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Naalyéhé Bá Hooghan—
"House of Merchandise":
The Navajo Trading Post as an
Institution of Cultural Change,
1900 to 1930

ROBERT S. McPHERSON

Within the next week, most of you will enter a supermarket that has electric-eye doors for convenience, plays soothing Muzak, and presents its produce in a display worthy of *Better Homes and Gardens*. Oranges treated with chemicals to make them turn the desired color, apples coated with wax, and glistening fruits and vegetables sprayed with water are placed beside brightly colored packaging that screams "one-third off," or "fewer calories," or "organically grown, natural food." As you speed through the express lane checkout and glance at your watch, you select the shortest distance to sprint to your car, located near the handicap parking stall. Weaving between the parked cars, you manage to hit the main flow of traffic, never giving a second thought to the series of choices you have just made, many of which were influenced by the environment and the store manager as much as by you. In short, many of those value-laden decisions derived, whether consciously or subconsciously, from the culture in which you operate. So it is with all people.

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The purpose of this paper is to examine a similar transaction at another time, another place, in a different cultural setting. The Navajo trading post started as an institution in 1868, reached its height between 1900 and the 1930s, then declined. Recognized by many as the focal point where two cultures came together on equal terms, the post served as a vehicle for both change and preservation.¹ Most historians, however, look only at the economic transactions—the exchange of rugs, wool, and silver across the counter—rather than at the role of the post as a vehicle of acculturation. The following brief analysis examines the posts of the northern part of the reservation for their importance in facilitating change in a people noted for adaptability. The Navajo accepted alterations selectively, as a means of enriching their lives without sacrificing cultural integrity. Only later, after the disastrous livestock reduction of the mid to late 1930s, did their culture experience a rate and direction of change totally foreign to previous traditional practices and patterns.

Between 1900 and 1930, there were basically two types of posts that serviced the Navajo. The first belonged to licensed traders, approved by the Bureau of Indian Affairs, which gave operating instructions for a post at a specific location. The store and inventory may have belonged to the trader, but the land surrounding it was the tribe's, and the license was the government's.² Federal regulation dictated the screening of traders, limited the locations of posts, and controlled certain sale items. According to the BIA, a "proper person" to be involved in the business had to be of good moral standing, honest in his dealings, fair in establishing prices, concerned about his customers, and opposed to the sale and use of alcohol by the Indians.

Anyone caught trading on the reservation without a license forfeited all of his merchandise and paid a fine of up to five hundred dollars. How much money would actually be lost in such an incident varied from post to post, but one trader estimated that his store cost him five thousand dollars, with two thousand down and a 6 percent mortgage, along with an inventory of fifteen hundred dollars. On the other hand, a person with a license was never guaranteed that it would be renewed at the end of his tenure, which could last from one to five years.³ The adage of "damned if you do and damned if you don't" in a sense applied to the trader, who theoretically was at the mercy of everyone from the local agent to the Washington bureaucrat on one side, and the Navajo customer on the other.

Although the real may be far from the ideal, the general impression of the traders of this era is that they were basically honest, moral people who worked hard. Those who were not honest did not last long, forced out of the market by competitors who were. Most of the traders were white men, although a handful were Navajo. An Indian had an advantage in that he could establish a post anywhere, whereas an Anglo had to go to a previously specified location. For example, John Wetherill opened a store in Oljato in 1906 after receiving approval to locate on an abandoned mining claim that was surrounded by, but not part of, reservation lands. By 1910, he, his wife Louisa, and his partner Clyde Colville decided that Kayenta, twenty-six miles away, would be a better site because of the traffic that flowed through Marsh Pass. The Wetherills again had to submit to the application process, with accompanying character references, in order to be approved.

The second type of post avoided many government regulations by locating off the reservation. Generally found on the San Juan River, these posts were strung along the northern boundary of Navajo land extending from Farmington, New Mexico, to Aneth, Bluff, and Mexican Hat, Utah, to the western boundary and settlements along the Colorado and Little Colorado rivers. Before the 1890s, these posts flourished as a never-ending source of aggravation to the agents, who watched their charges get siphoned off the reservation, only to be cheated and sent home impoverished.⁴ The national depression of the 1890s generally wiped the slate clean, so that with the establishment of the northern and western agencies in the early 1900s, closer surveillance of border activities was possible. Again, the general impression of trading in these establishments is that, with a few exceptions, those who sold to the Indians were honest and concerned.

Over a thirty-year period, the number of posts fluctuated. A military expedition led by Lieutenant Colonel George Hunter in 1908 provides an educated estimate.⁵ Hunter identified posts at Oljato, Round Rock, Bluff, Tuba City, Teec Nos Pos, and Red Lake as those visited by the Navajo from that region. There were also stores in the Farmington/Shiprock area, although he did not mention them. One of Hunter's captains visited the Bluff post and reported that 950 adult Navajo had traded there within the past year, but only half of them had homes within a sixty-mile radius. Hunter, basing his population figures on traders' statements, concluded that from Navajo Mountain to the Carrizo Mountains there was a total population of men, women, children, and slaves

of 1,512. Even as a rough estimate, these figures are a strong indicator of Navajo mobility for trade relations.

By 1930, there were additional posts located at Ismay, Aneth, Mexican Hat, Monument Valley, Kayenta, Chinle, Red Mesa, Shonto, Inscription House, and Navajo Mountain, just to name the most prominent. To chronicle the rise and fall of all of these posts is not my intent here, but only to indicate how prolific they were during this period.

