The Hunger of the Navajos

Robert Bunker
THE HUNGER OF THE NAVAJOS

The snow all around was piled so high, that they could not hope to get to the trader's for weeks. They expected to go hungry and to lose a good many sheep. The woman stepped out the door when she heard the relief plane bringing the supplies. She was struck and killed by the bundle the pilot dropped.

It was an unthinkable accident, of course. The Tribal Council did not blame anyone. Back in the Indian Agency, the men who had planned this "Operation Snowdrift" searched their souls, puzzling whether somehow the woman's death might have been avoided. But the accident did not, finally, seem to mean anything—unless, perhaps, that much in Navajo life did not mean anything nowadays.

A trader vigorously cursed the whole Federal administration of relief. But when a truck carrying relief supplies broke down near his door, he stored those supplies—without charge—until they could be moved again.

A missionary near Ramah had his own little relief program. He was an able administrator; he'd left his own successful business to come to this barren land. He was perfectly frank about the obvious—that one big reason for his gifts to the Navajos was to attract them into his church.

He asked me into his parlor, in his tiny isolated house, and sent his high-school-age son to go study in the kitchen. He gave me some coffee. He asked me whether I was prepared to put my other duties aside—I was government "sub-agent" working from nearby Zuni. He asked me to join him in his campaign against Navajo bigamy.
He could have been offended at what I answered him, he could have thought I was tricking him. I said I was afraid that the few Navajos I knew with two wives, if forced to choose one, would choose their younger, second, wives. I said I didn't want the desertion of their elder wives on my conscience, any more than on the Navajos' own. I said I knew the Tribal Council had outlawed plural marriage—and that I still did not think that was a good first "accommodation" or sacrifice for the Navajos to make to our white American culture. I said something vague about "when they have found their own way..."

Perhaps the missionary gave me up as just not worth arguing with—as the "false believer" he'd told me I was once before. What he said now was, that he must respect my conscience.

He could have challenged me so very easily. He could have asked me whether I thought the Navajos were finding their own way. Or whether they were not simply waiting, sitting, alone.

In Navajo lands, earth seems to have one vast sweeping surface, fashioned sensuously by a giant thumb. Though desert, this land is magnificent, and that Navajo is magnificent who builds on the unbounded. There, where even the reddest cliffs seem always distant, where the eye follows mile on mile of gently rolling table land, he lives in his tiny cluster of round cedar hogans.

In such a setting, the Navajos must seem a very practical people to be making a living at all. Working in families or small groups of families, they have possessed themselves wholly of the earth they love. They have built both on lands of incredible beauty and on lands gashed by ugly canyons or marred by dirty yellow piled stone. Where a Navajo rides against the sky, all blemishes seem incidental, and all earth's surface is man's true home.

Against such emptiness of land and sky, all personal encounter is charged with emotion. Navajos, meeting Navajos, seem to see right through one another, as if each in imagination had lived
the others' whole natures and lives. Yet they are gracefully formal with one another, even reserved. There is loneliness in vision such as theirs.

The Navajos proved once, clearly enough, that they have practical economic vision as well. American soldiers rounded them up in the 1860's and made them walk across New Mexico, to the concentration camp that was Fort Sumner. Before they were walked back again, the Navajos had to give up much of their old ways,—their raiding, of course, though not many had been raiders, and their hunting and farming of lands the soldiers said weren't theirs.

The Navajos kept their pride. Even today they give as much as a third of their time to that joining of their thought and all their arts which we non-Indians can only call their "religion." Any change was in externals. The men now wore standard Western clothing, and the women shining velvet and sweeping calico.

They changed, especially, their means of livelihood. They learned weaving and silversmithing. The strength and subtlety of their design, displayed in these new arts, won them wide fame and a little cash.

Their big effort went into sheep. Where before most had had few sheep, now, saving with purpose, they covered all their land with their yearly growing herds. They were self-respecting and self-supporting; old Federal reports tell the story again and again. The Navajos themselves multiplied, from perhaps eight thousand in 1870 to some sixty-five thousand today. They kept themselves proud on what land the United States left them alone on.

