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The Navajo Missions

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According to the terms of the Navajo treaty of 1868 whereby a school for every thirty children was to be provided, the first government school on the reservation was established in 1873 at Fort Defiance.

D. M. Riordan of the U. S. Office of Indian Affairs described it in his report:

It was managed as an industrial boarding school, though no system of teaching industrial occupations was in operation or could be under the conditions existing. This was owing to the usual failure of the United States to perform its agreements in connection with Indian work. The Government, by its failure, compelled the opening of the school in an unfinished building, without suitable appliances; even without a woodshed or water closet; with a roof in its kitchen and dining room that was about as good as a sieve as a protection; ... sans everything almost that was needed for success in a school of this kind.

In 1871 the Supreme Court had ruled that the Pueblos were not "wards of the United States" and hence not under government guardianship. Nevertheless Congress appropriated funds for other schools at Tuba City and Tohatchi, at Keams Cañon just east of the Hopi First Mesa, and at the bottom of the mesa. They were no better. Thus among the Pueblos, where schools
were not legally permissible, children were forcibly taken from their parents by Government troops to fill the schools. But among the Navajos, where ample provision of schools was required by treaty, few were thereafter provided.

With the failure of reservation boarding and day schools, non-reservation or "away" schools were established. The pattern was set by the Carlisle Indian School in 1879. Colonel R. H. Pratt, who had served in the Indian Wars of 1874-75, had taken a liking to the young prisoners placed in his charge. Lamenting that the few Plains Indians being schooled by the government were sent to Hampton Institute, Virginia, an institute for the segregated education of Negroes, he suggested that a school be provided for Indians alone. Accordingly he was allowed to use the abandoned army barracks at Carlisle, Pennsylvania, which had previously served as a cavalry depot. His success with 139 Kiowa, Sioux, Comanche, Cheyenne and Arapahoe children proved his point. There were built Haskell Institute at Lawrence, Kansas, Sherman Institute at Riverside, California, and similar schools at Phoenix, Arizona, and Albuquerque and Santa Fe, New Mexico—each drawing Indian conscripts from all Indian reservations in the United States. The theory was to remove the children from their home reservations and educate them out of their Indian background by a militaristic routine. Their hair was cut. They were forbidden to speak their own language, to wear their own clothes, to keep their traditional customs, even their own names. They were then expected to settle in white communities and forget they were Indians.

Among the Pueblos and Navajos the theory did not work. Both bitterly fought conscription. If the children were caught and sent away to school, they were dismissed untrained for anything but manual or menial labor. Developing a sense of inferiority under the racial discrimination of white employers,
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they hung around the edges of town unkempt and unwanted with that other Western racial minority, the mestizo "Mexicans." Eventually they returned to their reservation homes— "back to the blanket."

Indian objections to this system were not based, as supposed, upon a stubborn refusal to better their lot by learning new customs, trades and crafts. Boys were secreted in kivas and hidden in the mountains precisely because the age at which they were taken away coincided with the time during which they were prepared for initiation in tribal ceremonialism.

When this finally became apparent in 1926 the Indian Commissioner attended a council meeting at Taos pueblo. He informed the members that their religion made them "half animals," and forbade the withdrawal of Pueblo boys from school for kiva initiation. When the old men refused to comply, the whole body was thrown into jail for violating the religious crimes code—only to be released by the Federal District Court under press of publicity.

Meanwhile it was as incumbent upon the government to break the still resistant will of the roving Navajos, as it was to destroy the traditional self-enclosure of the Pueblos within their independent city-states. Both government reservation schools and "away" schools being failures, various denominational Christian churches and missionary societies were encouraged to establish schools on the reservation. The Indian Bureau agreed to the proselytizing of Navajo children and later subsidized the schools with Indian funds held in government trust. And the churches, grasping at the opportunity to bring salvation to the souls of heathen savages, agreed to give them primary schooling.

