine Ridge Reservation in South Dakota while her family remained in
Kansas. At her new station she met a thirty-five-year-old unmarried teacher, Mary E. Raymond, with whom she soon struck up a friendship. During the long winter nights the women must have talked about their goals in life and the desire to help the Indians. As a consequence the two women decided to leave the Indian Service to become missionaries. Undoubtedly encouraged by friends, they contacted the Methodist Episcopal Ladies Home Missionary of New York whose secretary, Mrs. E. W. Simpson of Troy, was seeking volunteers. This group planned to open a mission at Jewett, New Mexico, as the third phase of a Methodist effort among the Navajos. In 1890 the church established a mission at Fort Defiance, while the Women’s National Indian Association (WNIA) had funded one at Two Gray Hills. In the fall of 1891 Eldridge and Raymond were selected to work as co-missionaries and sent to Jewett, where an adobe station was under construction. The women lived in tents until the building was ready, seeking shelter when necessary at the nearby trading post of Henry Hull.

Several hundred Navajo families lived on or near the northeast corner of the reservation in 1891. Like most of their kinsmen residing elsewhere on the 12,400-square-mile reserve, these people clung to old traditions and lifeways. They practiced age-old religious ceremonies, many of which focused on healing the numerous ailments plaguing their daily lives. The Navajos lived in earth-covered hogans, tended herds of sheep, and grew corn, wheat, squash, melons, and other vegetables wherever a water supply existed. Survival in this arid land required Navajo families to live in small, widely scattered camps. A clear gender-based division of labor existed within the community. As Agent Charles E. Vandever explained in 1890, “the woman cares for the hut, cooks, weaves, and looks after the children, who for the most part tend the flocks. The men plant the corn-fields and build the huts, but their principal care is the horse herd.” The San Juan Navajos had relatively little contact with non-Indians. Located far from the agency, they seldom encountered a government employee. Most contact, therefore, came with the local traders who operated just off the reservation and who provided the Indians with manufactured goods (and probably some alcohol) in exchange for blankets and wool. Settlers, both Mormon and Gentile, living along the bottomlands, also interacted with the Native people. Christian missionary efforts, however, had been so feeble that Vandever admitted that the tribe “was entirely devoid of any religious instruction.”

Seeking to remedy this situation Eldridge and Raymond quickly set off to make contact with local Navajos. In addition to constructing a mission church,
they anticipated opening a school once sufficient funding arrived from back East. In the meantime, they found plenty of work. One long-time resident recalled Mrs. Eldridge “astride her burro or horse traversing the reservation in all sorts of weather, to call at Navajo hogans and minister to the well being of Indian families.” At first, traveling without an interpreter, they tried to master the Indian language by recording each word they learned in a notebook. Most Navajo families were suspicious of, if not hostile toward, the White women. Eldridge wrote years after, “We were not received with any great cordiality by the Indians, as they had been told we were coming to steal their children.” A few, however, were more receptive and volunteered to help build the mission.6
Although sincerely concerned with Indian welfare, the missionary women, like their contemporaries, approached their calling from an ethnocentric perspective. Neither Eldridge nor Raymond recognized any redeeming value in Native society, both believed that Navajo survival depended on the adoption of White, Christian culture. In essence, if the Indians did not begin living in a "civilized" manner they were doomed to extinction. In 1893 Raymond, echoing the general philosophy of the Dawes Act of 1887, remarked that "irrigation, allotment of land, and education of all the children will civilize these people, and the love of God will save them." Several years later Eldridge noted that the Navajos "are so much like children and need so much teaching and leading." Thus, as they began their work, each woman desired to do her part to convert the Native peoples from what they were to what American society expected them to be. This attitude may have repelled many Navajos, but neither Eldridge nor Raymond understood this concern. To them converting and assimilating the Indians was simply the "right" thing to do, and they intended to facilitate the transformation.

Less than two months after their arrival on the San Juan, Raymond reentered the Indian Service as a field matron, an action that would profoundly influence the lives of both women. The deployment of field matrons to "civilize" Indian women had just received congressional approval, and, acting upon the recommendation of the Missionary Society, the Indian Office appointed Raymond to serve the Navajo Reservation. She took up her duties at Jewett on 8 December 1891.8

The field-matron program, a naive attempt to foster the ideals of Victorian womanhood among Native women as a way of promoting assimilation, decidedly fit the views of both Eldridge and Raymond. Inaugurated in 1890, the program aimed to mold Indian women into an acceptable version of middle-class White women. Commissioner of Indian Affairs Thomas J. Morgan, trumpeting popular Victorian ideas about separate and distinct spheres of influence for men and women, believed that the best way to remove Native women from their "primitive" state was to show them "the same gallantry and respect which is afforded to their more favored white sisters." To accomplish this task, a hardy group of what Lisa Emmerich terms "decidedly unconventional white women" was sent into the field to "instruct Indian women in the duties of the household, assist and encourage them in Bettering their homes, and taking proper care of their children; and incite among Indians generally aspirations for improvement of their life." Thus, the focus of field matrons' duties was visiting Native women at home and encouraging them to follow
sanitary practices, prepare nutritious meals, learn to sew and do laundry, care for the sick, and receive religious and moral instruction. This program, therefore, operated upon a foundation of gender stereotype: Native women, “bound and thwarted by ignorance, poverty, and long-established tribal custom,” must be helped to exchange “a tepee or wigwam for a neat, comfortable, and well ordered home according to civilized standards.”

While the Indian Office wanted Native women to learn Victorian gentility, it expected matrons to remain feminine while they worked in something more akin to a man’s sphere. Matrons lived a spartan life in the field, performed hard physical labor, and were essentially self-sufficient, all on a salary of $50 per month. Despite this job description, the Indian Office offered no training, but rather accepted the recommendation of missionary groups that the women knew what to do. Thus, although Mary Raymond returned to government service, she never fully disconnected from her missionary role, and she continued to regard herself as Mary Eldridge’s coworker.

