



PROJECT MUSE®

Northern Navajo Frontier 1860 1900

Robert Mcpherson

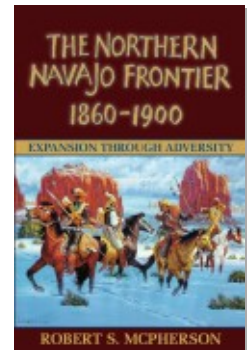
Published by Utah State University Press

Mcpherson, Robert.

Northern Navajo Frontier 1860 1900.

Utah State University Press, 2001.

Project MUSE.muse.jhu.edu/book/12453.



➔ For additional information about this book

<https://muse.jhu.edu/book/12453>

4 / Navajos, Mormons, and Henry L. Mitchell: Cauldron of Conflict on the San Juan

The San Juan River winds its way through the deserts and canyon lands of southeastern Utah, presenting a challenge to those who want to use its water. Yet in the spring of 1879, for the Mormon exploring party searching for a place to settle, this river provided the only large and continuous source of water for crops and livestock. Silas S. Smith, leader of this group, was probably surprised when he ventured into the area of present-day Aneth to find a number of non-Mormon or “gentile” settlers already busy constructing houses, irrigation ditches, and a dam. The leading figure amongst these homesteaders was a man named Henry L., or “old Man,” Mitchell, a character who added color and turbulence to the settling of the San Juan area.

Mitchell’s importance to the study of Navajo-white relations was twofold. First, he provided a well-documented chronicle of events on this part of the northern Navajo frontier. Mitchell wrote letter after letter to Indian agents, military commanders, and other officials relating—and often exaggerating—activities of white settlers and their Indian neighbors. While Mitchell was only one of many actors in the drama that played along the San Juan, he also provided excellent insight into the function of the early trading post and problems occurring along the northern boundary, both of which will be discussed in later chapters.

Second, and more important, are the Navajos’ reactions to these events. Examples of active intimidation, aggressive livestock herding, overt force, and well-aimed complaints are recorded in Mitchell’s letters. These techniques were used to obtain Indian desires. Although Mitchell remains at center stage in

the following narrative, the Navajo reaction to this irascible settler can be clearly observed: do only that which is desirable and aggressively defend against that which is not. The effect of this attitude can be seen in the fact that Mitchell left after seven years of hardship.

Little is known about Mitchell's early life, which began in Missouri, eventually led to Colorado, and then to Utah where he settled on the public domain—a fairly common experience for many of the pioneers in this area.¹ Prior military service is indicated by his signing a letter as a former "First Lieutenant in Company K, 8th M. S.," although he would later assume the title of captain. His son, Porter, was also enlisted in the same unit as a sergeant.² When and where this service was rendered is unknown, but it seems likely to have been during the Civil War, since Porter was born in 1843.³ In 1878, the Mitchells settled into Utah with a large extended family tied together through both birth and marriage.

To unravel the genealogical relationships of this group is difficult, but it appears that in addition to Henry L. Mitchell and his wife there were at least three sons, two daughters, and three sons-in-law, each of the latter with his own trading post and farm. There were also Mitchells living in the Mancos-Cortez, Colorado, area, where Mitchell Springs gave rise to a small village called Toltec, which by 1889 had died out.⁴ Yet it was "Old Man" Mitchell, patriarch and spokesman for this group, who served as the major figure in events occurring in and around his ranch at the mouth of McElmo Canyon on the San Juan River.

He arrived there in the summer of 1878, having spent the previous year in Montezuma Valley, Colorado. Like many of the settlers from this area, he traveled down McElmo Canyon, a natural passageway because of the canyon's level grade, continuously flowing creek, and excellent farm lands. By 1879, there were eighteen families, consisting of seventy men, women, and children living in McElmo and along the San Juan.⁵ Mitchell selected his homestead site on one of the flood plains of the river, where he established a farm and trading post, began work on some irrigation ditches and a dam, and managed some cattle and horses. Still, eking out an existence in this area was challenging, given the fluctuations in the height of the river and the ever-present threat of Indian raids. So it was surprising to find a new influx of white neighbors coming from another direction, as Mitchell and the Mormons came face to face.