For a generation then, the result was the same. Cruelty and stupidity in government schools, kindness and incompetency in mission schools, combining to widen still more the gulf between the red and the white.
THE NAVAJO METHODIST MISSION. The first of these mission schools, the one whose background is an integral part of my own childhood, and with which I am most familiar, was the Navajo Methodist Mission along the bend of the San Juan.

When our family's two old-maid aunts, previously fictionalized as the Vrain Girls, in my novel Below the Grass Roots, went there in the 1890's the region had all the elements of a movie frontier epic. Farmington, at the convergence of the San Juan, La Plata and Las Animas rivers, was its center. Ten miles west was the little Mormon village of Fruitland. Twelve miles east was Bloomfield, home of the cattle rustling Stockton Gang. To the north was the Ute reservation, to the east the Jicarilla Apache reservation, and to the south and west the Navajo reservation. There was nothing at Shiprock but Hubbard's Trading Post. Gallup was four days travel by wagon. Durango, sixty-five miles north in the Colorado Rockies, was the closest railroad junction.

Farmington's main street was two blocks long. It was filled with swaggering cattle rustlers, unruly cowboys, Indian traders, Utes, Apaches and Navajos. Here from Hon-Not-Klee, the trading post at Shallow Water on the Gallegos which the Vrain Girls made their headquarters, they came on rare occasions to catch the stage and to bring to a boy those vivid reels of their unaccountable life and that of the other women with whom they were associated.

The earliest of these was Mrs. Mary E. Eldridge, the first missionary in the region. A member of the Woman's Home Missionary Society of the Methodist Episcopal Church, she founded the first mission near Hogback, about twenty miles west of Farmington. Her work consisted mainly of administering to the sick out of meager funds contributed by the church and the government. The second was Miss Mary Tripp who started the
first school about 1893, assisted later by Miss Edith Dabb. In September, 1899, Miss Frances E. Rykert came from upper New York to help them as a teacher. I remember her vivid description to me of her frightening journey by train from Albany, by stage from Durango, and by wagon to Hogback.

A half-dozen women limited by funds, knowledge and experience, with little support and supervision, trying to convert, teach and heal the Navajo nation! In the movie they would have succeeded. In life their attempts were at once ludicrous and heroic.

Mrs. Eldridge soon homesteaded the land and offered to deed it to the Home Missionary Society of her church. When it was refused, she deeded it to the Presbyterian Church. She then located three miles west of Farmington, across the San Juan river, establishing a new post from which one of the Vrain Girls worked as a field matron.

The Methodists moved up the river and re-established the Navajo Methodist Mission School on bottom land about four miles west of Farmington on the west side of the San Juan near the La Plata suspension bridge. Here Miss Mary Tripp established a small place under the auspices of the Indian Rights Association of Boston. Here too Miss Rykert worked as a teacher; assisting her was the other Vrain Girl.

The work was progressing, but as a movie plot it was also developing complications. If it were not rivalry between the Methodists, Presbyterians and the Indian Rights Association, it was the admonition of the government Indian agent conflicting with the advice of experienced Indian traders, the demands of cattlemen and townspeople. Medical supplies were short and money to buy them. Only the women held together, riding to remote hogans by horseback, teaching the "Jesus Way" and how to sew and read.

How wonderful the children were! There was Enogah, the
spunky little girl named Kigpah ("on the warpath") and Ya-batya meaning "brave" because he "always dared to do right." One of the most inspiring children Miss Rykert ever taught was a boy of five. He could read and embroider as well as a woman. Of him she wrote, "He left us when he was only nine. I think of him now in the place that our dear Savior went to prepare." Unfortunately there had been no medicine to cure him when he became fatally ill. His father carried him away and held for him a last sing. One of the Vrain Girls followed on horseback and looked after his burial.

It was discouraging work. Miss Tripp died in 1909; and after serving five years as a teacher and three years as superintendent Miss Rykert returned East seriously ill.