In general, the Navajo welcomed the posts to their area for two reasons: The closer they were, the more convenient; and having more options available provided an opportunity to play one store against another for better prices. In either instance, travel was involved, and for the Navajo, unlike the whites, setting out on a journey could hold serious implications. Supernatural beings populated the Navajo world, beings who could be either benevolent or vengeful, depending on the ceremonial precautions taken by the traveler. Many people, before setting out, wrapped themselves in a protective shield of good thoughts, prayers, and songs of the Mountainway and Blessingway.⁶ Just as in the myths and legends from which these songs came, the traveler identified with a supernatural hero who had also journeyed far and been protected. The Navajo felt impelled to invoke supernatural aid, especially when posts were located in distant areas or across mythological boundaries that separated safe refuge from the lands of the enemy.

For example, the San Juan River was established by the gods as the northern boundary of safety. Known by various names such as Old Age River, Male Water, and One With a Long Body, this powerful force is also described as a snake wriggling through the desert, a flash of lightning, and a black club of protection to keep invaders from Navajo land. These elements serve as protective symbols to separate realms of safety and danger. Even today, when older people cross the river, they sprinkle corn pollen to the holy being within, to ask for help. When questioned about going to a post on the other side, the Navajo expressed how frightened they were as they loaded their sacks of wool and goat skins into a wooden boat, then watched a young man row them through the sand waves and across the San Juan to the Bluff Co-op.⁷

Fear was not only associated with crossing water. Navajo Oshley, a longtime resident of southeastern Utah, told of the time he traveled to the unfamiliar post of Chilchinbii'to. As darkness fell, he approached an abandoned corral and heard soft singing

and what he thought was a ceremony. His horse became skittish, and a feeling of foreboding overwhelmed him. He hurried on and finally arrived at his destination, where he spent the night, but the next day, curiosity got the best of him and he returned to the spot. There was no hogan and no ceremony, only a set of human tracks that changed into coyote prints that headed for the trading post. Oshley was convinced that he had had a close encounter with a skinwalker, an evil personification created through witchcraft.⁸

In addition to danger, however, travel to a post also brought opportunity for riches. The Navajo sang songs to beguile the trader into giving a good deal. To the Navajo, thought is as important as action, so good thoughts and wishes needed to precede what occurred at the store. Prayers and songs could work wonders on the trader, one of them wishing "the white man will be generous with his money as well as with his food."⁹ An excerpt from a trading song says,

Hard goods of all sorts are attached to it as it becomes mine.
Soft goods of all sorts are attached to it as it becomes mine.
It shall be beautiful behind it as it becomes mine.
It shall be beautiful in front of it as it becomes mine.
Good and everlasting one am I, as it becomes mine.¹⁰

Once the people arrived at the post, a new set of concerns arose. The stores, constructed of rock, adobe, or wood, followed a basic pattern, with a large front room called the bullpen. This room held a wood-burning stove and plenty of space for customers to gather and visit. On the outskirts of the room, in an L or U configuration, were wide wooden counters worn smooth by the blankets, wool, and merchandise that flowed back and forth. Some posts had a six-inch elevation behind the counters, allowing the trader to look out into the bullpen over the heads of his customers, while also appearing larger in size, a slight psychological advantage. One trader also put wire mesh eighteen inches above the counter to prevent being lassoed and dragged over the top, although this fencing does not appear to be a common practice.

All goods were stored well out of reach of the customers, who identified articles by pictures and colors instead of by reading labels. A disadvantage of this physical layout was that in the winter, heat radiated from the stove into the bullpen but rarely made it over the counter to the feet and legs of the trader. Locks on the doors, a pistol or rifle nearby, and the trader's wits were the

main means of safeguarding his establishment in times of trouble. Service for the customer and security for the owner divided the two worlds.¹¹

The trader usually lived in a back room that served as both a kitchen and a bedroom. Outside the typical post was a well, a corral for livestock, a guest hogan stocked with wood and some cooking utensils for long-distance visitors, and perhaps a storage shed for the ten- to twelve-foot long sacks of wool. Most of the items taken in trade or pawn remained in the post.

When people entered the bullpen, they saw brightly colored shirts and hats, bolts of cloth, cans of peaches, tomatoes, and milk, candy, and hardware items, but the staples of the trade were sacks of flour, Arbuckle coffee—either whole or ground—sugar, and baking powder. Packing crates served as shelves, seats, and storage bins and were also sold to the Navajo for similar uses in their hogan.¹² Anything that enhanced life on the reservation and could be freighted in a wagon or, later, by motor vehicle went to the trading post for sale.

The entire experience of buying and selling was laced with cultural values. When the Navajo entered the store, a lengthy process started in motion. The first thing one did was nothing—just come in, look around, sit down, and later greet other Navajos in the bullpen. Personal relations and trade were not rushed. Eventually, the customer approached the counter and started a light conversation with the owner, telling where dances and ceremonies were going to be held, where he had come from, and what he had been doing. Most traders and their wives spoke Navajo; only a few depended on interpreters.