Like many of the early matrons appointed by church organizations, neither Eldridge nor Raymond saw a conflict between governmental and religious duties. In fact, Eldridge accompanied her friend on trips into the field as soon as it became evident that the Missionary Society could not immediately provide funds to open a school. The women attempted to instruct Navajo women in baking, sewing, laundering, and cleanliness. They soon learned, however, that the Navajos were more in need of medical care than domestic improvement, and that a matron’s original mission could hardly be achieved in the face of major health problems among the Navajos. In August 1892 Raymond noted that the nearest doctor resided at Fort Defiance, which left her and Eldridge to handle ailments by themselves. Raymond described a typical case: “We went to see a very sick child, whose father came for us. He brought a horse for one of us to ride. We spent several hours there to administer the medicine ourselves. Yesterday (Sunday) I went again. To-day the father came to report and get medicine, and to-morrow we will go again to see the child. The distance to its home is 12 miles.” Working under these conditions, they realized that another of the matron’s formal responsibilities, going into the field, was in fact counterproductive. Raymond reported, “We reach a larger number of Indians when we stay at home than when we go to them, because they are so scattered and move about so much.”

The fiscal year 1892–1893 witnessed a great burst of activity at the mission. Several eastern missionary societies—principally the Women’s Home Missionary Society—provided operating funds that underwrote Miss Raymond’s
room and board. Other funds went toward the purchase of farm implements and carpenter tools to help local Navajo families build wooden houses and grow crops. Ministering to the sick also consumed considerable effort. Medicines, when available, were distributed and seemed to have a good effect. Yet the mission's medical services were not universally appreciated. Navajo healers (called medicine men at the time) resented the intrusion. Aware of such feelings, the women avoided confrontation by quickly dropping a case if a medicine man was consulted. Their most prudent course seemed to be not to antagonize these influential persons at this early stage. Nevertheless, they held Indian medicine in contempt. Raymond explained, "Experience will teach them that our simple remedies do more good than songs, rattles, and feathers." The necessity of constructing irrigation canals seemed to be especially important. If the Navajos wanted to free themselves from dependence on government food, they needed to develop successful farms. "After the land is irrigated and allotted," Raymond wrote, "the Navajos will build their houses and plant orchards and alfalfa fields." Thus, while supervision of farming was perceived as a man's job, both women clearly understood that their work would be more fruitful if they worked to develop an agricultural economy among the Navajos.11

Sometime around the beginning of 1893, Mary Raymond married Tom Whyte, who ran a local trading post. She nevertheless continued her duties as field matron. As before, much of her work involved providing simple medical care for those Indians willing to come to her. She also focused on the construction of irrigation ditches and securing financial support from the Cambridge, Massachusetts, branch of the WNIA to provide digging tools. These canals remained a priority since only through successful agriculture did it seem possible for the Indians "to appreciate the comforts of civilization." While her reports sounded optimistic, an undercurrent of despair ran through the matron's correspondence. She became frustrated with her slow progress in changing Navajo women. In June 1893, Navajo agent Lt. Edward H. Plummer advised Raymond, "Benefitting the Navajo is a rather hopeless task . . . the best efforts and intentions seem to accomplish so very little that it is most discouraging work." Additionally, some Indians were openly hostile to the White community around Jewett, their defiance resulting in several uncomfortable incidents.12

Meanwhile, Eldridge labored to keep her mission running. She received and distributed donations of clothing, sewing materials, soap, and food. One charitable group in Florence, Colorado, sent her a tent with camp stove and
bed to be used for a hospital. The Women's Home Missionary Society bought a large supply of medicines, while several individuals donated small amounts of cash. Eldridge, however, believed that her greatest accomplishment was organizing the construction of several irrigation ditches that brought additional acreage under cultivation. Only through farming were the Indians likely to develop permanent homes, which she saw as the first step in civilizing them. Unfortunately, Eldridge was somewhat distressed to learn that successful Navajo farmers shared their crops with other “less industrious” tribal members, a custom that, in her opinion, discouraged hard work. Nor was she happy with some of the local Whites. She once noted that the valley had always been a hangout for “outlaws and desperados.” Some of these individuals had attempted to frighten the church women away so “they could sell whiskey to the Indians and gamble” without objection from the Christian community.

Upon the rather fanciful recommendation of Mrs. E. W. Simpson, who characterized Mary Whyte as doing “most excellent work in teaching the Indian women to make their homes more comfortable, to make and repair clothing, to cook, wash with hot water and soap, iron, to care for the sick, and many things to uplift and civilize them,” Whyte was reappointed field matron in June 1893. Her work continued in much the same fashion, but her efforts to convince the Indians to change still produced only minimal results. In October, for example, she reported that five Navajo families had built houses with windows and doors supplied to them. On another occasion, she noted that “one boy after much persuasion consented to let us cut his hair short.” In 1894 she summed up her three years on the San Juan with the hopeful comment that the local Indians were “getting dissatisfied with ownership in common, and I think the time is not far distant when the more progressive Navajos will dissolve the tribal relations.”

In the early summer 1894, misfortune struck the San Juan Mission community. Mary Whyte became pregnant, but her husband became abusive and the couple separated. The abuse Whyte suffered caused her child to be born “somewhat deformed.” These events, combined with the demands of her job, proved so stressful that Whyte suffered a mental breakdown. Exactly what happened next is unknown, but the new mother lapsed into a severe illness that required constant care. Eldridge attended to her friend day and night until Mrs. Whyte’s brother arrived to take the ailing woman home to Kansas. Unfortunately, efforts to restore her health failed, and the young matron passed away on 28 July 1894.
Agent Plummer recommended that Eldridge replace Mrs. Whyte as field matron. Writing to the Indian commissioner, he remarked that Eldridge would be the most suitable replacement. In addition to her knowledge of "medicine," he noted: "She speaks a little Navajo and understands more. She has a very strong and most beneficial influence over the Indians living about her. They know her and trust her implicitly." Mrs. Simpson of the Missionary Society lent her support to the nomination. Although not wishing to lose "her superior abilities as a worker among the Indians," Simpson agreed that "a more efficient worker cannot readily be found." As a consequence, Eldridge returned to government service in July 1894, taking over a position she would hold for the next eleven years. Nonetheless, she did not give up her involvement with the mission, even after the Missionary Society sent out Miss Mary Tripp to fill Eldridge's old station.