When the Mormon exploring party arrived at the Mitchell ranch, its members appeared to be welcomed guests. The Mormon group, composed of twenty-six men, two women, and eight children, seemed to feel comfortable with their established neighbors. Showing characteristic vigor, they shovelled their way into acceptance by the gentiles, by digging ditches, working on the riprap dam, and planting crops. The San Juan Stake History suggests that Mitchell's group would have given up their farming attempts if the explorers had not offered to help.⁶ At the same time, groups were sent out to seek

agricultural land for the future Mormon colony. Symbolically, the group showed its intent to settle by raising the American flag (made of blue and red shirts) at Montezuma Creek on the Fourth of July.⁷ After two months of effort, they abandoned the dam-building project, but reached an agreement that the two Mormon families who remained behind could have a share of the crops grown by their neighbors.

On a social level, the explorers attended the wedding of Clara M. Mitchell to a Mr. Williams, the ceremony being performed by a Presbyterian minister from Mancos. There was also the assistance given to Mrs. James Davis, the wife of a member of the exploring party, by a non-Mormon midwife, who had trouble delivering the baby. While she was absent, Silas Smith approached the woman in labor and administered to her through prayer, relieving the problem and winning for Smith the epithet of "doctor" among the gentiles.⁸

This seemingly propitious start, however, was deceiving. The settlers needed help, the Mormons needed help, and both had no one else to call upon. But underlying this friendly cooperation were two different views of life. The Mormons' ideals are seen in their charge to settle this lawless region as a first step "in the march of the saints. . . towards the center stake of Zion [Missouri]," while Mitchell harbored a resentment that caused him to order his family and neighbors that "they would soon give the damn Mormon outfit the same medicine that he had assisted in giving them back in Missouri."⁹ It is ironic that experiences gained in the East would be brought out to the West to meet again on the San Juan.

Before the explorers departed for Cedar City in mid-August, they constructed Fort Montezuma, about five miles below the Mitchell ranch. The James L. Davis and the Harrison H. Harriman families remained there in order to grow crops and await the arrival of the main body of Mormons.¹⁰ They were eventually joined by William Hyde from Salt Lake City, who came as a trader to the Navajo rather than as a part of the Hole-in-the-Rock expedition.¹¹

Crossing Montezuma Wash, part of the exploring party encountered one of Mitchell's sons, Ernest, and his partner James Merritt. In a previous meeting, these two had insisted they were looking for an isolated area in which they could herd cattle, but now Merritt secretly informed one of the explorers that the would-be cattlemen were really in search of a Navajo mine with ore that assayed at 90 percent silver. Desiring more company, Merritt asked the Mormon, George Hobbs, if he would like to accompany them for a quarter share of the profit—the same amount promised Mitchell. Hobbs declined because of his responsibilities to the main body of Mormons awaiting his report, but he did admit that the heavily stocked larder of these prospectors, along with the possibility of obtaining wealth, was appealing.¹² This refusal eventually proved to be a wise decision for this future settler.

In the latter part of 1879, Henry Mitchell began a trickle of correspondence that turned into a continuous stream reporting Indian depredations. In

fairness to Mitchell, he was in a difficult position. His ranch bordered the Southern Ute Reservation to the east and the Navajo Reservation to the south, while to the west and north lay lands claimed by small bands of Southern Utes, Paiutes, and Navajos who were often cited in government reports as "renegades." Because of kinship ties among these groups, each used the others for protection or to shift the blame for problems away from themselves.

Real trouble started in December 1879. According to Mitchell, the Utes were off their reservation and threatening to drive the settlers from their homes. Leaders like Mariano, Red Jacket, and Narraguinip were encouraging their followers to kill cattle and provoke incidents with the settlers, in order to force them to relocate out of the Utes' territory.¹³ Three weeks after this, Mitchell wrote to Governor Arthur Thomas of Utah on behalf of the "gentile" citizens of Kane County, asking the territory to supply 50 good guns and 200 rounds of ammunition for each weapon for protection against hostile Utes, Paiutes, and Navajos. This action was based on the isolated location of the McElmo settlers, the demands by the Navajos that the whites leave, and the aggressive herding of 20,000 Navajo sheep around the Mitchell household, an act which "cleared away all grass several miles back from the river."¹⁴ The Indians' actions intensified the growing friction on their borderlands. The Navajo agent, according to Mitchell, was not in control, since he had failed to curb this activity. Mitchell then pointed out an interesting fact that remained true for several years: The Utes, Paiutes, and Navajos were friendly with the Mormons but not with the gentiles. If the guns were sent to the Ute Agent, Hiram Page, then Mitchell would see that they were put in the hands of his neighbors, half of whom were ex-soldiers and for all of whom he would be responsible. The shipment was never made.