Evolving from this commerce came a linguistic variation called “trader Navajo,” a communication that emphasized the economic side of post life but missed the subtleties of more sophisticated speech. Some traders like Louisa Wetherill, Ray Hunt, and Stokes Carson became so expert that the Navajo detected few flaws in their speech. Regardless of linguistic ability, the universal sign of recognition was the handshake, a warm, slight touch rather than a vigorous, tooth-jarring pump. To the Navajo, one held the hand briefly and did not grip it tightly, since to do so boasted of one’s physical strength and belittled that of the recipient.¹³

The Navajo expected the traders to show some type of special kindness to each of the customers. For instance, there might be a box for tobacco and cigarette papers nailed down to the counter, or a plug of tobacco from which the trader cut a five-, ten-, or

twenty-five-cent slice. A little hard candy, a can of tomatoes, some coffee and bread, or popcorn induced the customer to feel relaxed and welcomed. A coffeepot, matches, and blankets might be borrowed for the night, while occasionally a child might be given a shirt or some other article of clothing. A 103-year-old woman claimed that she never feared the trader, because he gave her food, gave clothing to her brother, and called them his children.¹⁴

This last point is important. The Navajo language has titles that indicate kinship relations, such as sister, mother, father, grandmother, grandfather, son. These same names can be used to indicate respect and social status for a person who is not related by blood but is only an acquaintance. Owners and customers used these terms freely as they bartered over the counters, but underneath the chatter were implied responsibilities and relationships. The Navajo naturally placed the trader in the position of a parent who needed to provide for his or her children because of a sense of obligation. Hilda Wetherill Faunce, as a new trader, illustrates her feeling of frustration by describing a monologue she heard many times. The customer starts by saying,

My dear grandmother, come into this corner with me. We will speak slowly and not get mad. The children at my house who call you mother are hungry. They cry and call for candy and bread. One has a [bad] stomach. He said his mother would send medicine and apples and candy to him by me. Your children need shoes. In six months I shall sell my wool. Allow me, my mother, my sister, my pretty younger sister, to owe you twenty dollars until I shear my sheep. This will make all your children who live at my house warm. . . . See, my coat is worn out and no good. Let me have a new coat. Let me owe you four dollars for a new coat. Is this four dollars? It is very thin and ugly for four dollars. But I am poor, so I will take it. I tell all Navajos how nice you are, how you feed anyone who asks, and give apples and candy to all the children who come to your store. The Indians all say you are good. It's a long way to my house, and my horse is tired. While he rests I have time to eat. Give me a can of pears and a box of crackers, because I live a long way off and come all this distance in the cold to trade . . . with you because I know you are good and we are friends. That's right, that's good. This is for friendship. Thanks my mother. Good, good. Now I go.¹⁵

Although to a twentieth-century Anglo used to a system of impersonal economic transactions this speech lies somewhere

between wheedling and begging, in reality it shows the sense of responsibility and obligation emphasized in relations. Inherent in Navajo culture is the desire for cooperation and sharing fostered in a land that could be harsh and pitiless. The trading post was one more resource for survival, although to many whites with ethnocentric biases, this fact at times was hard to accept.

The trader also received a name that, unlike kinship terms, described a prominent physical or social characteristic. However, a previously existing pattern taught that a person is not called by this name face-to-face, because it could embarrass him or her by calling attention to a noticeable characteristic.¹⁶ Examples of names emphasizing physical qualities are Curly Head, Big White Man, Slender Woman, Red Beard, Swinging Arm, Skinny Hand, Hairy, Little Man with Big Ears, Looks Like a Mouth, and Rough Hands. Those centering on personality traits include Big Boss, One That Jokes Around, One Who Is Hungry, Lady Who Lies Around, and The Poor One, given to O. J. Carson, because he often said, "I can't lend you any money; I haven't any."¹⁷

The wide acceptance of women as traders also tied in with Navajo values. In a culture that was strongly matrilineal, Navajo women not only held the most important role in descent lines but also controlled substantial property and prestige. Both sexes accepted white women as competent traders, and an impression exists that in some cases they were preferred.

Louisa Wetherill provides the most prominent example. She spoke Navajo better than her husband John, did the trading while he was off exploring, was adopted by the most prominent leader in the Oljato/Kayenta region, acted as lawyer and judge in local disputes, was given access to ceremonial knowledge, and received all of the property of her adopted father when he died. One Navajo described her by saying, "Asdzaan Tsosie is like a Navajo herself. Even when she speaks English, she speaks with the tone of a Navajo."¹⁸ Hilda Faunce of Covered Water, Mary Jones of Bluff, Elizabeth Hegemann in Shonto, Mildred Heflin in Oljato, and "Mike" Goulding in Monument Valley all had positive interaction with Navajo clients and earned respect as knowledgeable and sharp bargainers.

The daily life of the trader is so well documented that only a brief sketch is necessary here.¹⁹ The implied theme that courses through all of these accounts is the importance of understanding the culture. For example, many have written about the Navajo fear of the dead and how traders were often called in to bury a body as

a service to the family. However, one trader earned the hostility of the community when he buried an important medicine man facing the wrong direction.²⁰ Jot Stiles, in a Tuba City trading post, watched a Navajo consumed with epileptic seizures. Realizing that his store and its inventory would be supernaturally defiled if the man died inside, Stiles vaulted over the counter and dragged him outside before it was too late. This action would hardly be expected in an establishment serving Anglo customers, but it met with strong Navajo approval. Stiles also trooped the streets of Tuba during a parade or gathering to identify those who owed him money. Other traders watched to see who came into their posts wearing new clothes purchased elsewhere. If that person already had a lot of pawn hanging on the wall or under the counter, the trader was alerted as to how much additional credit should be allowed.²¹

