UCLA
American Indian Culture and Research Journal

Title
For Our Navajo People: Diné Letters, Speeches, and Petitions, 1900–1960. Edited by Peter Iverson.

Permalink
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/84b3c0gr

Journal
American Indian Culture and Research Journal , 27(2)

ISSN
0161-6463

Author
Stucki, Larry R.

Publication Date
2003-03-01

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

and white interactions from 1763 to 1846 into historical context and to capture the place and time of the "frontier[s]." Hurt also uses his sources to place Indians at the center of the scene in the formation of these frontiers.

Miguel M. Chavez
University of California, Los Angeles

For Our Navajo People: Diné Letters, Speeches, and Petitions, 1900–1960. Edited by Peter Iverson. Photo editor Monty Roessel. Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002. 296 pages. $34.95 cloth; $19.95 paper.

This impressive collection of documents can perhaps best be summarized in a quotation from the book's introduction:

> There is a vast literature about American Indians in general and Navajos in particular. However, most of it has stressed the actions and words of non-Indians. Indians become the acted upon, the victims, the people to whom things happened. Such accounts stress defeat and dispossession. They appear to concentrate on shortcomings and failures. In many instances they exacerbate existing stereotypes.
>
> This book therefore reflects a new Indian history. . . . Instead of portraying Indians solely as victims, this history emphasizes agency—the ways in which Native groups sought to hold onto their land, create and sustain viable economies, maintain their communities, educate their young, affirm their rights, govern themselves, and find ways to maintain their heritage while forging a brighter future. (p. 2)

The editor's excellent choice of documents in this collection vividly portrays the anguish associated with the well-meant but badly executed stock reduction program, but quickly destroys the stereotypical misconception that all Navajos were opposed to all aspects of it. Many, in fact, fully supported drastic reductions in the number of "useless" or "surplus" horses since for every horse eliminated there would be pasture enough for five income-producing sheep (e.g., see pp. 6–7, 43, 243). Also, "politically correct" non-Navajos seldom mention "the often bitter internal disputes that even today continue to plague the Diné Nation. Thus, these documents clearly demonstrate especially troubling tribal, regional, and local disputes over oil and timber revenues and land use in general (e.g., see pp. 3, 14–15).

The editor highlights the major dispute between Jacob C. Morgan and Chee Dodge over who should benefit from the development of such economic resources as oil. Chee Dodge believed "that such development should benefit all of the Navajo Nation" (p. 3), while Morgan, echoing the concerns of the people of his region, felt that the income from such resources should be spent locally (e.g., see pp. 3, 162–163). Ultimately, as seen in the later documents in this collection, although internal disputes continued, Chee Dodge's viewpoint gained the upper hand.

The beginning of the continuing bitter "joint use area" dispute between the Navajos and the Hopis is the subject of a 1944 letter long before the two tribes were drawn into the federal courts over this issue (p. 28). This letter from future tribal chairman Paul Jones to the federal superintendent complains that Hopis are using trucks to harvest wood from Navajo portions of this disputed area. Later, in a series of 1954 speeches, Jones forcefully presented a number of additional grievances against the Hopis (pp. 33–37).

By 1955–56 evidence in two speeches by Jones, who was by now tribal chairman, shows that he was no longer content to let the outside world have complete control over oil, coal, and uranium lease agreements (pp. 37–39). He said that it was now time to get the "best price" for these resources. He also criticized Navajo "old-timers" who were blaming these resource extraction agreements for the lack of rain that was every year becoming worse. According to Jones, even if this were true and the extraction activities were to cease, traditional herding and farming activities would not be enough to support the growing Navajo population. Then Jones, quoting a councilman who harshly criticized Navajos who were expecting the tribe or the federal government to give "handouts" to herders suffering from the prolonged drought, said: "Do not give it out. Let them work for it. This idea of a handout has made a lazy people out of our people" (p. 39).