Eldridge assumed her new duties with enthusiasm and determination, yet her efforts to teach Indian women homemaking skills were hampered, if not completely negated, by a worsening drought and government parsimony. For some years weather conditions had been good for the Navajos, but by 1894 a protracted drought had dried up the range grass. The herds of sheep dwindled, and ponies were no longer worth taking to market. As a consequence, those living on the northern part of the reservation found themselves near starvation. By November many Navajos were reduced to eating horse and burro meat, which made them sick with bowel and stomach ailments. Mary, helped by Tripp, was simply overwhelmed as she tried to help the Navajos. Whenever possible, she handed out donated food, but she still reported, "The constant need of the hungry people—those who are absolutely suffering from hunger—was very hard to encounter day by day, and our resources were taxed to the utmost." She visited local camps, handing out clothing to children who had "neither moccasins, pants, or skirts" to protect them from the winter cold. While these efforts helped somewhat, Eldridge also argued for a long-range solution. She wanted the government to finance the building of irrigation ditches so that Indian families could become self-sufficient farmers. This promised to bring about more stability and create an Anglo-type family environment in which she might successfully work with the women. The validity of this idea had been demonstrated to her satisfaction by the Cambridge Branch of the WNIA, which had funded for Jewett the construction of a ditch capable of irrigating six hundred acres. She predicted, "With a little help lowering the head of this ditch the land would support at least forty families, and the ditch could be carried on to cover several hundred
acres more of good land.” Hiring Navajo men to build the ditches would also enable them to earn the means to provide for their families in the approved White fashion.17

Eldridge’s work, as she admitted, was “continuous and exhausting.” Much of her time was spent caring for the sick. During the last quarter of 1894 she greeted 1,577 Navajo visitors at the mission, dispensed medicine to 670, provided food for another 240, and distributed clothing to 376. Even these efforts could not meet the Navajo demand for her services. In spite of help from eastern charities like the Lady’s Home Missionary Society, the WNIA, and the Indian Rights Association (IRA) as well as the government, funding fell so short that Mary began using her own money. As acting Navajo agent Constant Williams reported in January 1895, “I learn from other sources that this noble woman is devoting more of her private means for charitable purposes among the Indians than she can well spare; and this because her tender heart cannot withstand the piteous appeals so constantly made.” Although Eldridge had confined her work to the immediate vicinity of the river, Navajos residing deeper in the reservation regularly asked her for help. Mary felt compelled to help all those she possibly could.18

In early 1895, to supplement the meager support she was receiving from the Indian Office, Eldridge developed a lasting relationship with the IRA and its director, Herbert Welsh, who advocated the effective administration of Indian affairs. Conditions on the Navajo reservation had attracted enough national attention that the IRA retained Alfred Hardy, a former teacher on the Navajo Reservation, to survey the situation. That spring, Hardy stayed at the San Juan mission for five weeks. He observed firsthand the suffering of the local Indians and acquainted himself with the matron. His sympathetic reports to Philadelphia suggested that Eldridge ought to be aided in her work with the Navajos. Director Welsh responded to Hardy’s suggestion with one hundred dollars to be used to purchase food, clothing, and seed as well as a boat to ferry people across the San Juan. Eldridge could hardly believe the generosity. “May God bless the Indian Rights Association,” she wrote, explaining that during “all the dark days of the past winter” she had no funding to provide for the ten to forty Navajos that showed up each day.19

Eldridge, not particularly bashful, asked Welsh for additional help. She noted that the Protestant Episcopal Church had just opened a small hospital at Fort Defiance and pleaded for help with the medical needs of the people on the river. She pointed out that she was obliged to care for the sick on cots in the small, twelve-by-fourteen-foot mission kitchen, where she also
fed as many as eight to ten of the needy. The matron asked Welsh whether
the IRA or other charitable groups could provide enough money to build a
small adobe house for use by the mission staff, so that the entire mission
building could be devoted to the Indians. Her justification for this request was
that medical care was "certainly one of the strongest holds which we can
possibly get on this people to take their sick and care for them and it helps
more than anything else to destroy the influence of the medicine man." This
sentiment clearly struck a note of agreement with Welsh, and he began to
encourage various groups and individuals to donate money to the mission.20
In return, an appreciative Mary Eldridge began to supply Welsh with infor­
mation on reservation activities. Although these tidbits were not theoretically
part of her official duties, she began the practice of going outside official
channels in her efforts to support the mission. This practice eventually caused
the matron considerable trouble, but she undoubtedly believed such private
activities critical to her work, given the inability of the Indian Service to follow
through with the supplies necessary to implement its program.

Within a month Mary asked Welsh for another favor. As she prepared to
make an extended summer trip onto the reservation, one of the mission's
horses had become unserviceable. Unwilling either to wait or to take the
mission's remaining team, which would leave a visiting minister and wife
without transportation, she found a team and harness for sale at $150. The
matron asked Welsh to lend her the purchase price, which she promised to
pay back in the future. Eldridge reminded him that she had been using her
own funds to help feed and care for the sick and that she could ill afford
another expense. Further, she argued the team was necessary for she and
Miss Tripp carried all their own grain, food, and bedding. Once Welsh ap­
proved the loan, Mary turned to the Indian Service for forage and a new
wagon. Captain Williams forwarded her request to Washington and recom­
mended its approval. Considering that Mary's work was in the field, and that
the Navajo did not live in villages but were spread all over the reservation,
Williams believed that with a new wagon "her usefulness will be increased."
A frugal commissioners' office, however, agreed only to provide forage for the
team (a wagon company later furnished her one of its products).21

The Indian Office undoubtedly wanted Eldridge to spend more time in
the field and less time at the mission, where she tended to be distracted with
church matters. Thus, Commissioner of Indian Affairs Daniel Browning re­
sponded favorably in the summer of 1895 when Mrs. Simpson of the Mission­
ary Society suggested that Miss Laura E. Smiley become a second field
matron at San Juan. The New York socialite noted, "My thoughts in recom­mending Miss Smiley was [sic] to send her to Mrs. Eldridge for training for a time." This would enable Mary to go deeper into the reservation while Smiley remained with the missionary at Jewett, a proposition with which Browning agreed. Meanwhile, Eldridge continued to receive considerable praise. Captain Williams noted that she could "not be too highly com­mended," while Mrs. Simpson remarked that "she is doing most successful work, and is willing to give her very life if need be for the elevation and christianization [sic] of the Navajos."22