Those not wise to the ways of the world became the butt of Navajo humor. Catherine and Frank Moore were living near the Oljato trading post doing some surveying, when the store owner died. His wife and daughter put the corpse in a box and asked the Moores to manage the business while they went to Cortez to make funeral arrangements. The temporary traders opened the doors of the store the next day, hoping their slim Navajo vocabulary would get them through. There were in the neighborhood a number of children who had been to school and spoke fairly good English, but the Moores did not know this. Some of them marched into the store and asked for everything in Navajo. After removing many items from the shelves, the traders finally brought down a box of shells, only to receive the reply, "Yes. Twenty-two shells; that is what we want." The pranksters and the heretofore silent Navajo adults in the store broke into grins and laughter at the Anglos' consternation.²²

Between 1900 and the 1930s, the trading post fostered a variety of changes. As the Navajo people grew increasingly desirous of and dependent on the products of the posts, they increased the economic activity that allowed them to trade there. I am not suggesting that this was the only force moving them towards acculturation; it was one of many. Anthropologists and historians generally agree that societies are constantly changing. The main questions therefore become, In what direction, at what rate, and to what extent does the change occur? For the Navajo, the posts provided an introduction to white culture ranging from ruins to roads, from dollars to dyes, and from country fairs to current events.

TRADERS AND ARCHEOLOGISTS

Anasazi ruins provide a good example of the introduction of white culture. In traditional society, the Navajo generally avoided these sites because of their association with the dead. Traders, however, often were an effective force in decreasing the amount of fear connected with the Anasazi. There are numerous accounts that indicate that both men and women operating trading posts encouraged the Navajo to set aside their anxiety and guide people to the ruins, assist in the digging of artifacts, and locate objects on their own. Indeed, the traffic became so intense that in the *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* in 1905, traders were warned that the artifacts from Anasazi sites were "not private property to be disposed of at will." The report continued,

It is well known that for some years past, Indian traders have greatly encouraged the despoliation of ruins by purchasing from the Indians the relics secured by them from the ruined villages, cliff houses, and cemeteries Much of the sale of such articles is made through licensed Indian traders, to whom the Indians bring their "finds." It seems necessary, therefore, to curtail such traffic upon the reservation [Navajo, Southern Ute, and Zuni] and you will please inform all the traders under your jurisdiction that thirty days after your notice to them, traffic in such articles will be considered contraband A failure to comply with these instructions will be considered sufficient ground for revocation of license.²³

This decree apparently had little effect on most traders, since the traffic continued unabated.

The tenor of these transactions varied in scope, some of the traders being less zealous than others. A man in Shonto reported that after extended windstorms in the spring or intense cloud-bursts in the summer, Navajo shepherds brought in pots, ladles, and bowls exposed by the storms. In exchange, the seller received five cents worth of hard candy in a brown paper sack. Two Navajos took this same trader to a site where they had been digging, only to find that the huge pot located at the corner of the ruin had burst into three pieces, the sand inside shattering the jar outward.²⁴

Louisa Wetherill received a basket that had been discovered twenty-five years previously by a person who, until that time, did

not want to touch a thing that belonged to the Anasazi. With the trader present, his attitude changed.²⁵ Another man sold a circular piece of sandstone, one foot in diameter, that was etched with an Anasazi petroglyph. He had used the rock for its healing power by rubbing sand off its edges and giving it to his patients. The cure was said to be effective against almost any disease.²⁶

Wives were as active as their husbands in collecting artifacts. A Navajo woman led Hilda Faunce from her post at Covered Water to a mound filled with sherds. Seizing a piece of broken bone, Faunce unearthed a skull and some vertebrae. Her Navajo guide herded her children away, fearing that a "devil" might be present, while an old man warned Faunce to get the skull out of sight. She later found a bowl in the grave and proudly displayed it on her mantle.²⁷

Navajos also entered the excavating business, some with excessive zeal. In 1906, one man took a plow and scraper and leveled a mound for a few pieces of pottery to sell at a post. He apparently destroyed much more than he saved.²⁸

In addition to the purchase of artifacts, traders also encouraged the Navajo to enter the ruins by enlisting them to work for archeologists as laborers around the sites. The degree of willingness varied with each individual, but many sought employment simply because of economic pressures. How daring they became once they were hired was another story. Responses varied considerably. For instance, Bill Lippincott, a trader at Wide Ruin, employed Navajos to help dig a ditch for a pipeline to his store. As the men labored with their shovels, they uncovered pottery, mortars, and beads. The Indians refused to dig until the entire pipe system was rerouted. The rerouting of the pipeline insured not only their immediate help but future business at the post as well.²⁹

The trader Richard Wetherill hired Navajos to dig in the Chaco ruins, which they did until they found an Anasazi corpse and promptly quit. Eventually, others came looking for work, and the number of Navajos reached a high of twenty employed in 1897. One of the problems Wetherill faced was that his Navajo workers took objects like arrowheads, figurines, and turquoise found during the excavation. Part of his solution lay in putting more than one workman in a room, hoping that the rivalry would cause one person to report the other's actions. This was not totally successful. One frog figurine made of jet with jeweled eyes disappeared, only to turn up at a trading post in Farmington; it required fifty dollars to get it back. Wetherill also sent his wife among the Navajo to

purchase any arrowheads they happened to have.³⁰

Trading posts provided other forms of employment, including herding the trader's livestock, hauling supplies to railhead towns, doing odd jobs at the post, and serving as guides. The net effect of many of these activities was to encourage the men to leave home. Navajo Oshley tells how a trader hired him for fifty dollars a month to herd sheep. His wife remained at Dennehotso, a hundred miles away, while he earned some money, much of which went for a saddle and food he obtained from the post.³¹ This in-house sale and trade was a common practice among traders, who wanted to keep the cash flowing back over the same counter.