In another letter at this same time, Mitchell placed a claim against the United States in the hope of collecting part of the Ute annuity. Stating that his earlier homestead in Montezuma Valley, Colorado, had been destroyed, he charged the government \$1,000 fee as reimbursement for the two residences, a half-mile of cedar fence, two corrals, seventy acres of grain, 1,500 grape cuttings, and 2,200 peach seedlings that had been lost.¹⁵ He, along with three other citizens placing similar claims, blamed much of this activity on Narraguinip, who was said to have admitted destroying the property because of the livestock and the fences in the area. Mitchell later filed similar claims, many of which he was accused of fabricating.

The new year brought no cessation of problems. Ernest Mitchell and James Merritt had not been heard from for sixty days. Either their mining venture was so profitable that they were too busy or else they were in trouble. The first indication that the latter was true occurred when a Navajo, Boy with Many Horses, visited a Paiute camp sixty miles above Lee's Ferry. There he saw four mules taken by Paiutes after they had killed the owners. Since the Navajo were often blamed for deeds they did not commit, they were anxious to have the affair investigated.¹⁶ At the same time, Mitchell wrote to Galen

Eastman, the Navajo agent, saying that both the Utes and Navajos were acting “saussy” (*sic*) and that if fighting occurred, most of the settlers would be in trouble because the men were out looking for Merritt and Mitchell. However, if nothing happened in the next couple of weeks, there would be 200 men present to hold out against Indian attacks until the soldiers arrived.¹⁷

As February drew to a close, Mitchell’s fiery rhetoric grew more urgent. Merritt and Mitchell’s bodies were found in Monument Valley and Henry Mitchell went to retrieve them. Although it was a Navajo guide who led him to their corpses, no single group claimed responsibility, the Navajos blaming the Utes, the Utes blaming the Navajos, and the Paiutes serving as another possible culprit.¹⁸

Following the burial, Mitchell launched into some of his most vitriolic prose. Claiming that five other men had been killed (although their bodies had not been found), that the Utes were in league with the Navajos, and that both were equally bad, he went on to inform the Navajo agent, “If you can’t take care of these Navajos, let me know because if nothing is done, there won’t be any Navajos. In ninety days, 1000 men will be here who can kill just as well as Navajos can. These Navajos are terrors, cutthroats, thieves and murderers.”¹⁹

Agent Galen Eastman sent out Navajo representatives to investigate the murders. They returned with word that the guilty party was comprised of renegades who were not attached to any agency.²⁰ A second inquiry by a Navajo and a Mexican named Jesus Alviso confirmed that three or four Indians of Ute-Paiute ancestry, living north of the San Juan, had killed the two miners.²¹

This incident illustrates how Henry L. Mitchell reacted to difficult situations. While he had ample reason to be upset and inflammatory over his son’s death, the tack he took was counterproductive. First, he did not have a clear picture of events before he started making accusations. Bouncing between the possibilities of the Navajos, the Utes, and the Paiutes, he finally learned who the guilty party was—but not before offending two Indian agents and frustrating the commanding officer of Fort Lewis. Second, he resorted to threats, promising that armed action was the only solution. Third, he exaggerated events, claiming that people had been killed, who had not even been in a fight. Finally, he became the focal point for much of the written communication that came from the Four Corners area. Mitchell was a prolific writer, chronicling activities, real and imaginary, that affected interactions between Indians and whites on the San Juan. For the next five years, the Mitchell ranch, “Riverview,” became an important center of Indian-white conflict.

With the arrival of the Mormons at Bluff in April 1880, Mitchell’s imagination found a new field of endeavor. The Hole-in-the-Rock expedition took much longer and was far more trying than the Latter-day Saints had expected, so they stopped eighteen miles short of Montezuma Creek, their original destination, and organized the city of Bluff. Within a month, Mitchell filed a claim against the Mormons and Indians, who were supposedly driving the

gentile settlers out of the McElmo and Montezuma Creek areas. Considering the bedraggled condition of the Mormons one month after their arrival, one wonders how Mitchell could write the following (original spelling reproduced):

i have bin drove from my home on the san wan by the indians through the mormans it being no longer safe for me to live thare without protection. Tha have driven evry gentile out. The morman get the indians to do it. This is a horrible state of things. When will it stop. Colonel, i am here below Parroot City campt out and destitue of allmost everything. i have lost by those Indians several thousand dollars by the Utes and Navahoes and i think it is wright that the government sould pay me out of the indian annuity at least a part. i am getting old and wore out and then to be robd and drove from my home, i think it hard and if you can do any thing for me i will be vary great full to you.²²

