

The Navajo Nation

A Short History and Orientation

Prepared by the Sierra Service Project

May, 2008

Introduction

The Navajo Nation, in my opinion, is an incredibly interesting and magical place to visit. As a participant in Sierra Service Project, you have a really unusual opportunity to experience Navajo culture in a way that few outsiders do. I expect that you will find people to be warm, welcoming, proud and fun to be around. I hope that the physical beauty of the landscape, together with the integrity of the people you will meet, will touch you deeply.

The Navajo Nation is the second-largest group of Native Americans in the U.S. today, and their land base is the largest. In fact, the Navajo Nation is larger than 10 states and extends into four states - Arizona, Utah, New Mexico and Colorado. This area is the traditional homeland of the Navajo and is known as Diné Bikéyah in the Navajo language.

Approximately 300,000 belong to the Navajo Nation and a little less than 200,000 people live on the Navajo Nation.

History

Pre-Colombian History

There is a lot of scholarly disagreement about the early history of the Navajo people. Navajos are Athabaskan speakers, as are the Apache and other tribes living in the Southwest today. We know that these peoples originated in western Canada and lived in small, nomadic bands. Apparently, ancestors of present-day Navajo migrated to present-day Navajoland sometime between 800 and 1400 AD. It is clear that newly-arrived Athabaskan speaking groups were in conflict with longer established residents. This might have been one of the factors that led to the decline of the Anasazi people. It is believed that the Anasazi are the ancestors of the current Pueblo people of the Southwest, including the Hopi. [A History of the Navajos, by Garrick Bailey and Roberta Glenn Bailey]

Navajos grew a variety of crops which can still be seen today in Navajoland. The most important crop is corn, followed by beans and squash. During this period it is thought that Navajo hunted wild game, like deer, elk, mountain sheep, rabbits and squirrels.

Spanish Rule

The first Europeans to arrive in what is now the Southwestern United States were the Spaniards in 1541, who were the first to call these people "Navajo". The term "Dine", which simply means "the people", is the term that Navajo continue to use to refer to themselves. The Spanish introduced goats and sheep to the Navajo and this had a big impact on Navajo lifestyles and the local environment. Both of these grazing animals are important to the Navajo today. In particular, sheep is used as food, and sheep wool is both sold commercially and used to produce rugs and other craft items. The Spaniards also introduced horses to the Navajo, and these became important for hunting and raiding.

In 1680, natives of the Southwest launched a well-coordinated revolt against Spanish rule. The revolt was triggered by Spanish repression of native religious practices and a drought. The Spanish were defeated and withdrew from the Southwest for over a decade. During this period, Pueblo Indians destroyed any symbols of Spanish rule and the Catholic religion, including churches and crosses.

The Spanish reconquered the area in 1692 and what followed was an often-bloody repression of Indian people. Navajos were subjected to some of this violence, particularly because of their habit of raiding the settlements of the Spanish and Indian settlements. For the next 150 years, conflicts between Navajos and the authorities were frequent and Spanish (and later Mexican) governors often sought to negotiate peace settlements with the Navajos in an effort to stop their frequent raids.

One of the reasons that these negotiations failed is that the Navajo effectively lacked any kind of central government authority. Navajos lived at that time - and continue to live - in rural isolation or in

very small villages. They didn't have established cultural institutions like councils and chiefs to impose their will upon the population.

The American Period

The American government seized control of New Mexico and the surrounding area in 1846 and inherited the problems that the Mexicans had in providing security for its citizens in this area. The American solution was to build an army fort, Fort Defiance, in the heart of the Dinete. The fort is not far from Window Rock, the headquarters of the Navajo Nation government.

The fort helped, but did not end, the raiding. In 1863, after a series of clashes, the Union Army sent Kit Carson with a group of soldiers into Navajoland with orders to use a "scorched earth" strategy to force the Navajos to surrender. "Scorched earth" refers to the practices of destroying anything and everything belonging to an enemy people in an effort to make their land uninhabitable. Carson's men killed any Navajos refusing to surrender, burned corn-fields, killed sheep and other livestock, destroyed stocks of stored corn, and burned homes. This policy was brutal and it was successful.

The Long Walk

With some heroic exceptions, Carson was successful in getting most of the Navajo people to surrender. These people were force marched, beginning in January, 1863, in the heart of the winter, 300 miles from Navajoland to a place called Redondo Bosque in eastern New Mexico. The 300 mile walk took 18 days. Several hundred people died along the way, and between 8,000 and 9,000 people were resettled into the small area of Redondo Bosque.

Conditions in Redondo Bosque, which was essentially a large concentration camp, were horrible. Food was inadequate, disease was rampant, and farming was impossible. At times, people starved and raids were common between Indians within Redondo Bosque and those in the surrounding areas.

By 1868, the U.S. government had been embarrassed by negative news reports about conditions at Redondo Bosque and was ready to declare the experiment a failure. President Grant negotiated the Treaty of Redondo Bosque, which created a reservation for the Navajo at its present location and specified various forms of assistance for the Navajo, who made the 300 mile trek back to their homeland. In exchange, the Navajo gave up raiding.

The Long Walk and the years in Redondo Bosque are commemorated annually by Navajos.

Rebuilding

The Navajos returned from Redondo Bosque to a devastated land and had to rebuild their homes, their farms and their herds of livestock. The US government established an Indian agency on the reservation and imposed a governance system on the Navajo that hadn't existed before. This system has evolved into the present Navajo Nation government.

