UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title

The Navajo People and Uranium Mining. Edited by Doug Brugge, Timothy Benally, and Esther Yazzie-Lewis.

Permalink

https://escholarship.org/uc/item/34r8r3f4

Journal

American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 31(4)

ISSN

0161-6463

Author

McPherson, Robert S.

Publication Date

2007-09-01

DOI

10.17953

Copyright Information

This work is made available under the terms of a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial License, availalbe at https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/

eScholarship.org Powered by the California Digital Library
University of California

The Navajo People and Uranium Mining. Edited by Doug Brugge, Timothy Benally, and Esther Yazzie-Lewis with foreword by Stewart L. Udall. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2006. 210 pages. $29.95 cloth; $18.95 paper.

Almost sixty years have passed since the uranium boom in the Four Corners area started. Uranium, first worshipped, then vilified, and now regaining favor is a chameleon of its time. Initially seen as something that saved lives during World War II, then as cheap energy and a new form of "gold," next as an extreme environmental hazard and a crippling substance that led to death from cancer or destructive missiles, and now as a tentative solution to global warming and an efficient fuel source—uranium has come full circle. The Navajo people comprised approximately one-quarter of the workforce, and their mining and milling experience is one important aspect of uranium's early history, which began in the 1940s. A book about this experience is overdue. *The Navajo People and Uranium Mining* provides seven interviews with miners or family members and seven scholarly chapters that range from the Navajo perception of uranium to current actions taken for compensation to workers and their relatives. As with most studies that have a number of contributors, in this case eleven authors and ten interviewees, the quality is mixed at times. This volume's contributors should be commended for their selfless assignment of royalties to the Navajo Uranium Memorial.

This work's primary focus revolves around two aspects: the mining experience from a health standpoint and the ineffectiveness of the 1990 Radiation Exposure Compensation Act (RECA). Between the late 1940s and 1990, more than three thousand Navajo miners worked in uranium digs in the Four Corners area both on and off the reservation. Some mines were extensive, twenty-four-hour-a-day operations run by large companies such as Kerr-McGee. Others were "dog hole mines" that employed a handful of workers who ripped the ore from the earth, loaded it into wheelbarrows, and moved it to a pickup truck. Whether complex or simple, all the mines held in common the danger from physical accident and exposure to uranium dust and other types of particulate matter that would result in immediate or long-term illness. The US Atomic Energy Commission was the sole purchaser of uranium and so stood at the center of the legal controversy. The tragic destruction of lives and years of suffering for those who worked in or lived near the mines and mills resulted from this mining experience.

Central to the controversy was the role the federal government played with private enterprise in order to obtain ore. From the Navajo perspective, the government was remiss in its duties to enforce safety practices in the mines and inform all miners and mill workers about the hazards involved in handling uranium. Dereliction of duty is not too strong a phrase to encapsulate the highly charged emotional attitude held by many affected by the aftermath. On the book's dust jacket, Navajo Nation President Joe Shirley Jr. states, "Genocide. There is no other word for what happened to Navajo uranium miners. The era of uranium mining on Navajo land was genocidal because the hazards of cancer and respiratory disease were known to doctors and federal officials, and yet they allowed Navajos to be exposed to deadly radiation to see what would happen to them." Former Secretary of the Interior Stewart Udall intones in the foreword, "The Navajo uranium miners and their families were literally sacrificed to help the nation prevail in the Cold War" (xii). Denouncing the government for its perceived insensitive, deceptive, and slow-to-inform attitude created a nightmare for thousands of miners and their relatives. RECA, enacted to address the wounds created by this situation, did not fare much better in history. Add the RECA charges for inadequacy and extensive red tape to the miner's charges of an insensitive and slow-to-inform attitude, and one has the book's major theme.