Another man, Old Mexican from Aneth, hauled hay for the trader, traveled to Cortez, Mancos, and Durango to obtain supplies and drop off goods, and became so proficient at it that he decided not only to deliver the products from the trader but to sell and buy his own wares at a better price.³² For a six-day round-trip to Mancos he received twelve dollars, and when he returned he was warmly welcomed. Old Mexican said, "When I got back to Aneth a crowd was there waiting for me to pull in. They were expecting quilts and blankets on this wagon. They bought up nearly all I brought." Although he was a trusted worker, the trader sent him home, admonishing him that he needed to go back and care for his wife and children: "They want you to support them and not leave them. Some day one of your children might starve to death or freeze to death and you would get in trouble."³³

Home industries were the heart of the economy, the most famous of all being the rugs and saddle blankets woven in the hogans of the people. There are a number of very good studies about the rise of the weaving industry, the role of the trader in encouraging a better product, the movement from utilitarian to artistic creations, the struggle to introduce better qualities of wool, and the attempt to keep vegetable-dyed designs a part of the Navajo heritage. In *A History of the Navajos*, Garrick and Roberta Bailey give an excellent summary of the economic impact of this industry. Starting in the late 1890s, real commercialization of the craft began, as Navajo weavers grew desirous of entering the Anglo-American marketplace. Part of this shift occurred because of a recent economic depression, part because of the abandonment of older, heavier blankets for lighter, machine-woven Pendleton blankets for personal use, and partly because of a craze for Indian decorations in Anglo homes. Traders welcomed the demand head-on, encouraging Navajos to weave for the tourist industry

and for export to outlets as far away as New York and Los Angeles. Their impact was obvious. In 1899, the weaving trade amounted to only \$50,000 reservation-wide; fifteen years later it had skyrocketed to \$700,000, and, by 1923, a variety of blankets were available from the Sears and Roebuck catalog.

The trade had its ups and downs as demand fluctuated. For instance, a decline in weaving occurred as World War I markets gobbled up wool for military purposes. The general pattern existing up through the early 1930s, however, was that when wool was available and cheap, the rug industry prospered, but when it became scarce, weaving slowed down appreciably. Before and after World War I, when wool was plentiful and the price low, the rug industry reached its height.³⁴

Weaving varied from region to region, family to family, and person to person, some individuals commanding better prices at the post than others. Blankets called "quickies" or "bread and coffee rugs" were loosely woven, poorly designed, and bought according to weight, varying anywhere from fifty cents to a dollar a pound. A well-woven 3 x 5-foot rug, on the other hand, might command up to eight dollars and a 9 x 12 not more than twenty dollars.³⁵

As with most things in Navajo culture, weaving was not solely a matter of economics. The knowledge associated with it originated in the time of the myths, when Spiderwoman taught the first Navajo this trade. Songs and prayers accompany the creative process, but there is also danger involved. Improper use or a mistake in the songs can offend the holy beings and, instead of helping the weaver, can cause harm or spoil the product. When asked if she used songs when weaving, one woman replied that it was too dangerous and that, although her weaving would probably be much improved, she preferred not to get involved but just take her chances in the market. Another suggested that she never let children touch any of her blankets before trading, because they would handle them playfully and so the trader might not want them. She associated playing with poverty.³⁶

The traders helped to nurture the industry along. While they shipped large amounts of raw wool to the railheads, they also kept enough at the posts to sell back to the Indians in the winter. This maintained steady employment and flow of cash. By 1914, the traders in the northern and western agencies were placing linen tags and lead seals on rugs to guarantee Navajo genuineness to the buyer.³⁷

Another part of this protection and improvement process included the purchase of raw wool. Agents and traders realized that the Navajo sheared their sheep under primitive conditions. They used the same old corrals, because there were only a limited number of places for watering. Vermin and disease infected the animals at these sites. Herders sheared the animals in the spring and early fall and often got sticks, sand, manure, burrs, and briars mixed in with the clippings. Agents sent out directives, urging the traders to protect both themselves and their clients by purchasing only clean wool. Post owners realized that when the product reached the buying markets in Kansas City or further east, if the wool was found dirty, the purchaser would either refuse it or subtract a substantial amount that more than covered the cost of cleaning it.

In 1922, raw Navajo wool, characterized as "coarse in quality and light in quantity," sold for forty cents per pound with a three-to six-cent margin on market prices. By the time it was transported to the buyer's bin and cleaned, some clippings were reduced to fifty percent of their original weight. Two traders reported that between dirty wool and fluctuations in market prices, they suffered disastrous financial problems. They had purchased the wool in 1920 at thirty-five cents a pound, stored it for a year-and-a-half because of poor market conditions, freighted it at one-and-a-half cents per pound, then sold it at nine cents per pound with an estimated loss of \$38,000.³⁸ The accuracy of these figures is difficult to determine, but they do dramatize a very real problem.

A final set of figures summarizes the importance of raw wool and rugs. In 1922 in the western agency, 23,080 pounds of rugs sold for roughly \$41,000; raw wool for \$22,000, comprising 78 percent of all the commerce for that year to include the sale of sheep, cattle, pelts, silver, and miscellaneous items.³⁹ Little surprise that the traders and agents did all they could to improve upon the breeding stock, the sheering practices, and the control of disease among sheep.