The 20th Century

The 1900's brought periods of unprecedented prosperity to the Navajo. The building of the Santa Fe Railroad along the southern reservation boundary made it possible for Navajo wool to make it to markets throughout the United States. In certain times - especially during wartime - wool prices were high. The development of high quality rugs and their popularity also brought in significant income. Despite this, economic development on the reservation lagged the rest of the nation and, like most of Indian country, continues to do so today. Oil was discovered on the reservation in the 1920's, followed by the development of gas and coal mining. These continue to provide income to the tribe. During the 1950's and 1960's a significant amount of uranium mining was done on the reservation which resulted in the creation of toxic wastes and high levels of radiation-caused cancers in some communities. (Today, teenage Navajo girls have a rate of reproductive organ cancer that is 17 times greater than the rest of the United States.)

Beginning first in World War I, Navajo men have volunteered in significant numbers to fight in our nation's wars. Most Navajo communities have a tribute to veterans in their chapter houses and famous Navajo Code Talkers of World War II have been honored throughout the nation.

Culture and Religion

Navajo culture is characterized by a lack of central organization. Traditionally, there has been no ruling class, no priests, and no chiefs. This lack of central authority is thought to be one of the things that actually enabled the Navajo people to survive and recover from the ordeal of the Long Walk and Redondo Bosque.

Navajo religion has been described as a worldview and series of ceremonies marking different life events - like puberty ceremonies and cleansing ceremonies. Medicine men are hired to conduct these ceremonies based upon the training they have received from other healers and their reputations. Many Navajo have a profound sense of spirituality tied to the land - the Dinete'h - and will often say daily prayers.

The traditional Navajo home is the hogan - an eight-sided structure which always has a door facing east, the direction of the rising sun. There are many hogans on the reservation.

The Navajo language is spoken by many people on the reservation and many elderly people speak only Navajo. Because of its size and its isolation, the Navajo have been successful at preserving their language and much of their traditional culture.

Despite their reputation as being very tied to tradition, historically the Navajo have been quick to adopt certain outside technologies when they thought these technologies were beneficial. One example of this was the horse-pulled wagon, which became highly prized items after their introduction on the reservation.

Economic Development

Like most of Indian Country, the Navajo Nation is far less developed economically than the rest of the United States. Until recently, phone service on the reservation was rare, and there are still many people who live without electricity or running water. The Nation has about 2,000 miles of paved roads; in comparison, the state of West Virginia, which is about the same size, has 18,000 miles of paved roads.

In the part of the Nation where Sierra Service Project will be working this summer, per capital income in 1999 was \$6,426, compared to a U.S. national median of \$21,857. This translates to 58 percent of the population living below the poverty level.

Lack of jobs is one of the main reasons for this economic disparity. Because of its isolation, jobs on the reservation are scarce. Estimates of unemployment vary significantly between 40 and 80 percent of the population. Housing is also a problem, with overcrowding and substandard conditions being quite common.

Despite these problems, there are many signs of economic development in the Navajo Nation today. In the past 10 years, many small shopping centers have been built, banking services are available, and it has become easier to start a business. There has been a real push on the part of the Navajo Nation government to get people to spend their money on the Nation rather than in neighboring, off-reservation towns.

Education and Social Problems

Nationwide, only about 50 percent of native youth graduate from high school, and this is probably about the same for Navajo youth. In the 1990's, the Federal government financed the building of many new schools on the Nation, and these can be seen as you travel around the reservation today. (This was done during the Clinton administration and it is one reason that Bill Clinton is a very popular figure on the reservation today. The other is that Clinton was the first US president to officially visit an Indian reservation in 50 years!)

There is a community college on the reservation - the Dine College in Tsaile. The Dine College was the first native American community college established in the country, and continues to serve Indian students from the Navajo Nation and from across the country.

Like many economically-disadvantaged communities, social and health problems exist on the Navajo Nation. Alcoholism is common, despite the fact that possession and sale of alcohol is prohibited. Gangs and drug abuse have increased in the past decades. Suicide rates among Indian teens are the highest in the nation and domestic violence rates are high.

As mentioned previously, the effects of uranium mining are higher cancer rates among some groups and in some communities on the reservation. Diabetes rates are very high as well, caused by diet and lack of exercise. There are very well publicized fitness and education campaigns now underway.

Conclusion

I hope that you will agree that it is truly a privilege to be able to spend a week among in a Navajo community, to be welcomed into homes and to be invited into relationships. This is a unique opportunity to learn about a proud, historic, strong community of Americans that differs in some important ways from your home community. This is a great opportunity to serve and to learn!

Learning More!

There are lots and lots of resources available for learning more about the Navajo people. Here are just a few.

Tony Hillerman

Tony Hillerman is a mystery writer who has written a number of excellent and entertaining books set on the Navajo Nation. Hillerman is greatly respected by the Navajo people for his respectful and accurate depiction of their culture. Some of my favorite books are: *A Thief of Time*, *Skinwalkers* and *Talking God*.

Several of Hillerman's novels have been made into made-for-TV movies and the ones I've seen have been good. These are available on Netflix and at Amazon.com.

Other Movies/DVDs

Rocks with Wings: This is a great documentary from 2002 about the winning girl's basketball team - the Lady Chieftains - from Shiprock, Arizona. If you can find a copy, it is definitely worth watching and your teens will enjoy it. (SSP has a copy which we can loan you.)

How the West Was Lost is an excellent historical series put out by the Discovery Channel. The first volume deals with the Navajo Nation. This may be available at your local library and you can easily find it for sale online.

Codetalkers: This movie got particularly bad reviews. I haven't seen it, but from what I've heard, it isn't an accurate portrayal of Navajos or a very good movie!

Books

Many books have been published about Navajo culture and history, and are available at your local bookstore or online.