Despite such praise, Eldridge operated without much guidance and improvised as she went along. In some ways she fulfilled the prescribed roll of field matron. When Commissioner Browning wrote that "the spirit of the field matron must be that of self-denying, self-forgetting devotion to the interest of those among whom she labors, and the work implies much toil, hardship, wisdom, courage, and patience," he could well have been referring to Eldridge. But it was also clear that Mary could do very little to change Indian women. Despite the government’s desire to get them into “an attractive, well-kept, civilized home,” the obstacles proved overwhelming. Mary was so pre­occupied with combating starvation and disease that she had little time for anything else. When Browning optimistically proclaimed that field matrons were aiding Native women in adapting to the “appointments and conveniences manifold” in opening a new home, he was not accurately describing the Navajo reservation. In 1896 another change occurred: the Civil Service System was extended to field matrons. No longer could they be appointed upon the recommendation of eastern philanthropists. The missionary soci­eties lost much of their influence once women with no religious connections could qualify for these jobs. Although the change did not affect Mary’s em­ployment, it indirectly weakened the outside support she had been receiving. As Lisa Emmerich has written, “the private financial aid these groups had given in the past could now be possibly viewed at the least as unethical and at the most influence peddling.” Additionally, mission groups could no longer be assured that their interests would be looked after in the field.23

These changes had little immediate impact on Eldridge. During her five years on the San Juan she established many influential friends among the eastern elite, and these friends came to her aid on several occasions. Her nonstop work had taken such a toll that she was showing clear signs of fatigue. In addition, she wanted to visit her daughter and aged father in Kansas. Thus, in August 1896, she requested a thirty-day leave of absence with pay. Alfred
Hardy, who at the time resided in Farmington, Connecticut, professed a deep interest in Navajo welfare and took up her cause. Writing directly to Commissioner Browning, he noted that Eldridge had toiled since 1891 without a vacation. Her eastern friends, including Welsh and the Cambridge Branch, had raised enough money for her to visit Kansas and then travel to the Lake Mohonk Conference of the Friends of the Indians. This annual New York gathering of influential reformers would give her an opportunity to meet personally most of her benefactors. "It seems to us all," Hardy wrote, "as tho great good for the Navajo would result in her being able to meet & fully inform those interested in that field of labor." Hardy concluded that "she will in every respect be doing the work she is paid for by being here a while."²⁴ Browning approved Eldridge's leave.

Eldridge journeyed to Lake Mohonk in October, attending what must have been an impressive event. She listened to speeches and discussions related to Indian work, met many of her supporters, and enjoyed the fall weather. She no doubt approved of the ten-point resolution offered at the end of the meeting, which recommended an end to the reservation system, education for all Native children, and preaching and teaching as an accompaniment to government programs. "We, therefore," the resolution concluded, "urge all Christian people vigorously to reenforce the work carried on by their missionary societies during this brief transition period until the Indian shall be redeemed from Paganism and incorporated into our Christian life, as well as into our national citizenship." Although she did not get to meet Commissioner Browning, she visited with Hardy and his family in Connecticut for several days, before returning to New Mexico with "renewed vigor & a much lighter heart."²⁵

Eldridge's friendship with Hardy, however, got her into some difficulty with the Indian Office. During her stay in New England, she freely discussed reservation happenings, particularly her unhappiness with C. H. McCaa, the recently resigned government farmer assigned to the San Juan. Accustomed to doing things the old way, Hardy took it upon himself to suggest that Browning appoint W. A. Townsend to the vacant position. Hardy offered a compelling argument, up to a point. McCaa, whose duty was to instruct the Navajos in agriculture, had been next to useless, causing Eldridge to take over the "hard & very laborious work" of agricultural instruction, a job clearly within the male sphere. Hardy thus asked that the industrious Townsend be appointed farmer "for Mrs. Eldridge's sake to relieve her of the necessity of devoting so much of her time to the farm work." Her Connecticut friend also asked the
Indian Office to reimburse her for personal funds expended in feeding the
Indians. Because Eldridge had not collected receipts to prove her outlays,
Hardy asked that an estimate be accepted, stating that she had been too busy
to “consciously make out a bill.” Finally, Hardy noted that Eldridge’s father
was so near death that her daughter Ruth had left college to care for him, with
the matron bearing the cost. All of these responsibilities had strapped her
finances. Although the Indian Office appreciated her sacrifices, it reacted by
accusing Hardy and Eldridge of trying to circumvent Civil Service requir-
ments and accounting regulations. Hardy apologized for any misunderstanding,
saying that nothing could be further from the truth. Nevertheless, he
reiterated, “I know it to be Mrs. Eldridge’s great desire that the Mr. Townsend
referred to in my letter should be placed in charge as assistant Farmer on the
San Juan (when any vacancy occurs) — provided of course that he can pass
the required examination.”

During 1897–1898 Eldridge continued her activities much as before. Join-
ing with Mary Tripp who remained on duty at the mission, she probably
spent as much time tending to church activities as she did in the field. Her
fieldwork was further restricted when Smiley departed and left Eldridge to
be, once again, the sole matron. Apart from an occasional journey deep into
the reservation, she focused her activities on Jewett, where plans were in the
works to construct a new mission building and hospital, and at Two Gray
Hills, where a small mission had been opened. The mission at Two Gray
Hills was somewhat hampered by the lack of formal permission from the
Navajos and the government to use the land for construction of a permanent
building. Nonetheless, a missionary nurse, Mrs. T. E. Cole, was hired to work
at the hospital. Eldridge’s deep involvement with these projects forced her
to turn down an invitation to attend a Teacher’s Institute in Colorado Springs.

During this same period Eldridge became involved in a dispute with
Reverend Harold Antes, which threatened to destroy all her work. Antes, a
Methodist missionary at Fort Defiance and a man of rather questionable
character, had visited the San Juan Mission with his wife in 1895. After he left
his position at Fort Defiance, Antes returned to Jewett in April 1897, looking
to open his own mission. Eldridge, believing that he intended to help the
mission staff, “offered him a home until he could secure a location.” Some
months later, however, Antes went to agency headquarters seeking permis-
sion to establish his own mission near the current one. The agent, Maj.
Constant Williams, told Antes that the present mission “had been here for a
long time and had got hold of the Indians here and that he considered that
we had a right to this side of the reservation and that there were very many places in the reservation where the Indians were just as much in need of help as here.” Undaunted, Antes returned to Jewett and criticized the mission staff for its lack of school facilities and farming tools. He made derogatory remarks, said the matron, “to me and to my management” and began to “say hateful things” about the local Mormon families. At the same time, he attempted to create the “Navajo Faith Mission” by asking for support from Eldridge’s eastern friends, in particular Mary G. Fisk. All of this turned White people away from Tripp’s mission. Again, according to Eldridge, Antes’s sermons, “instead of preaching to gospel had so much criticizing to do as almost invariably to make division in the Church, and his denunciation of the officers of this Church is anything [sic] but truthful or just.” Eventually, the Antes episode blew over. Probably under pressure, he moved his mission to Aneth, Utah, where in 1911 he and his wife were expelled from the reservation as the result of an impropriety.28