The new superintendent of the Navajo Methodist Mission was Mr. Simmons and his wife, both new to the country. With him were Miss Brown, a teacher; Frankie Damon, a blind half-breed interpreter; an old Mr. Western who boarded there; and a Mr. Tice from Illinois. The buildings consisted of a six-room adobe used as their living quarters, a two-story adobe whose downstairs was used as a schoolroom and whose upstairs served as a dormitory for the twenty-seven Navajo schoolchildren, a laundry building, and corrals and sheds for stock and chickens.

Here it was then, as I remember it.... No! It is too hopelessly tragic to be recalled in actuality. It had best be characters and setting of a movie after all. The plot reaches its climax in September, 1911. It is raining.

A thin drizzle obscuring the sage with a wet grey mist. Recurrent showers. A steady downpour. Then cloudburst after cloudburst in the mountains. The San Juan, Las Animas and La Plata rise ominously. By Thursday, October 5, the rivers are overflowing their banks.

Townspeople, ranchers and traders are in an uproar. Messages from Colorado warn of an oncoming flood; the Rockwood
dam above Durango is weakening. All people in the lowlands are notified to move to safety. Particular anxiety is felt for the Mission School as it is located on the bottom lands of the San Juan roaring with the flood waters of both the La Plata and Las Animas. Mr. Simmons is notified.

It is noon. He is praying at the head of the dinner table. Around it are patiently standing Hortense, Alice, Geraldine, Percy, Abigail, John, Ira—twenty-seven Navajo children neatly named, with their hair cut, learning the Jesus Way.

“We will not move,” he answers. “God will protect us.”

Mr. Western is seventy-five years old. “The river has never risen this high in all the years I’ve lived in this part of the country. Take my word for it!”

Mr. Tice grins. “I am an expert swimmer.”

Lessons resume. But late that afternoon Frankie, the blind interpreter, steals out to measure the water. It is waist deep before he reaches the approach to the bridge. He comes back to propose they all move to a vacant homesteader’s house on higher ground nearby.

“No!” shouts Mr. Simmons. “God will protect his children from the flood!”

This raises an ecclesiastical argument in the blind halfbreed’s mind. According to the whites there is God and there is the rain, the flood, the mud and all inanimate nature. But according to the Navajos there is God in the heavens, God in the rain, the flood, the mud, God in his children, The People, and all these Gods together are one God, the God of all the living universe. What does it matter which manifestation of God is preëminent for the moment? It is most confusing. Still he is inclined to believe that for the present it would be expedient for God-in-the-children to remove to higher ground from God-in-the-flood lest they coincide with some inconvenience to all concerned.

So while the children are ordered off to bed and the white
staff obdurately retire, he remains at the telephone. More calls come. Angry calls from the Indian Agent, Mr. Shelton, demanding that something be done by somebody for the Wards of the Government. Imploring calls from neighbors. Mr. Simmons refuses to answer. Abruptly the line goes out.

It is still raining. Blind Frankie cannot hear it for the roar of the flood.

He gropes toward the dormitory, rouses Hortense, Percy, Abigail, Geraldine—all the twenty-seven Navajo children. They lead him out to the corral and help him harness the horses. Inside the house the two frightened women, Mrs. Simmons and Miss Brown, hear them. They come out and beg to go too. It is still raining.

The blind man loads them all into the wagon and takes the reins. The water has risen. It covers the hubs, is belly deep on the horses. They cannot get to the abandoned homestead. But they do make it upriver two miles to Mr. Eldridge's place.

At two a.m. the first rise takes out the suspension bridge. At four a.m. the second rise strikes the Mission.

The sight at daybreak is appalling. The river looks like a monstrous brown snake writhing back and forth, uprooting huge cottonwood trees, gouging holes in the ground. The Mission buildings are all gone except the floor of the laundry, held down by heavy machinery. On it stands Mr. Tice and the Mission dog. Nothing can be done to save him. They watch him desperately all morning.