It seemed to them that industry and thrift would be enough. I don't know whether anyone ever warned them different, whether anyone ever told them that land could be overgrazed. Anyway their grass gave out, their land began to wash away. Washington made them sell sheep and slaughter goats—and asked their new Tribal Council to "agree." There was hunger and idleness on the land.
NEAR THE MORMON TOWN of Ramah, there are some seven hundred Navajos. Their land is checkerboarded over with white men's holdings and fences. They live near green valleys that were once theirs. They live where they can hear—not from most of their neighbors, but from just enough—that they are "damned Navajos," and that "the damned Navajos won't work." Just often enough: I've heard it said when there were Navajos who I know can talk some English, ten feet away. They never any of them let on they had heard.

Ramah Navajo community is a one-room school, an empty frame store, and a water tank in gray empty country. I always wished fervently, as I drove over the last rise, that there might be dappled horses by the water tank and perhaps even a circle of green "Indiana" wagons. For if so, if I found Navajos there, they would lend some warmth even to this bleak land.

Ramah is the Navajo community most studied by the anthropologists.

Or Ramah is long wagon roads, and a hundred-odd families hidden away in their small clusters of miraculously tidy log-and-brush hogans. "What are the other Navajos doing?" they always asked at Ramah. They grazed their few sheep, in and around the lava beds. They'd find occasional odd jobs or, even after so many failures, a few might try dry farming again. They'd send their delegate to meetings of the whole tribe's Council; what he had to report seemed big but far away. For the Councillors meeting at Window Rock could hardly prescribe what each small community may do for itself.

One day of each week I was supposed to drive the thirty miles from Zuni and help the Ramah Navajos. The job need not be entirely thankless; they had very much loved the man who had my job before me, Walt Olson. When Walt told them he was leaving, Ramah's leaders looked as if he had slapped them and they were going to cry.

Each summer Olson had used to pull the Ramah Navajo Co-op
out of the red with a two-day rodeo. The Gallup Independent ran a nice story for Walt. There'd be a pretty fair turnout of white ranchers and townspeople, and a wisecracking Indian Service announcer with a loud speaker wired to his truck. Some ranchers even entered the events, or challenged Navajos to special races. Olson would jounce around on a big old gray farm horse, trying to make order of what went on. But once the day was under way, it was all Navajos—"Dineh"—"the People."

Most Navajos are slender. Almost all moved gracefully, easily, with the glad dignity of knowing they were alive. The old men, in unmatched cast-off coat and pants perhaps, sat alert on the seats of their wagons, ready to spring to their feet for any excitement. The young men, in trim khaki, walked before the crowd with just the least comical pretense of bluster. The drearily uniformed schoolchildren roughhoused together on the ground. A few women still on horseback circled on the ridge of the hill above us, just moving, riding, breathing until the show began.

The Navajos aren't fancy riders. The rodeo was only an excuse for their family party. Before I was ever stationed in Zuni, Olson had me down from Albuquerque to make change, fast. Because most of the Navajos wouldn't enter any event until they'd seen someone else try it out first, or anyway until a bunch of them had got together and agreed they'd all compete. Then, suddenly, with the event already under way, fifteen or twenty of them would advance upon me where I sat in the pickup that was my office, and I was supposed to make change and keep records and sort out separate pots all fast enough so they could go on at once to their contest.

I don't think many Navajos knew ahead of time what they'd be good at; they'd just try. I don't think any of them knew that little Bob Begay would be so good on a bucking horse. He was just naturally graceful; it seemed he stayed on just because he was so small. Again and again we spectators would demand that Bob ride another horse, or steer, or burro, picked out as promis-
ing to kick specially lively, and someone would pass the hat, and at last Bob would come out and ride once more. Each time he’d let himself go a little more extravagantly, flailing away with his spurs and waving one arm aloft, with every Navajo there and a lot of us non-Indians cheering and laughing just as if he was a kid in our own family.

Then someone had the idea of making Bob’s brother Bill come out and ride—Bill being a lot bigger than Bob because he went to boarding school and ate. Of course Bill looked like a sack of flour on the burro they chose for him. He managed to hold on, though, and everyone laughed and cheered harder than ever.

We had lassoing matches, we had calf-wrangling, we had wild-cow-milking in which the riders were as likely as not to find they’d been sent out chasing a steer instead. The Navajos, in their wagons and their pickups, had circled all around by the corrals. They knew they’d have near as much fun watching the Navajo cowboys trying to get some of the wilder animals into the chutes, or trying to get out of the way, as they would just watching the riders trying to stay on horseback for a few seconds.