While no such conspiracy existed between Mormons and Indians to drive out the gentiles, there developed a spirit of competition between the two groups of white men for freighting business and resources. For instance, the ties between the Colorado settlers in Utah and the towns of Colorado were natural. Mancos and Durango served as depots for goods that were eventually freighted to the lower San Juan. It did not take the Mormons long to realize that although the Hole-in-the-Rock trail was an accomplishment, it was impractical to use as a shipping route to Escalante and beyond, so they also turned to freighting to and from Colorado.²³ Also, the Montezuma-Aneth area had a store, run by William Hyde, and a postal service, operated by James F. Daugherty, both of which started to rival those of Bluff.

As the Mormon community expanded, the gentiles could see their control slipping. For instance, in October 1882 a regular mail service was established from Mancos to Bluff.²⁴ County officials were Mormon, including judges, tax assessors, selectmen, and clerks. These Saints passed laws that reflected their interests, such as the rule that a liquor license for one year would cost 200 dollars paid in advance.²⁵ The Mormons also took the lead demographically, with Bluff in 1880 having 107 people and in 1890, 190. McElmo was not even included in the 1880 census and claimed only 16 people in 1890.²⁶

Even attempts by Mormons to include the gentiles were unfruitful. On June 1, 1885, Henry L. Mitchell was put in charge of McElmo District Roads, but on September 7, Hyde and twelve others wanted to change the route of the county roads to go to the Colorado line via the San Juan instead of leaving the river at McElmo. Mitchell and eight others protested, perhaps because this change affected the services rendered by friends and relatives along the old route. In four months' time, the Bluff and McElmo Road Districts had been consolidated into the Bluff Road District, Parley R. Butt had been made

supervisor, and the county road now went from Bluff to the Colorado state line.²⁷ Power politics were in the hands of the Mormons.

Meanwhile, conflicts continued with the Indians. Mitchell complained to the Secretary of the Interior that large groups of Navajos were wandering twenty to forty miles off the reservation, "robbing white men, claiming they own the land, and threatening to kill all whites. . . . I know they intend to make trouble this spring."²⁸ The Navajo Agent's reply to the Bureau of Indian Affairs was a handy bit of detective work. Agent D. M. Riordan began by contacting the primary Navajo leaders who lived along the San Juan, as well as the tribal chiefs—Manuelito, and Ganado Mucho—to see if any knew of an uprising. He also wrote to Mitchell and his son-in-law, James F. Daugherty, originators of the complaint, since "there is a looseness about the statements, a vagueness that gives a person really very little to work on in the way of investigation." Riordan also realized the close ties between the two authors, and though each sent a separate letter, having a different date and place of origin, the agent believed "they were written in the same house, on the same table, and (I doubt not) within the same hour," since these two men lived in the same house and were business partners. Riordan talked to more than 100 Indians, none of whom could find any proof of an incident. Finally, two close friends of the agent stayed at Mitchell's ranch for a couple of nights and observed no friction but only that "relations between the traders and the Indians seemed remarkably pleasant." The general conclusion drawn from this investigation was that the complaint was lodged in order to lay the foundation for a claim against the government in the future.²⁹

Mitchell also used the Indians to protect his interests. Although he protested that the Navajos were wandering far off their reservation, he issued passes, which he had no authority to do, for the Indians to come across to the north side of the river to graze their flocks on Mormon-used public domain. "The Navajos and Pah-Utes crossed with their countless herds of sheep and goats, and from the San Juan to the Blue Mountains—north 40 miles—they eat every particle of vegetation. This caused great suffering and loss among stock belonging to the Mormons, who say that remonstrance is useless."³⁰ The Navajos were anxious to take advantage of this opportunity to graze flocks on the far side of the river, expanding their access to land holdings.

It was intimated that Mitchell sold ammunition and whiskey. Thus, Mitchell was able to play a number of different angles. By trying to convince the agents that Indian attacks were imminent, he prepared the way to lodge future claims against the government. The loss of property—whether real or imaginary—served as a basis for requesting financial reimbursement. Mitchell constantly insisted that troops be sent to his vicinity to provide protection; these soldiers stayed at his ranch and bought goods at the trading post. By encouraging the Indians into his general area, he added more trading business, irri-

tated the Mormons, depleted their resources, and decreased their desire to remain.