Another theme running throughout these documents that might surprise the reader is the constant demand by Navajos for more boarding and day schools and anger at the "Indian Department" for dropping the mandatory attendance policy for school-age children (e.g., see pp. 52–54, 101–102). Even more surprising is the revelation that in 1946 14,000 Navajo students had no school to attend (p. 99). As late as 1953, when some Navajo parents tried to enroll their children in school, they were told there was "no room for them" and that it was "their hard luck that they did not get back in" because other students had shown up first (p. 151). Even those students "lucky enough" to be admitted were sometimes treated inhumanely. Thus one tribal council delegate reported that when he visited the Chin Lee school to check on the children sent there from his district "some of them were sleeping on boards and some were sleeping three in a bed that was meant for one" (pp. 95–96). Nor had matters improved six years later when tribal chairman Paul Jones in his 1959 inaugural address reported that there would not be classroom space that fall for 7,000 to 8,000 Navajo students (pp. 256–257). Even those parents and students who had had bad boarding school experiences did not reject the need for schooling. Instead, they wanted these schools to be located on the reservation, not in some distant location, a promise that Chee Dodge reminded federal officials had been made in the 1868 treaty (p. 91).

Perhaps most surprising of all is this denunciation in 1947 by Lilly J. Neil, the first woman to be elected to the Navajo Tribal Council, of attempts by educators to ensure that all Navajo children learn to speak Navajo:

> our White instructors are trying to get our Native language taught in school along with English . . . confusing our little children, but will this fulfill their part in the treaty, even if they do succeed in getting our little

> ones to speak Navajo the broken White Mans way? Will this qualify our children to compete with their White Brothers? The answer is *Positively No*, it only confuses them, and holds them back so they will have to be wards of the Government, and have to hire high paid white men to help them to get a mere existence [out] of this country we live in. (p. 105)

This passage vividly reminded me of a similar angry remark made to me in Ajo, Arizona, in 1968 by a father who had just learned that the local school was planning to teach the Papago (now Tohono O'Odham) language to his children. It also calls to mind Hispanic parents who have led the attack on English as a Second Language programs in public schools.

Five years later in 1952, a speech by tribal council delegate Hoskie Cronemeyer not only echoed Neil's earlier attack on the teaching of Navajo in the day schools, but suggested that "the teaching of Navajo customs should be done away with" (p. 107). Nor was this an isolated opinion at that time, according to the editor, whose introduction to the speech states, "Not all then and not all today would agree with this perspective, but Cronemeyer's judgment was widely shared at the time" (p. 106).

In the same speech, Cronemeyer attacked John Collier personally for destroying the quality of the reservation schools stating that "when Mr. Collier came in—like rabies in a flock of sheep our program spoiled" (p. 106). Thus, this collection of documents destroys the common misconception that while the Navajos disliked Collier for his unpopular stock reduction program, they all gladly embraced his relaxation of the mandatory school attendance policy, with its assimilation emphasis. Obviously, many at this time would have sided with Robert Manner's attack on the paternalistic reservation system in his classic 1962–1963 written debate with Collier. However, this is not to suggest that opposition to Collier's curriculum reforms was universal among those living on the reservation at that time.

In fact, Collier's ideas have taken firm root today among a new generation of Navajo educators, as I discovered as an exchange professor at Diné College a few years ago. There, intensive efforts are being undertaken to preserve the Navajo language and worldview, not only with required classes for all students but through a massive effort to train a new generation of Navajo classroom teachers to replace the many non-Navajos now staffing most reservation schools. Especially alarming to these native educators, while I was there, was the news that more than 50 percent of Navajo children entering the school system that year could not speak Navajo.

The editor has done an excellent job in his introductions and summaries to both the overall collection and to each individual document. Other than a mistake on the map on page xviii where the Hopi and joint use areas are incorrectly switched, the only fault I could find is that the collection ends at 1960—leaving the reader to wonder what response government officials gave to the many pleading letters they received.

Larry R. Stucki
Reading Area Community College