We had a tug-of-war in which the bright-skirted women outweighed and, finally outtugged the men who’d offered to pull against them. The men had known perfectly well what a chance they were taking. They walked off the field grinning a little wryly, yet tipping their broad Stetsons to their friends’ mock plaudits.

There was a chicken-pull with each of two teams on horseback striving to ride close enough to toss the “chicken”—a pillow—into a small corral. I swear that some of that day’s riders changed sides again and again, so as to force whichever team had the “chicken” back farther and farther from that corral, in wild circles all over the field and even out behind the hills until at last, all opposition exhausted as much from laughing and shouting as from the ride, one of them merely trotted in to victory.

The community co-op store took a percentage of every purse,
and sold cases of pop, as well as whatever the Navajos might want
to cook at their campfires dotted all about the hills.

On the third morning, slowly, the teams and wagons dragged
away. Men and women rode off straight and easy on horseback.
Behind them lay, deserted now, Ramah’s dreary monuments of
failure: the tiny school with its appalling shack-dormitories, the
co-op store with its unstocked shelves, the meeting house where
no one met.

SOME VERY GOOD men and women—Federal employees—had
knocked themselves out to do what they could for the Ramahs.
But their best was not enough—my best would not be enough—
where so many needs were so desperate. Community leaders
seemed only to husband what lands and what strength their
people had, in readiness for the day when, somehow, they could
see some course of action that would not endanger even that
little. Inevitably they had become more and more skeptical, in-
creasingly hesitant to act at all.

Inevitably political issues had become unreal. The leaders dis-
puted about which of two rival missions most respected Navajo
tradition, and which might best help them learn to deal with
white men. And, of all things, they fought about which of two
Indian Agencies might serve them best—our Albuquerque
Agency, operating from nearby Zuni, or the Navajo Service,
seventy miles away in Window Rock. Ramah’s officers were com-
mitted to us of Albuquerque—the more’s the pity. For having
chosen us, they had to defend us. They knew by now that we
could do little for them. So when they went in to Albuquerque,
they worked on “the Agent” until he expressed some vague hope
to do more next year. This was the lollipop to take home: To
Ramah, From the Agency, Kindness of Richard Apodaca and
Anna Miguel.

Richard is slow to move, and I was slow to see the depth of
his convictions. But Anna is immediately to be seen. Anna is a
wonderful woman. She had through most of the past ten or twelve years been secretary and interpreter for Ramah, provider of ideas, disparager of ideas, politician extraordinary—and good wife and mother. She is, incidentally, a most attractive woman in her middle thirties, direct and poised in every personal relationship, uneasy only when impersonal forces are more than she can understand.

Anna has learned far more of how non-Indians think, than have any of her neighbors. She has worked often with anthropologists and with administrators, questioning their purposes until she can explain to each Navajo they interview just what they want and why. If asking Navajos the questions white men can think up, and interpreting their answers, gives any insight into Navajo thinking, Anna knows her people too, as do few others. She knows all of this Ramah country, and country far beyond. But, "I don't know about these Navajo people any more," she has told me, "I don't know what they want."

There is light in Anna's wryest smile, as indeed she can charge every movement with grace. No more so than most Navajo women, perhaps, she and they in their modest velvet blouses and calico skirts to the floor. I rather expect, too, an unclouded inquiring gaze like Anna's from any Navajo who has known enough of us non-Indians to study us as individuals. Anna, I suppose, has really only one unique set-off to her grace: She has a pronounced limp, from lack of medical care once. Even this cannot make her walk seem anything but direct and flowing. Navajos' grace is grace regardless—regardless of physical setting or, even, of their fear of the unknown ahead.

And there must be great fear for one in Anna's position—who knows that no one can understand what she cannot grasp herself. Not knowing "what these people want," not knowing "what is going on," Anna must sometimes feel that action is futile and that those who pretend they can aid their people are fools who must be stopped before they can destroy what remains.
Anna has indeed fought down even her friends, when they grew too powerful. She has talked down every manager of the co-op store, and has conspicuously taken her trade elsewhere. Yet over the years, while all others have from time to time defaulted their leadership—Ben Luis to take jobs away from home, Frank Fent to farm his wife's land in another community, Richard Apodaca to study out each new problem before he will presume to lead—over the years Anna has continued to work with the Ramah Navajos.