Indians come. They are carrying a bedraggled and unconscious old man. It is Mr. Western. He had jumped from the window, crawled through the water to a mud bank. Mrs. Eldridge manages to restore him to life, but he has lost his mind.

Suddenly Mrs. Simmons screams. Through a neighbor's field glasses she sees her husband perched in a tree top emerging from the river. When the walls collapsed he had been washed away, clinging to the stairway. Luckily he had grabbed on to the
tree. Here he clings for several days until rescued more dead than alive.

Near noon the laundry floor rises and tips Mr. Tice and the dog into the river. The dog is washed toward shore and rescued by some cowboys with lariats. Mr. Tice disappears instantly. Two days later his body is found twelve miles downriver encircled by buzzards flying overhead.

And now the finale. Hundreds of Navajos lashing their horses up the muddy road toward Mrs. Eldridge's place. Is it an Indian raid? No! They are the parents and relatives of the twenty-seven children who had seen the Mission destroyed and had believed their children were drowned. . . . Close-up of the undisputable hero: Frankie Damon, the blind interpreter, who had saved their lives. . . .

Next year the Mission was rebuilt on another new site upriver just a mile west of Farmington, and Miss Rykert was induced to return and help it get started. But the Vrain Girls had gone. Something mysterious had happened to one of them. She had been converted by the Navajos. Becoming "queer,"
adopting their beliefs and customs, she vanished into the far reaches of the San Juan and has never been heard of since. . . . Strangely enough, one of the children she had taught loved her and took her English name. Today he is a Singer or medicine man; and with his wife, Tah Dez Bah, he is living in a hogan near Fort Defiance.

GANADO MISSION. A few years later the Presbyterians, like the Methodists, abandoned the site at Hogback and sent the equipment to another small mission established at Ganado, Arizona, in 1901. The site was fifty-six miles northwest of Gallup, near the location of the prehistoric Pueblo Colorado, and just one mile from Lorenzo Hubbell's Trading Post, the first post established on the reservation. For a quarter of a century it persisted as no more than another insignificant and ramshackle outpost in the wilderness.

Today, owned and operated by the Board of National Missions of the Presbyterian Church, Ganado Mission is the largest Indian Mission in the United States. Nothing describes it so aptly as an exclamation made recently by a lady tourist to Dr. Salsbury, its head: "Why Doctor, it's an A-osis in the Desert!"

An oasis it is. Two hundred acres of green lawn threaded by flagstone walks and gravelled driveways, shaded by rows of elms and cottonwoods, and supporting nearly seventy buildings. It is as tidy as a college campus, modern as 1950, self-contained as a small city.

The million-dollar plant includes a power-plant, ice-plant, deep freeze unit, steam laundry, carpenter shop, swimming pool, commissary, and a farm with pigs, chickens and a registered Holstein dairy herd to supply food for the four hundred people who are fed three meals a day. Several miles away the Mission
owns and operates its own coal mine. The High School, with an enrollment of 127 students, is the only Indian high school to be state accredited. In the "Cathedral of the Purple Sage" sermons are delivered in English, then translated into Navajo and transmitted by loud speaker into the wards of the hospital. This Sage Memorial Hospital with its 150 beds, its iron lung, X-ray, Wassermann baths, operating room and laboratory, is undoubtedly the show place of the reservation. In connection with it is conducted the only nurses' training school for Indians in the United States; over one hundred girls, representing fifty tribes, have been graduated.