After the Antes matter had been resolved, Eldridge focused much of her attention on building at Jewett a new mission complex that would include a hospital and industrial school. Although the mission work was not part of her official duties, she expressed no concern. As one writer has noted, “despite Mrs. Eldridge’s affiliation with the government the mission continued all her life to absorb her interest and attention.” She simply regarded herself as a missionary whose calling coincided with government service. Indeed, her federal paycheck usually went to support mission activities. In June 1898 she asked the Indian Office to set aside a tract of reservation land for the planned buildings. Again enlisting the aid of eastern friends, Eldridge set the plans for these improvements before the Indian commissioner. The Indian Office, however, opposed church use of Indian land, prompting Eldridge to donate part of a homestead she owned just outside the reservation boundaries. She once more used her connections to good advantage and may have even visited the East in late 1898. By early 1899 the Ladies Missionary Society of New York agreed to fund construction of the hospital. The Cambridge WNIA, through the efforts of Mary Fisk, came up with money for furnishings.29

During the summer of 1899 the new hospital, industrial room, and some farm buildings were constructed. The pride of the complex was the Rebecca Collins Memorial Hospital, which contained two large rooms each with four beds. As Eldridge reported to Welsh, she had increased capacity to care for the sick and could double the number of beds if needed. The two-story building also provided Eldridge and a nurse, Miss Mary L. Gaines, with upstairs
living quarters. The new eighteen-by-thirty-two-foot industrial building contained two sewing machines, a knitting machine, and a cutting table. Eldridge noted: “The Navajo women seem to enjoy the room and many of them can run the machine very well indeed. We expect soon to have a kit for the boys to learn to repair their shoes, mend trousers, &c.” The new buildings exceeded funding estimates, leaving Eldridge with a bill of almost $300 and an overdrawn bank account. As before, she asked Welsh for help. Meanwhile, Tripp, the missionary, donated enough of her inheritance to open a combined day and boarding school. 

Eldridge continued with her usual work for the next several years. Soon after the death of her father in 1895, her daughter, Ruth, moved to Jewett to help with mission activities. Eldridge undoubtedly received some emotional relief by having her only daughter at hand and no other family obligations. Ruth eventually married Harry Baldwin, the nephew of Hank Hull who operated the nearby Hogback trading post and store. Baldwin bought out his uncle in 1900 and ran the store until 1916.

After the turn of the century the missionary picture on the San Juan began to change. The missionary arm of the Methodist Church shifted its priorities toward education and away from medical care, and thus did not continue to support Eldridge’s infirmary. In 1903 the Methodists transferred the Jewett Mission to the Presbyterians, who established a school and medical mission of their own. About the same time, the WNIA also felt that it had invested enough resources in the effort and withdrew its funding. As benefactors disappeared, Eldridge offered to deed the hospital land, which she still owned, over to the Methodists. When the Methodists declined her offer, she turned the property over to the Presbyterians. The Presbyterian Synod then purchased the Jewett complex for $1,000, and the Methodist school and mission moved to Farmington. Temporarily out of a home, Eldridge and Gaines briefly set up a mission at Shiprock with the intention of establishing a school there. However, when the government established the San Juan School and Agency on 11 September 1903, the women’s idea for a Shiprock mission and school died.

Eldridge moved to Farmington, where she pursued her fieldwork and lived at the new mission. In a letter written to the IRA in 1904, she offered some insights into her feelings about the Navajos. She noted that there were no Native missionaries because they were not yet ready to be baptized. If Christian interpreters could be secured, they might help breach the language barrier: “the people are very superstitious and hard to reach . . . and are afraid
of the medicine man, but I find an increasing desire to know about God and an increasing reverence for real Christianity.” To her, the Indians had yet to understand the concept of the crucifixion. How, they asked, “could God see his own son put to such an awful death?” Mary sought to remedy this problem by sending field matrons—Christian women—out to the camps where they could reach each band. Eldridge believed that, like her, field matrons should be “women who expect to make this a life work and they should also be able to care for the sick and advise in all kinds of work and home making, teaching the children and leaving the older people to believe in the Great Spirit.”

Mary did not neglect her duties as field matron, and she lived up to what she expected of others. In August 1904, for example, she made a trip far into the reservation, accompanied only by the mission’s teacher, Miss Edith A. Dabb. These two hardy women set off alone in a wagon packed with supplies. After several miles they encountered an elderly man and a small boy riding one horse; a very old woman sat astride another animal. The old woman had become blind while visiting a mountain camp and was seeking medicine. An examination revealed cataracts as the problem. After cleaning her eyes, Eldridge directed the three Navajos to the hospital at Jewett. The two women then proceeded another twenty-five miles during which the only life they encountered was a coyote. They watered their horses at a trading post and then went on to the camp of a medicine man, arriving just as a dust storm swept across the area. The women slept that night in the open. The next morning, they pulled into Two Gray Hills trading post to greet old friends. Here they heard the most desirable kind of news. A Navajo man whom they called Theodore and who had attended the government school at Fort Lewis, Colorado, returned home with the conviction that he must live like White people. He had set up a farm that produced a good crop and built a stone house that “is kept very neat by his wife.” One of Theodore’s children had been named Eskin Nez after Eldridge, and the entire family seemed to be making the kind of progress she desired.