In 1909, a new incentive for improving crafts and production helped the trader instill the Anglo-American value of competition. The Shiprock agency, founded in 1903 by William T. Shelton, sponsored a regional fair. Trading posts from different areas had booths that competed in all types of industries. Shelton's reputation for carrying out the ethnocentric process of "civilizing" the Navajo was abundantly clear in some of the categories of exhibits at the fair. In addition to prizes for the best general display of

Indian products and vegetables and the best team of work horses and mules, there were also entries such as "prettiest Navajo baby" and "cleanest Navajo baby." He awarded a cook stove as first prize for the best wool blanket, a wash tub for the best Germantown blanket, and a handsaw for the best wool.

The fair drew Navajo contestants from over a hundred miles away and was so successful that it became an annual event. The traders and their clients took the cue, starting preparations months in advance. Specialty rugs declaring the name of the post and products from that area fostered regional pride and competition. Shelton invited tourists to attend, encouraged the Navajo to sell traditional artifacts such as bows and arrows and silver work, and even allowed some Indian dances. By 1914, seven hundred blankets graced the traders' booths, five of which were purchased and sent to the Panama-Pacific Exposition.⁴⁰

Although silversmithing did not become an important commercial industry in the northern part of the reservation until the early 1930s, silver bracelets, necklaces, brooches, and bridles still served as pawn. One problem confronting the trader was the Navajos' love for silver coins, used as buttons and decorations on clothing. The federal criminal code clearly stated that anyone who "fraudulently defaced, mutilated, . . . or lightened" United States currency could be fined two thousand dollars and imprisoned for up to five years. Agents contacted traders, requesting that they discourage the Navajo from drilling holes in coins and putting loops of copper through them to fasten them to their shirts. The traders did not like the practice any more than the government did, since banks would not accept mutilated currency because of decreased value and because it did not stack well.

Yet the traders had little choice but to accept it when Navajos in need cut dimes, quarters, half dollars, and dollars off their clothing. The only solution was to circulate this money among their clients, since few people accepted it off the reservation. Some posts even created their own money stamped with a unique design, and used these tokens in place of regular United States currency, another practice frowned upon by the government.⁴¹

As the outside world became increasingly aware of Navajo crafts and as trading posts became more numerous, a natural outgrowth occurred: roads. One of the keys to any economic system is transportation, and the isolated posts dotting reservation lands were no exception. The development of roads is a story for another time, another place, but their importance as a promoter

of commerce cannot be doubted. Dirt preceded macadam; the network stretching across reservation lands sprang from the posts located where water and traffic flowed.

In the early part of this century, traders willingly worked to build roads into their isolated locales, improving routes to encourage customers. John Wetherill and Clyde Colville smoothed and widened the road through Marsh Pass that tied in with Flagstaff, 160 miles away. Elizabeth Hegemann tells of working with her husband to blast away dirt and sandstone for a safe passage to Shonto, while Hubert Richardson headed a survey party over an old Ute war trail to the site of Rainbow Lodge. Traders from Kayenta, fearing competition, opposed the creation of this latter road, and a confrontation resulted, with the surveyors throwing sticks of dynamite to disperse their assailants.⁴²

Rain, drifting sand, and snow could present huge problems to the wagons, and later to automobiles, that traversed mile after mile of sand, rock, and canyon. Navajos served as pathbreakers when the track was obliterated or temporary bridges were needed to span washouts. By 1916, the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad served as a magnet to the northern end of the reservation, drawing traffic to Thompson, Utah; Dolores, Mancos, and Durango, Colorado; and Farmington, New Mexico. The *Cortez Herald* applauded efforts to extend paved roads, especially the one from Gallup in the south to Shiprock in the northern part of the reservation. Articles claimed, "This road would be of material advantage to the Navajo Indians who do practically all of the freighting for different traders on the reservation . . . With a good road, the Indians can haul [more], save much wear and tear on their wagons, and keep their teams in better condition."⁴³

While some people argued vociferously that these improvements would benefit the traders and the Navajo, their real goal often was to encourage tourist traffic. BIA money supported many of the paving projects on the reservation, but, for many whites, it was more important that the Gallup-Shiprock road, completed in the early 1930s, terminated near Mesa Verde National Park. One Indian agent, H. E. Williams, boldly declared "that the tourists, the Indians, and the government have the same common interest and purpose," suggesting that roads would "facilitate the necessary mingling with a reasonably good class of whites, to the end that the Indians will be better prepared for citizenship . . . [and] a new life different to that of the reservation and the trading post."⁴⁴

By 1930, good oil and dirt roads extended from Flagstaff to Tuba City, opening up the Grand Canyon to an increasing tourist trade, with a lateral east-west artery extending from Tuba City to Kayenta, then on to the north-south Shiprock-Gallup thoroughfare. Spur roads opened Natural Bridges, Rainbow Bridge, Inscription House Ruins, Keetseel Ruins, and Monument Valley to the tourist trade.⁴⁵ Little wonder that when two cars passed through Kayenta on the same day, John Wetherill quipped, à la Daniel Boone 150 years previous, that "the country's getting crowded."⁴⁶

Bridges were an integral part of this burgeoning network. Starting in 1909, the government made preparations for bridges to span the San Juan River at Shiprock and Mexican Hat and a year later at Tanner's Crossing on the Little Colorado.⁴⁷

Part of the justification for the Tanner's Crossing bridge was that traders and the western Navajo agency were shipping across the river over a million pounds of merchandise per year, most of which was hauled by Indians at \$1.25 per hundred pounds. "Goods damaged or washed away and the value of time lost at this crossing" required that a structure be built.⁴⁸