How accurate is this portrayal? Certainly the death of hundreds of Navajo uranium handlers and the sickness of thousands is well documented. Was it really genocide and intentional "sacrifice"? Not as much as the book suggests. If Navajo genocide was the federal government's goal, then many white people were killed to accomplish the objective. The implication is that this was an intentional effort to get rid of a particular ethnic group or at least that it was expendable. No proof is provided to support this view. The disturbing part is that there are Navajos who believe this to be true.

There is no doubt that many suffered from uranium's effect, but was this government malpractice an intentional wrong? Doug Brugge and Rob Goble wrote an important chapter, "A Documentary History of Uranium Mining and the Navajo People," which tracks the evolution of thought wherein uranium is recognized as a harmful substance that miners need to be protected from. I expected to encounter a smoking gun wielded by the federal government that implicates it in a direct cover-up of inaction for economic reasons. The first sentence of the chapter's conclusion reads, "This history shows a deliberate avoidance by the federal government with respect to the health disaster among uranium miners, even though uranium mining was considered very much a federal matter" (42). A careful reading and rereading of this chapter does not support clear malfeasance. Starting with the European experience and progressing into the 1950s, the fact that there were conflicting ideas about the link of cancer to uranium becomes immediately apparent. One report provided apparently conclusive evidence; another introduced mitigating circumstances and controvertible information that needed to be considered. For instance, the effects of black lung among coal miners, the fact that many who contracted cancer were smokers, the connection of radon to cancer, and the necessity of effective ventilation in the mines were all discussed in the 1950s and 1960s. There were studies that suggested or even proved from their perspective that cancer and uranium were linked, but like many reports they needed stronger support from additional sources to make them conclusive. Another hindrance to assisting Navajo miners was the 1958 reservation-wide ban on unions, while the court system of the day was not supportive of lawsuits against the feds. However, by the end of the 1960s the government had implemented regulations to protect workers. The larger mines complied because of financial backing; the smaller "dog hole" mines limped along as best they could.

The fight to obtain assistance for families affected by uranium culminated in RECA. Too little, too late, and wrapped in red tape, it summarizes many complaints that concern this legislation. Issues of documenting involvement with uranium, extent of experience, and unprovable assertions added to the miners' and mill workers' frustration. The amendments added in 2000 helped to address these concerns.

The editors have compiled useful information. By way of suggestion, there should have been more care in the use of standardized spelling of Navajo words and better information on the traditional teachings and healing for uranium. An introductory story about Leetso (yellow brown dirt) is told in a Navajo style, but it is removed from the traditional stories tied to standard religious teachings. The contemporary nature of this chapter dulls the ring of authenticity. Perhaps the most disturbing element, however, is found in the interviews, in which Navajos who have suffered the ill effects of uranium are asked loaded questions that direct their responses. For example, what should one say when asked: "There is compensation and some people barely are getting paid. What do you think of this?"; "The people from Washindoon [Washington] knew the health effects, but did not want the people [workers] to know about the health effects. . . . So there were lies; we were used in that way. . . . Did they do the right thing by not telling the people about the hazards or was it wrong?"; and "The government did not handle the people right—right? What do you think of that? Is that really true?" (53, 84, 132). Other questions link the uranium experience to the trauma of the Long Walk a hundred years before. This kind of activism perpetuates the thinking of "genocide" that President Shirley referred to earlier, and this adds more heat and less light.

The value of this book lies in two areas: first, as a one-of-its-kind book, it is a compilation of academic investigation and interviews that concern an important era of Navajo history. Much of the scholarship is balanced and some of it goes into sufficient depth to give the reader a good overview of complex issues. The second value lies in capturing the Navajo perspective. In spite of some of the interview questions, many of the participants balanced out the tragedy associated with mining with an understanding of the times. Should the government have done more to pursue safety measures aggressively and research a clearer understanding of the relation of uranium to cancer? Certainly. Was it an evil, lying organization, bent on genocide and the destruction of its mining workforce? No. The ease of hindsight and the opportunity to take scattered pieces of research and various bodies of evidence and create the smoking gun is tempting but not proven.

Robert S. McPherson
College of Eastern Utah, San Juan Campus