

The Navajo Indians

William M. Edwardy

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FORT WINGATE, the largest military post in the Southwest, is situated some three miles south of the line of the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad, and not many miles from the Arizona border. Department head-quarters are situated here, and a garrison of nine companies, mostly of the Sixth United States Cavalry, and one company of Indian scouts is constantly maintained. This large force is considered necessary to guard against any possible outbreak of the Navajo Indians, who roam over an extensive reservation, embracing nearly twenty thousand square miles of territory in northwestern New Mexico and northeastern Arizona.

The Navajos are estimated to number 23,000 or more, and they are by far the most powerful tribe of the Southwest. They have been at peace with the whites for about twenty-six years; but their fierce warlike natures have made it necessary for the military authorities to keep constantly on the alert. The tribe is rich in cattle, ponies, and sheep, and they suffered so much during the last war with the whites that it is the fear of losing their property more than anything else which prevents serious trouble. As it is, they are constantly quarrelling with cattle-men on the borders of the reservation, and they cannot resist the temptation of making an occasional raid on their neighbors and old enemies the Utes. In spite of his apparently peaceful inclinations, the Navajo has a deep-seated and well-founded hatred for the white man, and would gladly seek revenge for the wrongs he has suffered, if past experience had not proven to him that he must eventually lose in any conflict with his pale-faced conquerors. No white man or party of white men can safely pass through the Navajo country alone; but if sent out under the escort of any Indian of the tribe, the sense of honor of the people is such that there can be no possibility of danger.

Considering the vast extent of the Navajo reservation, with its natural wonders, the numerical strength of the tribe, and their superior intelligence, very little attention has been paid them by travellers and writers, so that their country, their customs, and their traditions are comparatively unknown. Fort Wingate is the natural starting-point for the Navajo country. It is a prettily situated post, with spacious quarters, storehouses, and corrals, where every detail of every-day life is conducted with that order and military discipline common to frontier forts. The strategic position of the post is such that in the event of a Navajo outbreak the troops could be readily thrown out between the reservation and the thickly populated districts of New Mexico. It was established several years ago, and is now under the command of General Carr, who during his many years of service with the Sixth Cavalry has fought nearly every tribe of hostile Indians on the border.

The company of Indian scouts which is kept at the post is a splendid body of men, being selected from among the bravest and most intelligent young men of the tribe. They have adopted the regulation army uniform, and are neat and careful in their dress. They render efficient service in keeping order on the reservation and in bringing in renegades who have committed depredations of any kind. The scouts are commanded by a regular army officer, but their chief is a handsome half-breed called Chee (the light-haired), who acts as interpreter, and is one of the most influential men of the tribe.

By the permission of the commanding officer, and through the aid of Chee, I succeeded in obtaining an Indian pony and the services of one of the scouts to guide me on a trip through the reservation. We left the post at an early hour of the morning, and headed north through the rugged, broken country, which in its peculiar formations is unlike any other portion of the earth. Snow had fallen during the night to the depth of several inches, and as we

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passed into the hilly country an ever-changing panorama of weird and beautiful scenery was opened before us. The tall buttes of variegated hue rising abruptly from the snow-clad plains presented an endless variety of color and form. Some were smooth and round as if chiselled by the hand of man; others were jagged and rough; while others still took the shape of perfect domes.

A few miles from the post we came upon a pile of dark brownstone which so closely resembles the body and spires of a great cathedral that it has been called the "Navajo Church." It rises for several hundred feet above the level of the surrounding plain, and can be seen for many miles.

Near Fort Defiance, where the agency is located, we passed three tall buttes which in color and form resemble stacks of hay. They are called the "Hat-stacks," and at the distance of one or two miles the illusion is so perfect that the name is very appropriate. There is an immense circular opening in one of these buttes, through which a person on the west side can plainly see the mountain slopes which lie to the eastward. The natural beauties and wonders of the Navajo country are too varied and numerous to be mentioned in detail. There is a wonderful canon in the Navajo Mountains — of which I know only from stories told me by old men of the tribe — which has never yet been visited by white men. It is a beautiful valley, shut in on all sides by cliffs which rise several thousand feet, the only entrance being a narrow defile scarcely wide enough for two men to pass abreast. The Bridal-Veil Falls, which have been seen and photographed, are unsurpassed in beauty by anything in the Southwest. The principal fall is a solid body of water some twenty feet in width, which plunges over a precipice 132 feet in height, and there are several smaller streams on either side.