The next day they went to an old mission site where they found the Navajo residents struggling to grow crops because of sparse mountain runoff and a failed reservoir. Eldridge noted, “The sheep and calves and some horses are dying from some disease and altogether the people seem very sad and hopeless.” The people there asked Eldridge whether a White man (agency farmer) could be sent to repair the reservoir, a suggestion she enthusiastically endorsed. Aside from providing medical care—one old chief had fallen from his
horse and Eldridge and Dabb "bandaged him up in great style"—they focused on farming conditions, surveying the need for a regular water supply and the construction of ditches and reservoirs as the best way to encourage Navajo assimilation. Such improvements promised to "bring hundreds of acres of land under cultivation and provide for a multitude of people." Eldridge concluded, "Otherwise the time is not far distant when these people will become ration fed Indians, which God forbid." Upon her return to the San Juan, Mary compared the nearby green fields and rich crops to "the sense of desolation and misery which I had just left," and asked her eastern friends what could be done to provide water to so many needy Indians.35

Although Eldridge did her best to service Navajo needs, she could not help being distracted by her growing disenchantment with the Indian Service, largely due to its lack of support for her reservation efforts. For some time federal administrators had been discouraging church involvement in Indian affairs and Indian agents from dabbling in missionary enterprises on the reservations. When Eldridge began to criticize local traders whom she suspected of selling whiskey to the Indians, she hoped that, under newly appointed Indian commissioner Francis Leupp, "things would be cleaned up
and we would have a clean man and manner in the Indian Service." However, on a trip to New Mexico, Leupp socialized with the traders, prompting an outburst of criticism from the outspoken matron. By January 1905 she reported to the IRA that she and the missionaries were "having trouble" with the Indian Office; she clearly hoped that the IRA would take up her cause.

Eldridge also became involved in a controversy with Amelia Quinton of the WNIA. Quinton apparently accused Eldridge of using WNIA funds without authority to hire Miss Dabb, an act that Mary effectively but tactlessly refuted. Quinton complained about hospital cost overruns. Charging her with jealousy, Eldridge wrote Matthew K. Sniffen of the IRA that Quinton "has never got over the disgrace of being found in the wrong and neglects no chance to say some thing [sic] hateful about me." Whether in the right or wrong, Mary's public feud with such a prominent reformer did her no good in eastern circles or with the Indian Office.

In the summer of 1905 Mary Eldridge was released from her job as government field matron when the position was abolished. The parting was hardly amicable. It appears that the Indian Office, especially San Juan Agency superintendent William T. Shelton, was displeased with the large amount of time she devoted to church work. Moreover, her letters to the IRA criticizing the government were not appreciated in Washington, D.C. Given the IRA's outspoken criticism of the Indian Office, the commissioner's office hardly needed a disgruntled employee feeding information to its detractors. Whatever the reason, Mary took her dismissal hard. "Why," she asked Sniffen, "should it be a sufficient reason for dismissal from the Service to report to an Association? Its [sic] all the means we have many times of correcting wrongs."

In retrospect, Mary's eleven years as a field matron had not achieved the goal of converting Navajo women to the Anglo lifestyle. Indeed, the field-matron program failed to achieve this goal anywhere. To be sure, she made many Navajo friends, was well respected, cared for the sick and needy, and played a major role in encouraging the Indians to dig irrigation canals along the San Juan. Nonetheless, teaching basic homemaking skills usually took a back seat to more pressing problems such as hunger and illness. She did what she could for the Navajos, given the limited availability of resources, and she proved to be an effective fund raiser. Yet because she believed that little could be done for women until permanent homes and self-sufficiency could be established, Eldridge had seldom focused specifically on the Navajo women and instead placed much of her emphasis on making Navajo men
into farmers. Additionally, church activities, always her first love, sometimes got in the way of doing government work, although Mary made little distinction between the two.

In some ways, Mary's dismissal from the Indian Service may have been a relief, for it permitted her to devote all of her energies to mission work. She quickly secured employment with the IRA, operating a cottage hospital attached to the Methodist Mission across the river from Farmington. Mary also continued to be actively involved with mission operations. In October 1905 she reported that a new five-room mission building, the Mary G. Fisk Home, had been completed. Its industrial room contained sewing machines and other clothes-making apparatus. Eldridge wanted to entice young Indian girls to the mission, hoping that their attendance would prevent some of the younger ones from becoming unwilling brides of old men. Such marriages were a fairly common practice among the Navajos, and Eldridge believed that these unions, sometimes of a polygamous nature, made "life a burden" to young women. Mary hoped that getting young girls into school or sewing classes would forestall such marriages. She also voiced opposition to the Navajo habit of gambling, believing that it inhibited the civilization effort. Using the gendered argument then in vogue with reformers, she characterized Navajo men as prone to setting down and gambling away their earnings. However, if these men became interested in making a home, they would learn to love their plot of land, improve it, and use their money for something better than gambling. Thus, changing the lifestyle of Navajo men was the first step in creating the type of family structure reformers visualized.

Once she was no longer in government service, Mary could be more vocal about Indian causes. In 1906, for example, she became concerned with rumors that the Indian Service was trying to discourage mission schools by demanding that potential Native students receive a federal agent's approval before enrolling in them. This policy, she surmised, was decreed to fill the government schools, leaving "the overflow if any [to] drift to Mission Schools." Given all the sweat and money that religious organizations had put into schools, this federal effort seemed unjust. Although the government did want to reduce its reliance on church schools, Eldridge's concern represented her growing mistrust of the Indian Office. She was calmed somewhat by Samuel M. Brosius of the IRA. He concluded that the parents of Indian students could still designate the school their children would attend as long as the institution would render "a fair education" and the request was made
to the agent before the fall term began. Because the agent retained a veto, however, the situation may not have completely satisfied Eldridge, who wanted complete freedom of choice.40

Mary also became involved with issues related to Navajo rights and justice, taking a stance that clearly angered many of her White neighbors. Toward the end of 1905 she became alarmed over an issue that had been simmering for some time. To the southeast of Farmington a large group of Navajos lived on nonreservation lands. Over the years they had developed a good water supply, including a catchment dam, and had cultivated enough land “to raise quite a nice lot of grain and vegetables,” a self-sufficiency that Mary had advocated for years. Because they held no land title, some Whites demanded the Indians be driven back to the reservation so the land could be opened to White settlement. Fearing that this dislocation might occur, Mary set out to help the Indians by encouraging the IRA to find a way for the Indians to claim title to their land. Fortunately, Indian Office officials also recognized the danger and recommended that the land involved be added to the Navajo Reservation. White ranchers objected and used their political clout to force a compromise. In 1907 the government permitted off-reservation Navajo families to ask for allotments under the 1887 Dawes Act and ordered all remaining lands be opened to White settlement.41