She and her husband have devoted themselves tirelessly and without pay to the enormous task of enrolling school children all over the unmapped countryside, whenever there are openings in Indian boarding schools. They have indeed fought for any project that holds hope for more schooling. Here is the positive effort Anna identifies herself with. There could be no political return adequate to her devotion.

There are times, as Anna says, when community action quite gets away from her. But always, I think, she symbolizes the fears and the unbelief, and especially the fear of unbelief, which must lie under all Navajo thinking today. Her very acceptance of Indian Service seems acceptance as of an evil—an evil necessary for the protection and the minor benefits Indian Servants may afford, and an evil simply preferable to the unknown until some far-off day when Navajo education and experience may be seen as equal to Navajo tasks.

The Navajos have great respect for Pueblo magic. They admire Pueblo organization. They even marry into Pueblo villages sometimes—though for some reason or other few Navajo men, at least, stay there for long.

The same week that Zuni Pueblo was entertaining and feeding all comers, in its great winter dances, the Navajos were on relief.

The Navajos had known relief, not recently yet not so very
long ago. Usually, “relief” meant ten pounds of potatoes or so, at the end of an all-day ride. Word began to reach Ramah that this time the issue would be greater, but clearly, this would have to be seen. No Ramah Navajo had any idea what caravans of trucks, bearing what mountains of food and clothing, had come rumbling into Gallup from white Americans suddenly aware of the Navajos. No Navajo had seen how Zuni’s usual impassive Federal employees were running trucks early and late, burrowing into the supplies in Gallup, staggering out with cases of food, all with energy and imagination and obvious delight. (For at last they saw something they could do for the Navajos.)

I hired a Navajo girl who’d married into Zuni, for the paper work we had to do. I don’t know how long she’d been away from home, though sometimes she visited her mother there. I do know she was Catholic-educated, and that she spoke Navajo rather badly now. And I did see how appalled she was by the poverty she now encountered. Mildred was competent in a variety of ways. She was kind, and hearty, and smiling, and sure of herself —what we like to think of as average American, though of Navajo blood. She had as many ideas as I, for how we could best organize the clerical job at hand. She did not seem to know at all, what misery our labors would reflect.

She would know soon enough. Perhaps she did not really take in what the first few Navajos told her, in answer to her questions. But along about half an hour after we started, she found she was crying. She had to fight back tears all that unending afternoon.

The day was bitter cold. The old men and women came in prepared to receive little. We crowded them first into that bankrupt co-op store—its rough wooden shelves clearly empty of any supplies. They met only us two Federal form-fillers, me and the Navajo girl they didn’t know, behind our two typewriters. We filled in, for each applicant, three whole pages of forms. We required much standing in line. We asked questions most of which must have seemed nonsense, about their most obvious needs.
We checked off each member of each family for age and census number. (For though what we would give them was from individual citizens, big government and for that matter Red Cross, would demand exactly these forms with notation of what each applicant had already received—before issuing them anything further.)

So here we went, and I knew all the reasons why. But oh how conscious I was of what a bureaucrat looks like. The Navajos and Mildred and I went through the governmental routine together—dead pan and without explaining our frame of mind. Giant government must always look foolish for its concern with minute detail. But as mere human being—they must have asked themselves—did I not know, could I not see, Navajo need for myself?

Only the utterly destitute stood here in line, old Navajo grandmothers whose children had died or moved away but whose three, maybe five, maybe eight grandchildren remained somehow to be fed and clothed. Younger women, standing around, had to answer most of my questions for them. At least they all put up with me in dignity; Navajos do not beg. At least, I thought, they do not show me what this may be doing to their spirit. I could not openly embarrass them, and so need not feel quite so embarrassed myself.

They huddled close round the one wood stove, quiet except as they reached Mildred and me, to answer our questions. Finally, after explanation of whatever had particularly confused them, and after the to-do of getting each old woman’s clear thumbprint—much hilarity there—we could direct them out of the store and to the meeting house for the actual issue. There they would be asked only. What, of all the goods spread before them all over the floor, did they want for the chits we had given them?

I knew the first grandmother who stood in my line pretty well. I remember her air of cynical resignation—how she seemed to be trying me out in behalf of her community, rather than beseeching-
ing my pity for her desperate need. And certainly I shall not forget her dumbshow, after she got the food we had for her.