As with the roads, however, this cry at times was only a camouflage for other purposes. The Lee's Ferry bridge, for instance, had an initial estimated cost of \$200,000, half of which was to be paid by the Navajo tribe. Proclaimed as an "outlet for the Indians . . . [to assist] them toward a more advanced situation," the bridge spanned the Colorado River in a section of country that was sparsely inhabited by trader and Navajo alike.⁴⁹ The \$100,000 debt placed around the neck of the tribe became a topic of congressional investigation that eventually led to revocation of the debt. Acrimonious testimony sprang from the reports of this incident, some people claiming that no Navajo lived within fifty miles of the bridge, that the tribe had opposed its construction from the beginning, and that the Navajo believed this to be an attempt to obtain oil royalty money. Other critics called the political maneuvering "highway robbery" in its purest form. Even the name was unsatisfactory: President Heber J. Grant of the Church of Jesus Christ of the Latter-day Saints, who was averse to honoring John D. Lee of Mountain Meadow Massacre fame, made a special trip to the Arizona legislature in Phoenix to request a name change from the Lee's Ferry bridge to the Grand Canyon bridge. However, the name of Lee's Ferry has remained to this day.⁵⁰

CONCLUSION

In summarizing the role of trading posts on the Navajo Reservation between 1900 and 1930, one quickly realizes what an influential position they held between the two cultures. Each post had its own personality, its own economic emphasis, yet all shared the common goal of commercial exchange in a foreign cultural setting. As agents of change, the traders provided desirable goods, but the Navajo purchased only what they wanted. In a free market economy where competition exists, the buyer has as much influence as the seller in determining rate and flow of exchange. The question of whether the trader cheated the Navajo is not the issue here but, rather, whether the trader encouraged change. The answer, obviously, is yes. The location and organization of the post, the traffic in prehistoric artifacts, the marketing of wool and rugs, the establishment of the Shiprock Fair, the construction of roads, and the employment of Navajos in a mixed barter and wage economy all emphasized white values in an Indian world. They encouraged the Navajo towards the "civilizing" process so important to the Indian agents.

However, to look at the post solely as a tool of white imperialism is to suggest that the Navajo were helpless pawns. This is far from the truth. The Navajo were sharp bargainers who knew what they wanted and worked towards the means to obtain it. Traders stocked only those goods that would sell and charged prices that were competitive with other posts. While long-distance travel might be an inconvenience, the evidence indicates that Navajos were not averse to traveling to posts that offered the best prices. And as soon as a customer entered the store, the trader was obliged to operate substantially on Navajo terms. The giving of initial presents, the use of kinship terms, the bestowal of trader names, the speaking of a "foreign" language, the dependence on pawn, and the social obligations placed upon the trader indicate anything but a passive acceptance of white imperialism on the part of the Navajo.

The Navajo accepted and rejected according to their own cultural dictates, but they were also moving inexorably towards greater acculturation. In general, they were in the driver's seat but did not, could not, realize where the future would take them. Until the 1930s, they selectively chose those things that fit into traditional cultural patterns. With enforced livestock reduction and John Collier's BIA programs, the government catapulted the

Navajo into the wage economy of twentieth-century Anglo-America. When the government removed the basis of their economy—livestock—the Navajo increased mobility, and their growing dependence on roads, railroads, and consumer goods pushed them into the Depression of the 1930s and the New Deal programs of Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

The trader, economically crippled but surviving, watched many of his customers turn first to him for help, then look elsewhere for employment and products. Other elements such as service in World War II, attendance at boarding and day schools, access to the media, purchase of trucks and cars, and participation in the Federal Trade Commission hearings of the early 1970s affected both the Navajo and the trading post as economic partners. The golden days of the trading post were over; the days of plastic, tin, and Saran Wrap had arrived.

NOTES

1. For examples that stress the importance of trading posts in bringing about change, see Garrick Bailey and Roberta Bailey, *A History of the Navajos: The Reservation Years* (Santa Fe: School of American Research, 1986); Frank McNitt, *The Indian Traders* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1962); and H. Baxter Liebler, "The Social and Cultural Patterns of the Navajo Indians," *Utah Historical Quarterly* 30 (Fall 1962).

2. Elizabeth C. Hegemann, *Navaho Trading Days* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1963), 267–68.

3. "Indian Traders," *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, 1903* (Washington, DC: U. S. Department of the Interior), 34; E. B. Merritt to William T. Sullivan, 26 March 1914, Record Group 75, Bureau of Indian Affairs, Western Navajo, National Archives, Washington, DC; Hegemann, *Navaho Trading Days*, 267–68.

4. See Robert S. McPherson, *The Northern Navajo Frontier, 1860–1900, Expansion Through Adversity* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1988), 63–78.

5. LTC George Hunter to Adjutant General—Colorado, 26 August 1908, Record Group 393, U. S. Army Continental Command, 1821–1920, National Archives, Washington, DC.

6. Fred Yazzie interviewed by author, 5 November 1987; Charlie Blueeyes interviewed by author, 7 June 1988.

7. J. M. Sherwood, "Notes Regarding Charles E. Walton," *Utah Historical Society, Salt Lake City, Utah*, 3; Yazzie interview; Martha Nez interviewed by author, 10 August 1988.