Many local Whites opposed this solution, fearing that the Navajos would take the best lands and delay “the development of the greater part of the best and most resourceful section on the Western slope.” A group of ranchers used their influence with the Land Office to stall Indian allotment applications while they sought a reversal of the policy. These tactics angered Mary to such an extent that she frantically urged the IRA to become directly involved. Her particular concern involved a group of Navajos living at Waro’s Camp near Mount Huérfano. Time was of the essence. The push for New Mexico’s statehood was rapidly coming to fruition, and, once a state, New Mexico would most likely lobby against any Indian allotments on the public domain. In May 1908 Mary visited Waro’s Camp, where she found the Indians “distressed about their lands.” She noted that the Navajos had always lived there, except during their removal to the Bosque Redondo (1864–1868). The Navajos at Waro’s Camp had seldom received government help because they lived far away from the agency and off the reservation. Nevertheless, they had built or were building over twenty houses. Their economy was based on several thousand sheep whose wool they sold or made into blankets. In agriculture the Navajos used dams to provide enough water to raise “fine crops of corn,
beans, melons, squashes &c, but no wheat." In all, "they have good saddles, and are well clothed, and seem in a very prosperous condition." 42

These people were continually harassed by New Mexicans. From time to time non-Indians came in and ordered the Indians off the land, "telling them that their place is on the reservation." At other times, Hispanic shepherds brought in great flocks of sheep and pastured them on the Navajo's range. Given these pressures, the Indians told Eldridge they would prefer to see the reservation boundaries extended east to include their lands as well as Mount Huérfano, a sacred Navajo site. They asked her to write a strong letter to federal officials in Washington, D.C., on their behalf. Should they be "driven on to the reservation they would not know where to go with their herds [and] they would be simply ruined." Mary assured them that they had many friends in Washington who "wanted to see them go on and improve and become citizens of our great country." 43

Mary hoped to travel to Washington to argue on the Indian's behalf, but circumstances prevented the trip. Instead, she urged Brosius to come to New Mexico right away, lest the Indians "be beaten out of their allotments." She noted that New Mexicans were scaring the Indians by telling them they would have to pay taxes, support schools, etc. She also told of local traders who had stolen Navajo horses, sold their property, fenced off their lands, and whipped "the women when they are out herding." In addition, "several Indians have been badly beaten up for daring to suggest that white people get off the land allotted to them." White sheepmen in particular seemed to have enough money to foil allotment. Brosius responded by visiting Arizona and New Mexico in July but to no avail. Despite the efforts of Eldridge and the IRA, local influence won out and no solution was reached by the time New Mexico entered the Union in 1912. As predicted, the New Mexico legislature immediately lobbied against expanding the reservation or granting Indian allotments on the public domain. As late as 1916 the General Land Office had yet to approve over twenty-nine hundred Navajo allotment applications. "Supposedly," states one authority, "the applicants did not meet improvement and residence requirements; in reality, the office was bending to local pressure, and withholding patents for no legitimate reason." Although some of the allotments were eventually approved, a federal law passed in 1918 finally put an end to ideas of enlarging the reservation. 44

During 1908 Mary was also involved in seeking justice for a group of Navajo rebels from the nearby Aneth, Utah, area. The overbearing reservation superintendent, William T. Shelton, met defiance when he ordered a
traditional medicine man named Bai-a-lil-le (Byalille) to have his sheep dipped, sell some of his flock, give up his multiple wives, and send his children to school. Shelton saw this resistance as a challenge to his authority, and in the fall of 1907 he ordered in two troops of cavalry soldiers, who attacked Bai-a-lil-le’s camp, killed several Indians, and took captive ten men including the old medicine man. The captives were sent to prison at Fort Huachuca, Arizona. Although Eldridge opposed most of Bai-a-lil-le’s traditional ways, she and the IRA believed the Navajo men had been jailed unfairly. According to her sources, Shelton was the troublemaker. The superintendent asked the enemies of Bai-a-lil-le to bring him in dead or alive. When that ploy failed, the army was called in. The Navajos, surprised by U.S. regulars, “made a break, firing their revolvers in the air as they ran, and they were very much frightened.” Eldridge saw their subsequent imprisonment as a cover-up for the incompetence of the army and the Indian Office, and managed to rally a group of reformers to the Navajos’ cause. Eventually, the IRA hired a lawyer from Tombstone, Arizona, to pursue the men’s release in the courts. The Indian Office regarded their legal campaign as meddling, but Mary soldiered on. In June 1909 the efforts of the IRA paid off when the Arizona Supreme Court ruled that the Navajos had been imprisoned illegally and ordered their release. This result must have pleased Mary greatly.

In 1911 sixty-two-year-old Mary Eldridge celebrated her twentieth year of work among the Navajos of the San Juan. She continued to live in her cottage hospital near the Methodist Mission, helped to raise several Indian children, and visit local hogans. She was undoubtedly pleased with her life’s work, although she remained distressed with the injustices she observed daily. Her days as an active missionary, however, were just about over. Following the flurry of activity in 1908, she withdrew from active involvement with the IRA. She was enjoying retirement in October 1911 when the San Juan River flooded and destroyed the mission. Fortunately, Mary’s cottage was on high ground and could be used as a safe haven for the people of the mission. When the waters receded, the mission was gone. Local citizens helped rebuild the mission at a different site, but at this point Eldridge’s participation in mission activities dwindled.

After the flood Mary became something of an “elder statesman.” She was recognized by many people as the founder of the Methodist Mission and, in her later years, noted for continuing to operate her small hospital as well as for rearing a number of “Navajo children with the same motherly care as though they had been her own.” Well into her seventies, Eldridge remained
hardy enough to make trips onto the reservation, and at one point she lived with a Navajo family for an extended period. She died in Farmington on 28 March 1933, at the age of eighty-three—"one of the most beloved women who have lived in the Southwest."47

Mary Eldridge left a significant legacy. The mission she helped to establish exists today as The Navajo United Methodist Center. Eldridge served the Indians at a time when few Whites were interested, and although she seldom expressed sympathy for or understanding of traditional Navajo ways, she liked the Native people and strived to assist them. Her obituary pointed out: "Never had Mrs. Eldridge been appealed to in vain for help for any kind by white man or Indian. Never was a storm too severe, the night too dark or cold for her to go to the assistance of the unfortunate when called upon and myriad indeed is the number of those who will arise to call her blessed."48 Her work on the San Juan also illustrates the difficulties that an ethnocentric government and church encountered in trying to "civilize" the Indians. Even people of good will, church missionaries and federal matrons like Mary Eldridge, struggled with convincing people of another culture to accept their values. The success she achieved is a tribute to the hardy and dedicated woman who worked for her God and country on the San Juan.

