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Along Navajo Trails

Will Evans, Susan Woods, Robert Mcpherson

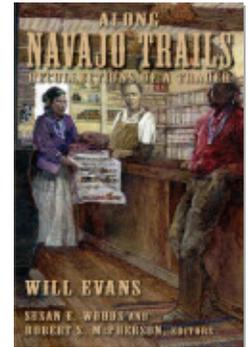
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Foreword

In 1948 Will Evans closed his trading post at Shiprock, New Mexico, for the last time. In leaving its “bull pen” trading room, he walked away from a half century as a Navajo trader, from a fraternity of businessmen who lived more intimately than perhaps any other European Americans with the Navajos, during one of that remarkable people’s most challenging and successful periods. Like others of the trader fraternity, Evans was confident he knew “his Indians”—the families and clans that traded at his post. Moreover, he almost certainly shared the opinion commonly held among traders that anything important in the way his patrons felt, or in what they were doing, surfaced sooner or later in the bull pen and, from that vantage point of the white man’s world, made its way around the larger trading community.

In this book, Evans’s response to the Navajos, ably illuminated by editors Susan Woods and Robert McPherson, adds a welcome and enlightening chapter to the story of Indian trade in the Four Corners region. Written initially while Evans was on the job, his narrative focuses on the cultural exchange that took place between him and the Navajo men and women who lived within accessible distance of the Shiprock Trading Post, which to Evans was the heartland of the Navajo world. Masters of survival’s give and take, the Navajos of the Evans era had been back for three decades from the terrors of their own “Babylonian Captivity,” at Fort Sumner in eastern New Mexico. In the first half of the twentieth century they were fully engaged in an astonishing period of population growth and selective adaptation that ultimately served their cultural survival so well.

In reading *Along Navajo Trails*, it is well to note that Evans was a Mormon—part of a group which was also proving to be a surviving people. He had emigrated from Wales with his parents and, following the promise of a coal mining job, ended up at Fruitland, New Mexico. Corresponding closely in time to the Navajo return from Fort Sumner, the Mormons had colonized a vast, disjointed Four Corners Indian country, which included the Navajo and Hopi Reservations as well as Paiute, Ute, Apache, and

Zuni tribal lands. Eastward from Utah's Dixie on the Virgin River, a broken line of Mormon colonies could be traced through Kanab, Utah, and then southward and counterclockwise from Lee's Ferry and Tuba City, Arizona, through the lower and upper Little Colorado Basin towns, to Ramah, New Mexico, and north to the San Luis and San Juan Basin communities in Colorado, New Mexico, and Utah. This thrust to extend the Kingdom of God to the remnants of Book of Mormon people was at first largely preempted by Mormon preoccupation with desert survival and then reemerged, though as less of a priority, in a period that culminated in the appointment of Arizonan Spencer W. Kimball to the top levels of Mormon leadership after 1943.

During Will Evans's time the line between Indians as spiritual duty and as commercial prospect was at best blurred. The particulars of Mormon belief colored both the relations between Indians and LDS traders and the way other whites perceived the latter. Their distinctiveness complicated working the Mormons into the trader culture and their role into literature of the Navajo trade. Perhaps helpful in understanding this is Edward Hall's 1994 *West of the Thirties: Discoveries Among the Navajo and Hopi*. Hall divides Navajo traders of the era into three categories: those who worked for the Babbitt Brothers of Flagstaff, who were narrowly interested in business; independents like the Hubbells and the Wetherills, who he sees as sensitive, broad-gauge liberals; and Mormons, who looked to Salt Lake City and followed aggressive trade practices, including peddling that ignored other traders' rights.

The Four Corners loop also encompassed burgeoning industrial, transportation, government, and ranching communities, as well as world-class prehistoric culture sites and stunning natural beauty. It is not surprising that combined with Native Americans, polygamist Mormons, cowboys, and freewheeling archaeologists, these had a magnetic effect, drawing tourists, scientists, journalists, artists, as well as Hollywood and other myth makers. All together they molded the Four Corners into a cherished national cultural property.

Among the myth makers were many who wrote about the Navajo people and Indian traders. Their literature is various. Much of it is fascinating. Some of it is romantic and misleading. But like most stories in a free society, it is unfinished. As we advance, our capacity for comprehension grows, as should our taste for fuller, more useful interpretations. So it is in the case of Indian traders. Certainly the story of the Navajo capacity for adaptive survival is not complete. The success of Tony Hillerman's novels, for example, suggests that new and unexpected adaptations and interpretations continue.

In a different way the New Mormon History has poured out in a veritable stream of information. Much of it is narrowly crafted, aimed mainly at Mormon consumers, among whom self-indulgent tastes are creating viable markets for popular art, movies, and retold stories. Amidst this trend, scholarly work on the Mormon past continues to have an active, though limited appeal. With the possible exception of the stereotyped fiction of Gerald Lund (*The Work and the Glory*) there has, however, been a retreat from the social and cultural history of colonization. As Mormons sweep into their awareness of their church as a worldwide institution, work toward understanding the Mormon West remains unfinished. Although the first admiring Mormon expression of interest in Navajo Indians dates to 1831 and an occasional record of intercourse with Indians has followed the church's entire western career, next to no effort has been made to understand the role of Mormon Indian traders of the Four Corners or elsewhere. Neither Mormon nor Four Corners historians nor the myth makers have taken their measure, much less done justice to the social tension that has made western writers and publishers reticent to address the topic.

In Will Evans we see a Latter-day Saint who had the opportunity to observe the still preliterate generation of Navajos who returned from the Long Walk. In him stirred the need to collect and record. He was a man of his times and of his people. Both his biases and his strengths were apparent in his friendships with his trading post patrons and in his determination to observe the character and daily course of their lives. This was true also of his extended attempt to capture for posterity the nearly ethereally creative artistry manifested in sandpaintings—created at night as extended rituals reached their climax and then erased before morning.

It has been more than fifty years since Will Evans left his trading post. May we continue to find interest in the things that stirred him so.

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