8. Navajo Oshley interviewed by Winston Hurst and Wesley Oshley, January 1978 (multiple interviews).

9. Rose Begay interviewed by Bertha Parrish, 17 June 1987.

10. W. W. Hill, "Navaho Trading and Trading Ritual: A Study of Cultural Dynamics," *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology* (Autumn 1948): 385.

11. Hegemann, *Navaho Trading Days*, 345; Arthur L. Chaffin interviewed by P. T. Reilly, 24 December 1966, Utah State Historical Society, Salt Lake City, Utah.

12. Blueeyes interview; Martha Nez interview; Slim Benally interviewed by author, 8 July 1988; Hegemann, *Navajo Trading Days*, 272.

13. Cecil Richardson, "The Navajo Way," *Arizona Highways* (July 1948), 22.

14. Hegemann, *Navaho Trading Days*, 342; Blueeyes interview; Nez interview.

15. Hilda Wetherill, "The Trading Post: Letters from a Primitive Land," *The Atlantic Monthly* 142 (September 1928), 289–90.

16. Richardson, "The Navajo Way," 24.

17. Kitty At'iinii interviewed by Fern Charley and Dean Sunberg, 13 July 1972, California State University, Southern Utah Oral History Project.

18. Genevieve Herrick, "Women in the News," *Country Gentleman* 46 (October 1939), 46.

19. For examples of daily life in a post, see Frances Gillmor and Louisa Wade Wetherill, *Traders to the Navajos* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1934); Hegemann, *Navaho Trading Days*; Hilda Faunce, *Desert Wife* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska, 1928); Willow Roberts, *Stokes Carson: Twentieth Century Trading on the Navajo Reservation* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1987); and Gladwell Richardson, *Navajo Trader* (Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1986).

20. Mary Shepardson and Blodwen Hammond, *The Navajo Mountain Community* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1970), 203.

21. Hegemann, *Navaho Trading Days*, 58–59.

22. Catherine Moore interviewed by Jessie Embry, 23 April 1979, Charles Redd Center, Brigham Young University, Provo, Utah.

23. "Traffic in Relics from Indian Ruins," *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* (Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1905): 29–30.

24. Hegemann, *Navaho Trading Days*, 366–68.

25. Gillmor and Wetherill, *Traders to the Navajos*, 130.

26. David M. Brugge, *A History of the Chaco Navajos* (Albuquerque: National Park Service, 1980), 166.

27. Faunce, *Desert Wife*, 238–40.

28. T. Mitchell Prudden, *On the Great American Plateau* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1906), 172–74.

29. Alberta Hannum, *Spin a Silver Dollar* (New York: Ballantine Books, 1944), 24–26.

30. Ann Axtell Morris, *Digging the Southwest* (Chicago: Cadmus Books, 1933), 167; Frank McNitt, *Richard Wetherill: Anasazi* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 1957): 143, 165–68; see also Brugge, *Chaco Navajos*, 155, 159–60.

31. Oshley interview.

32. Walter Dyk, *A Navaho Autobiography* (New York: Viking Fund, Inc., 1947), 87.

33. *Ibid.*, 95.

34. Bailey and Bailey, *A History of the Navajos*, 150–52.

35. Hegemann, *Navaho Trading Days*, 299.

36. Daisy Buck, conversation with author, 18 August 1989; Begay interview.

37. G. W. Hayzlett to commissioner of Indian affairs, 18 September 1902,

Record Group 75, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives, Washington, DC; "Navajo Blankets," *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs*, vol. 2 (Washington, DC: U. S. Department of the Interior, 1914): 36.

38. F. E. Brandon, "Wool," *Western Navajo*, 28 November 1922, Record Group 75, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives, Washington, DC.

39. Sharp to commissioner of Indian affairs, 1 March 1923, Record Group 75, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives, Washington, DC.

40. "Shiprock Has First Navajo Indian Fair," *Farmington Enterprise*, 29 October 1909; Dyk, 143; "Navajo Blankets," 36.

41. Bailey and Bailey, *A History of the Navajos*, 152–54; E. Merritt to Walter Runke, 4 April 1919; Runke to commissioner, 12 March 1919, Record Group 75, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives, Washington, DC.; Hegemann, *Navaho Trading Days*, 273.

42. Gillmor and Wetherill, *Traders to the Navajos*, 191; Hegemann, *Navaho Trading Days*, 274; Richardson, *Navajo Trader*, 49–57.

43. "Latest on Gallup Road," *The Cortez Herald*, 28 October 1915.

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45. C. L. Walker to commissioner of Indian affairs, 8 August 1927, Record Group 75, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives, Washington, DC.

46. Gillmor and Wetherill, *Traders to the Navajos*, 255.

47. Charles J. Kappler, *Indian Affairs. Laws and Treaties*, vol. 3 (Washington, DC: U. S. Government Printing Office, 1913): 407, 433, 491, 575.

48. U. S. Senate, "Report on the Necessity of a Bridge Near Tanner's Crossing, Navajo Indian Reservation, Arizona," S. Ex. Doc. 684, 61st Cong. 3d sess., 1910, 1–2.

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50. U. S. Senate, "Hearings Before a Subcommittee on Indian Affairs," *Survey of Conditions of the Indians in the United States*, part 6, 70th Cong. 2d sess., 1930, 2205–2206; U. S. Senate, "The Navajo Indians of New Mexico," *Senate Congressional Record*, vol. 71, part 4, 71st Cong. 1st sess., 1929, 4484–4485; C. L. Walker to commissioner of Indian affairs, 6 July 1929, Record Group 75, Bureau of Indian Affairs, National Archives, Washington, DC.