Two weeks' supplies for her and for her six young grandchildren was quite beyond anything she had expected. It was, furthermore, far too much for her to carry; she loaded it on wooden boards useless for her journey home but admirable for display. She hauled her boards over the snow to the co-op, to where the other grandmothers still stood in line, and thrust open the door in triumph.

There was astonishment in the crowd then. There was the muttered conviction that we must have made a mistake, then the certainty that the Navajos would be made to pay eventually for whatever they took. There was the question directed at me, Did this really come from individual Americans and not from Washington? From individuals, I told them again, and astonishment was expressed the louder. There was firm agreement at last, that since no one in line had anything that could be taken in payment, all might as well take what was so unbelievably offered. And always there was chattering excitement anew when another grandmother was seen through the windows, come to display what she had been given.

There was fear expressed, some urgency now in crowding up toward our tables, lest the supply be exhausted before all could be served. There was, finally, the laughter of shock and of belief turned topsy-turvy, laughter because suddenly white people had thought of the Navajos. That laughter went on then through all the long afternoon, like that of partisans saved suddenly and incomprehensibly from sure political defeat, sure of their victory now, yet ready for new amazement at each added confirmation. Such unaccountable reversal to all experience can be understood only as slapstick.

If, from first questionnaire to last sack of beans, that issue of relief was an overwhelming experience to the Navajos, it was, incidentally, overwhelming enough for us on the job. Perhaps
we could hardly have failed to share the Navajos' excitement. We weren't hungry ourselves. But for us too these sudden gifts from all over the nation could seem only some monstrous whim. Government's requirements and the nation's generosity, both were forces outside Navajo understanding. We were somehow responsible for explaining—what?

THE NAVAJOS circled around school and co-op long after they could have started for home. They had no trouble arranging how to carry the food they had been given; anyone with a wagon would be sure to help those who had come on horseback. They stayed to talk. I stayed to see them and hear them—and to try to match up left and right shoes we had, to give out another day.

On my way home at last, I kept passing the people's wagons. They would pull over to the right of the rutted road, and I would somehow pull past on their left. They would laugh, and I would laugh. High on the dark hills I saw old men and women riding. They waved, I honked.

When I reached home, I was exhausted. Navajo relief had been a good hard daytime job all week—and I'd been staying up most of the nights at the Zuni dances. So when I found Ben Luis waiting for me, I was appalled.

But then I knew there was nothing I wanted more, at that moment, on that night, than to talk to such a hard-headed, tough-minded young Navajo as Ben.

Or at least to let him talk, about what the day had meant to him. Ben is a Navajo whom a few whites call arrogant. I think maybe they're put off by the black fire of his eye, or even by the extra-ordinary red darkness of his taut cheeks. A lot of good businessmen have hired Ben, or tried awfully hard to. But I couldn't ask even Ben to share the burden of my pitying his people.

I thought of telling him why I never visited the homes of his people. How I could stand to see their misery all right, if I had
to. How I had gone into Navajo hogans often enough in communities I was just passing through. But how I could not look the people of Ramah in the eye, week after week, once they knew I had seen their misery.

I don't think I wanted to say, "Look at me, Ben, how sensitive I am." I think I wanted to say, "Look, Ben, this is a little silly of me, it's why I'll never be much good working with Navajos."

I thought of telling him simply, that I felt good going to Zuni dances because they're good theatre—because if the Zunis saw how moved I was, they could simply be glad to have entertained me. Whereas the only time I ever went to a Navajo dance, it seemed to me I saw such naked pride and despair struggling in such precarious balance, that I got out of there and got drunk.

Maybe I was just sentimentalizing. Maybe I'd have done better to tell Ben about it all, and get the poison of pity out of my system. But what good would my pity be to him, either? What really could I do about these people I pitied—unless somehow I could help them undertake something for themselves?

Anyway, I did not talk of my own ideas or emotions that night. I listened to Ben.

He told me he figured his community might have three or four thousand dollars coming in that winter, in Red Cross and government relief checks. I told him three or four thousand was a minimum; he nodded his agreement soberly.

He said that even three or four thousand dollars was something new in Ramah. He said there must be something the people could do for themselves, to make part of that money stay in the community so it would do double duty.

I talked late with Ben.