At Fort Defiance, which is just across the line in Arizona, I found a picturesque little settlement in a broad canon, where the government has erected a number of buildings, and established a school for the education of Indian boys and girls. This is the business centre of the Navajo reservation, and here all dealings and consultations between the agents of the government and chiefs of the tribe are carried on. There are at present seventy-two children in the school; and outside of authorized traders there are probably twenty government employes at the place. Mr. C. E. Vandever, the present Indian Agent, was formerly City Marshal of Terre Haute, Indiana, and under his vigorous administration of affairs many innovations have been made, and a degree of order established which until lately was unknown on the reservation. I will give you some of his views in regard to the advancement of the Indian later on. At Defiance I spent some time, and naturally my first efforts were directed toward learning something of the traditions of the tribe. Through Chee's help I had no difficulty in securing interpreters, and had many long and interesting talks with the story-tellers, or historians, whose business it is to tell what has been handed down from the past.

I found among the Navajos the same difficulty which I have met with in other tribes, viz., that the various historians, or story-tellers, do not always agree in their traditions, and that while the groundwork may have been the same originally, each one elaborates or curtails to suit his own fancy. In common with other tribes of the Southwest, the Navajos believe that they originally came from below, and like the Moquis their lower world is composed of two stories or stations. Their best-established tradition of the creation, or appearance of man on earth, is as follows: The Navajos originally lived in the underworld — that is, the world immediately below the one upon which they now live. In that world they were happy and contented, and had everything which heart could wish for. There were no excesses of heat or cold, and fruits and flowers grew in abundance. The day was marked by a bright cloud, which rose like a curtain in the east, and as this went down a black cloud rose in the west, which marked the night. In this happy condition they existed until some one of the tribe discovered an opening in the earth which extended upward to some place then unknown. He communicated his discovery to his people, and the tribe set out to find to what place the opening would lead. Finally they emerged upon this earth at a point somewhere in the Navajo Mountains, and immediately prepared to take possession of their new home. When they came upon earth they were ruled by a queen, who mysteriously disappeared four days afterward. Men were sent in all directions to search for her, and those who had gone in the direction of the Navajo Mountains came upon the opening by which the tribe had ascended from the lower world, and found that it had not yet been closed. Looking downward, they beheld their former home, and saw their queen combing her long black hair. She

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spoke to them, and told them to return to her people with the message that she had died on earth and had returned to the lower world, and that they would come to her only when death had released them from the upper world. With this the earth closed, and the searchers returned to the tribe with the message which had been given them. Soon after this, giants appeared in the country, who killed and ate up the entire tribe with the exception of four families, who found safety in a deep canon of the Navajo Mountains.