The whole place is a memorial to its present superintendent and medical director, Dr. Clarence G. Salsbury. Today, at the age of sixty-three, his fame as the Sagebrush Surgeon has spread throughout the world. He has been elected to fellowship in the American College of Surgeons, the American College of Hospital Administrators, the International College of Surgeons of Geneva, Switzerland, and named President of the Arizona Hospital Association. Last spring some eighty eminent surgeons assembled in convention at Ganado to pay their respects to their remarkable colleague, the Big White Doctor—235 pounds big. To watch him do a Caesarean in twenty minutes was a pleasure this writer declined with thanks; but watching him clean a mess of catfish for two young nurses was just as revealing of character. There is nothing slow or awkward about his driving either. He hits the rutted dirt roads at an eighty-mile-an-hour clip that leaves no doubt he knows every stone, wash and curve. He is a kindly man, a real character, and his story is one of the most unique in the Four Corners.

A missionary doctor in China for thirteen years, he came home in 1927 to accept a temporary assignment among the Navajos. When he arrived at Ganado he found a ramshackle infirmary of twelve beds trying to serve a people much worse
off than the Chinese. Putting up tents to hold typhoid, diphtheria and tuberculosis patients, he talked the Presbyterian Board into building him a two-story, stone hospital. Then he struck out into the reservation to drum up trade.

According to the story, his first break came when he brought in a little girl for an operation. The child took the anesthetic beautifully. Then suddenly a thrombosis, a blood clot formation, set in. Despite his skill he could not save her.

Swiftly the news of her death spread. A mob of angry Navajos swarmed in upon the hospital, threatening to run him out or kill him. Then Red Point, a venerated old singer, stepped out and addressed the crowd.

"For many years I have been your singer. But I have not always succeeded. Did you talk of killing me, of running me away? This Big White Doctor is a medicine man too. He is trying to help the Dinneh. But what man has the power to always preserve life? So what is this empty talk of killing him, of running him away? Let him alone. Go home. I have said it!"

In return the Big White Doctor invited Red Point into the hospital to see how his medicine worked. The old singer was particularly fascinated by the microscope. "See those bugs?" The Doctor pointed to the contaminated water on the slide. "They'll kill all of you if you don't let me help."

Red Point was impressed; and when the typhoid epidemic struck in 1930, it was largely due to his efforts that The People were induced to receive inoculation.

In 1933 the first class of two nurses was graduated from the school of nursing. Both of the girls were Navajos: Ruth Henderson and Charlotte Adela Slivers or Naglíníyil Nazbah ("Peace Army"), the daughter of Da-Ha-Na-Hez, a medicine man. Red Point gave the commencement address.

Today the Ganado Mission is expanding its activities beyond its sphere of influence around the mission proper. One Satur-
day we went with the Doctor, two nurses and interpreter to a field clinic held thirty-five miles north at Tselani. Here, to a little stone building near Art Lee’s Trading Post, rode Navajos from their remote hogans along the heartbreakingly beautiful canyon and from the edges of the distant Black Mesa where there still live Navajos who have never seen a white man. Of the fifty patiently squatting on the floor only two spoke English. But one by one they got up, baring their arms for the needle. At Cornfields, Nazlini and Greasewood similar scenes take place weekly—field clinics with inoculations and emergency treatments carrying the Big White Doctor’s powerful medicine to The People.

On Sunday we went with the Reverend Douthitt, the mission minister, and his interpreter, on still another field trip. His field is every hogan within two thousand square miles around the mission. His job is to convert The People to Christianity. In one hogan after another he stood before the family, the friends or neighbors who had been induced to attend. The Belicana Short Coat so incongruously attired in his black suit, white shirt and black bow tie—praying, telling a Biblical story, singing Jesus Loves Me or another gospel hymn translated into Navajo:

Jesus a-yo-a-so ‘nih,
Bi nal-tsos yeh sil hal-ne,
Al-cin-i-gi a-nis-teh
Do si-dzil dah, Ei bidzil.