Notes


2. MacDonald and Arrington, The San Juan Basin, 87; Pauline G. Malehorn, "The Tender Plant: The History of the Methodist Mission, Farmington, New Mexico, 1891–1948" (typescript, Farmington Public Library, 1948), 2. Some confusion exists regarding Mary’s birth. Several sources say that she was born in South Williamsport, Massachusetts, a town that does not exist. This error appears to stem from her 7 April 1933 obituary in the Farmington (N. Mex.) Times-Hustler. In fact, she was born in South Williamstown, Massachusetts, a place confirmed on her New Mexico Certificate of Death and by correspondence with Nancy Burstein, Williamstown House of Local History, on 14 June 2000.
3. List of School Employees, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Annual Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1889 (hereafter CIA, AR, and year), 409; Report of Superintendent Charles S. Meserve and List of School Employees, CIA, AR, 1890, pp. 289-90; List of School Employees, CIA, AR, 1890, p. 345; Meserve to Thomas J. Morgan, 21 August 1890, 20119-1893, Letters Received, Records of the Bureau of Indian Affairs, Record Group 75, National Archives (hereafter LR, RG 75, NA).


12. Report of Mary E. Raymond Whyte, 1 January to 1 April 1893, 14113-1893, LR, RG 75, NA; Plummer to Whyte, 22 June 1893, FD-18, Box 6, Letters Sent, Navajo Agency, Record Group 75, National Archives Pacific Region Branch, Laguna Niguel, Calif. (hereafter Letters Sent, Navajo Agency, RG 75, NA, PRB); and Herbert Welsh to Daniel M. Browning, and Herbert Welsh to Mrs. James E. Fisk, 9 May 1893, Indian Rights Association Papers, 1886–1903 (Scholarly Resources Microfilm, 1977) (hereafter IRA Papers, 1886–1903), reel 20. For an account of the “uprising,” see McNitt, The Indian Traders, 294.

14. Simpson to [Commissioner Daniel M. Browning], 2 June 1893, 20654–1893; Report of Mary E. R. Whyte, Field Matron, 1 April to 1 July 1893, 26162–1893; Report of Mary E. R. Whyte, Field Matron, 1 July to 1 October 1893, 41098–1893, LR, RG 75, NA; and Report of Mary E. R. Whyte, Field Matron, Navajo Reservation, CIA, AR, 1894, pp. 102–3.

15. Lt. Edward H. Plummer to Commissioner Daniel M. Browning, 28 May 1894, FD-22, Box 7, Letters Sent, Navajo Agency, NA, PRB; Thomas Harwood, History of New Mexico Spanish and English Missions of the Methodist Episcopal Church from 1850 to 1910, vol. 2 (Albuquerque: El Abogado Press, 1910), 279; and The San Juan (Farmington, N. Mex.) Times, 24 August 1894; and Malehorn, The Tender Plant, 6, 93–94. The circumstances relating to the separation are murky, but, after she became ill, Mary’s friends signed a public petition denouncing Tom Whyte for his “unmanly conduct towards his wife.” See Durango (Colo.) Herald, 29 July 1894.


17. Report of Field Matron, Navajo Reservation, CIA, AR, 1895, p. 129; and Report of Mary L. Eldridge, Field Matron, 30 September to December 1894, 5327–1895, LR, RG 75, NA.

18. Report of Mary L. Eldridge, Field Matron, 30 September to December 1894, 5327–1895, LR, RG 75, NA; and Williams to Commissioner Daniel M. Browning, 26 January 1895, FD-23, Box 8, Letters Sent, Navajo Agency, NA, PRB.


21. Eldridge to Herbert Welsh, 22 June 1895, IRA Papers, 1886–1903, reel 23; and Eldridge to Browning, [n.d.], 37078–1895, LR, RG 75, NA.


24. Constant Williams to Commissioner Daniel M. Browning, 28 August 1896, 34224–1896; and Alfred Hardy to Daniel M. Browning, 21 September 1896, 36279–1896, LR, RG 75, NA.

26. Alfred Hardy to M. S. Cook, 20 November 1896, and Alfred Hardy to Commissioner Daniel M. Browning, 17 December 1896, both in 45304-1896, LR, RG 75, NA.


29. Gen. Eliphalet Whittlesey to Commissioner, 8 June 1898, 26016-1898; Mary Fisk to Commissioner, 9 September 1898, 42110-1898; and G. W. Hayzlett to Commissioner, 21 February 1899, 9053-1899, all in LR, RG 75, NA. Eldridge to Herbert Welsh, 7 May [1900], IRA Papers, 1864-1973, reel 15; and MacDonald and Arrington, The San Juan Basin, 90.

30. Eldridge to Herbert Welsh, 7 May [1900], IRA Papers, 1864-1973, reel 15; and MacDonald and Arrington, The San Juan Basin, 91.

31. There is very little information on Ruth Eldridge. She was residing in Jewett by 1896, and her marriage is noted in Rosetta Biggs, Our Valley (1978, n.p.). See also MacDonald and Arrington, The San Juan Basin, 91.


33. Eldridge to IRA, 3 July 1904, IRA Papers, 1864-1973, reel 17; and Linford, Navajo Places, 263-64.


35. Ibid.


37. Eldridge to Matthew K. Sniffen, 10 August 1905, reel 18; William T. Shelton to Commissioner, 30 April 1904, Box 1, San Juan Training School and Agency, NA, PRB; and Malehorn, The Tender Plant, 26. Mary's conflict with governmental bureaucracy was not unusual among female reformers. For a somewhat similar situation, see Katherine Osburn, "Nellie Wiegel: 'How About That?!'" in Kriste Lindenmeyer, Ordinary Women, Extraordinary Lives (Wilmington, Del.: Scholarly Resources Books, 2000), 171.

38. That the field matron program was an overall failure in terms of its original goals is pointed out in Knack, "Philene T. Hall," 162-65. Knack argues that, had the program been successful, its impact actually would have been the opposite of that intended—"a lowered social status for Indian women."


40. Brosius to Eldridge, 1 June 1906, IRA Papers, 1864-1973, reel 18.


42. Farmington (N. Mex.) Enterprise, 7 June 1907, quoted in Bailey and Bailey, A History of the Navajos, 116; Eldridge to Matthew K. Sniffen, 16 May [1908], IRA Papers,


44. Eldridge to Samuel M. Brosius, 5 May, 12 June 1908, ibid; and Bailey and Bailey, A History of the Navajos, 116–17.


46. MacDonald and Arrington, The San Juan Basin, 93–96.