One day in their desolate retreat they saw at early dawn a bright ray of sunshine beaming upon a lovely verdant hill not far away. Four days in succession this phenomenon was presented, and being drawn by curiosity to visit the spot, they found a beautiful girl babe. This child was regarded as the daughter of heaven and earth, and they reared her with the greatest care. When she grew to womanhood, the great warrior who rides upon a white horse and carries the sun upon his arm as a shield fell in love with and married her. The offspring of this union were two sons, who slew the giants who had destroyed the Navajos; and under their protection the world was peopled again. The daughter of heaven and earth was finally taken up by her warrior husband and transported to the great waters to the westward, where she was placed in a floating palace, which has since been her home. She is immortal, and to her are addressed the prayers of the people. Her water home is guarded by twelve immortal beings, who return periodically to the land to learn what the Navajos are doing, and to carry back with them any messages which they may send. The tradition of this protecting goddess accounts for the respect which the Navajos show to the women of their tribe. among them a man never lifts his hand against a woman, although it is no unusual thing for a squaw to administer a sound thrashing to the warrior husband who has offended her. All of the sheep, which constitute the great wealth of the tribe, are owned by the women; and in the various families the line of descent is always on the side of the woman. The Navajos have little or no idea of a future existence, but are firm believers in the transmigration of souls. For this reason they have great reverence for different animals and birds, which are supposed to be the re-embodiment of departed spirits of Navajos. The morals of the Navajos are of a very low standard. Polygamy is practised; and the marriage rite is only a form, for the husband or wife can take a new partner whenever so inclined. It is usual to purchase a wife by paying from ten to twenty ponies, but the husband is not bound to keep her any longer than he wishes. However, the wife who is abandoned can avenge herself by shooting the ponies or cattle belonging to her fickle lord. Some of the Navajos own slaves, who are principally Ute Indians who have been captured on raids into their country; and although the government has been trying for a long time to liberate these captives wherever found, there are still many on the reservation.

The Navajos are naturally an intelligent and industrious race. They cultivate large tracts of land, and carefully tend their flocks and herds. The wool clip for the past year was upward of 2,500,000 pounds. They have lately been furnished with shears of an improved pattern; but until recently they cut the wool from the backs of the sheep with knives or sharp pieces of tin, an operation which was not only tedious, but was terribly painful to the animal. Previous to the last war with the whites, the tribe had extensive orchards of peach, apple, and pear trees; but these were cut down and destroyed by the soldiers under Kit Carson, since which time the Indians will not plant trees, for they say "the white men will come again and cut them down." During this war the Navajos suffered terribly, for they not only lost their flocks and herds, but nearly half of the tribe was either killed in battle or died of hunger and exposure. In order to subdue them, the soldiers and their allies, the Utes, destroyed everything upon which they could subsist; and it is related upon good authority that hundreds of Navajo women, when driven to the last extremity, threw themselves and their children headlong from the tall cliffs which overlook Fort Defiance, and were dashed to pieces upon the stones below. The Navajos have more than ordinary ingenuity in some classes of work, which is shown in the artistic patterns of the blankets which they make, and the skillful designing and manufacture of silver ornaments. A silversmith in the tribe can make bridles, belts, and necklaces which in originality of pattern and perfection of finish would puzzle many of our best mechanics. The people too are inclined to present a fine outward appearance, and display much taste in decorating their persons and the animals upon which they ride.

In regard to the progress which the tribe is making, there is little, if any. The means provided by the government are totally inadequate for the needs of the people. There is, to be sure, a school of seventy-two pupils, but what does this amount to among 23,000 people? The influence is so slight that it is hardly felt, and its benefits are

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scarcely perceptible.

Mr. Vandever, the present agent, is my authority for the statement that it is a bad policy to take the children from the agency and send them to Carlisle or some other remote school. He thinks that there should be several primary schools at convenient points on the reservation, and also a high-school, so that the children could be educated without having to be separated from their families. Above all, he thinks that there should be industrial teachers throughout the tribe, as the people are not only capable but willing to learn how to cultivate their lands and care for their animals.

At present the Navajos live in little huts, called hogans, scattered over the reservation, and it is very seldom that more than one or two of these huts are found together. Lately the people have evinced a desire to build houses, and a number of comfortable cabins have been erected under the supervision of the government agent. As already stated, there is constant hostility between the Navajos and cattle-men along the borders of their reservation; but this is due more to the encroachments of the whites than to any fault of the Indians. There are fine grazing lands on the reservation, and the Navajo Mountains are said to be wonderfully rich in minerals. These serve as a constant temptation for unscrupulous people to enter the reservation, and when they do, they are generally met with a warm reception. It is not an uncommon occurrence to find a body riddled with bullets, as was the case a short while ago, when two Mexican herders were found dead not far from the post. The Navajos now own their land in common, but there is a growing sentiment in favor of its allotment in severalty, and those who know them best predict that when this is done the tribe will make rapid strides toward civilization and enlightenment.