After months of hearing about the “Jesus Way,” a Navajo “makes his decision for Christ and the Church.” Then he is brought into the Mission compound for baptism in the church. When a conversion is made, according to Reverend Douthitt, it sticks; there are few backsliders. The children are enrolled in the mission school, are taught to forget the old ways and to make a complete transition to the new.
ST. MICHAELS MISSION. The Catholic St. Michaels Mission, manned by the Franciscan Fathers and located at Cienega between Ganado and Gallup, operates just as efficiently. There is no hospital, but its influence on the Indians is very great in other ways, through the Mission’s traditional reluctance to directly oppose tribal ceremonial life and the tremendous knowledge of Navajo psychology brought by Father Berard Haile.

It maintains a large boarding school for over three hundred Navajo children, and supports ten buildings including a chapel, dormitories, gymnasium, a light and water plant, a barn and shops in which farming and practical trades are taught. Father Haile opened the school in 1901. His admitted purpose was to teach Christianity to the Navajos. But seeing the barrier of language which alienated them and the more difficult task of teaching a religion to a people who have no word for religion in their own language, he set about learning their language and the meaning of their ceremonials.

Ednishodi Yazzie, “Father Shony,” first learned Navajo fluently. Then he set about transcribing it on paper with characters to fit the sounds. The result was a standard written Navajo language utilizing English and Greek characters, glottal stops, barred l’s and other symbols. To reproduce these he set up a monotype of his own with a special keyboard, and printed his own books. Meanwhile he began compiling a complete encyclopedia of information on Navajo thought and customs, and this led to an exhaustive study of the great Navajo sings or “Ways.”

His text books now include: Learning Navajo, a Navajo-English and English-Navajo vocabulary and An Ethnologic Dictionary—in which he devotes thirty-four pages of description to the name “Navaho” and accounts for this writer’s preferred spelling and stubborn use of “Navajo.” His religious translations are A Catechism of Christian Doctrine in Navajo, The

Little wonder that The People have nicknamed him “The Little Priest Who Knows.” Father Shorty, grey-haired, felt-slippered under his long brown robe, has done more than any man to codify their language, and probably knows more about them than any white man living.

Thus at this mission from the very beginning religious instruction was given to the children in their native tongue. Father Anselm Weber, another great missionary and linguist, rode horseback to Klagetoh, Cornfields, Tohatchi and Lukachukai gathering pupils. With this close personal contact he also fought for Navajo rights against white aggression, and through his influence at Washington was able to obtain more grazing land for Navajo sheep, The People’s only source of livelihood.

Unlike at Ganado, no tuition is required. Classes are held up to the ninth grade, half the day being spent in the classroom and the other half in learning practical arts. All students are encouraged to become Girl or Boy Scouts. Upon graduation, they are given opportunity to attend St. Catherine’s Indian High School at Santa Fe.

There are several other small missions on the reservation: the Rehoboth Mission of the Holland Christian Reformed Church east of Gallup; the Seventh Day Adventist Navajo Mission near Holbrook; the Good Shepherd Mission at Fort Defiance, and St. Christopher’s Mission at Bluff, Utah, both sponsored by the Protestant Episcopal Church; and the Catholic Tegakwitha Mission at Houck, dedicated to Catherine Tegakwitha, the Lily of the Mohawks, supposedly the first Indian north of Mexico to become a Catholic in 1655.
Most of these have been recently founded and like the older, larger missions their principal function is secular education. In addition to the missions, there are scattered throughout the reservation isolated missionaries like Shine Smith, I. G. Bennett at Tuba City and Andrew McGaffin at Kayenta—devout, humble, ill-paid men armed with no more than their Bibles and their own indomitable courage.

Today, three quarters of a century since the first school was established, over eighty per cent of all Navajos are illiterate, and there are school facilities for only five thousand of the twenty-four thousand Navajo children of school age. Whether this great need is to be corrected by endowed mission schools, State or Federal Government education systems still depends upon the formulation of a national, long-term Indian policy—a policy that will be formulated in part by these people who have now been granted the franchise as voting citizens of both New Mexico and Arizona.