Mitchell continually proved himself to be an opportunist par excellence. At least part of this scenario was not lost on Agent Riordan, who after explaining why the Navajos felt justified in living outside their boundaries, noted that "the Indians are persistently encouraged to leave the reservation by small traders living around through the country surrounding the reserve. These men generally treat the Indians pleasantly and the Indians listen to them. It is 'business,' pure and simple with the trader."³¹

Peter Tracy, who lived one mile below the Mitchell ranch, was not as fortunate in his relations. He had a reputation for being violent and quick-tempered, so it was a stroke of luck that he was not home when a group of Utes and Paiutes passed through his farm plot and helped themselves to corn and melons. They returned the next night, however, and Tracy demanded payment. A fracas ensued and one of the Utes, reportedly named Sore Leg from Narraguinip's band, shot him through the neck, killing him instantly.³² Mitchell and Daugherty immediately wrote letters, accusing the Navajos as well as the Utes, though their story differs in detail from that of the investigating cavalry officer sent from Fort Lewis. They seemed to revel in stirring up trouble on the San Juan River.

But 1884 brought real trouble for Mitchell and Daugherty. Events started in February when two miners, Samuel Walcott and James McNally, left Mitchell's store to prospect for gold and silver in Indian country. Leaving behind a wagon, some papers, and personal effects, Walcott and McNally had every intention of returning to the San Juan, but after separating from the main party of miners, the two men were killed while buying supplies from some Navajos in the vicinity of Navajo Mountain.³³

Mitchell took a personal interest in what had occurred and was able to convince Fred Fickey, an insurance adjuster from Baltimore, Maryland, and friend of Walcott, of what he believed had happened. Fickey was just as prolific in writing letters as was Mitchell, corresponding with military commanders, the Governor of Utah, and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs. Much of his information came from Mitchell and Daugherty and was tainted with their prejudices. For instance, Mitchell said that he had asked the Navajos about Walcott and McNally but the Indians became angry and attempted to start a fight. Mitchell had heroically tried to pacify them, but a fight broke out at the trading post. He next suggested that his personal letter to Fickey be published "so that the Navajo Indians will be learned a lesson."³⁴ Mitchell wrote a second letter, painting an even gloomier picture of the situation. Fickey relayed this information about Mitchell saying that his neighbors "are gentiles surrounded by Mormons and Indians and he says the Mormons have tried to get the Indians to kill them on more than one occasion (and I have no doubt of it). Of course the entire Mormon element and all their Indian allies

will misrepresent Mitchell; they would break up his settlement if they could and will do all the lying needed to screen themselves."³⁵

Fickey then went on to blame William Hyde, a Mormon and old neighbor of Mitchell's, who also had a ferry near where the two prospectors had been killed. He accused Hyde of being one of the "prime actors or originators of the affair" and was convinced that if the Indians were forced to tell the truth, blame would rest on the Mormons.³⁶ Nothing was further from the truth. The Mormons knew little about the incident, had no part in encouraging the Indians in acts of violence, and made very little mention of Mitchell and his following in their diaries and journals. In reality, the Mormons were busy trying to grow crops, harness the San Juan River, and maintain their own friendly relationships with the Navajos and Utes.

Now it was Mitchell's turn to have problems. On April 15, approximately two weeks after the deaths of Walcott and McNally, three men—A. Johnson, William Grove, and Victor Neff—came into the trading post, having returned from a search for the miners' bodies. While the white men were discussing their lack of success, four Navajo men and two women entered, wanting to trade. One of the Navajos took an unloaded gun and aimed it at a calf outside, then at a boy, and then at one of the white men. One of the travelers saw this last move and drew his own gun, believing he was being threatened. Another Navajo took the rifle away from the one who was pointing it and showed that it was unloaded, thus relieving tension. However, the disarmed Navajo called to his friend outside, a man named Bai-alil-le, and said, "These Americans are going to kill me." Starting towards the store, gun at the ready, Bai-alil-le threatened the white men, who drew their guns and started shooting. The first Navajo to fall was the one who had been pointing the gun in the store. Two shots killed him instantly. The sound of firing brought Mitchell's son and another man from the nearby fields; upon seeing the problem, one of them fired a shot that hit Bai-alil-le in the forehead, knocking him unconscious. The white men then rushed out of the store, firing in all directions and hitting one Indian in the elbow as he jumped a fence. Mrs. Mitchell helped the two Navajo women, trapped in the store, to escape out a back door and though they were fired upon while running, neither was hit. In the meantime, Bai-alil-le revived and escaped, as did the remaining Navajo man.³⁷

In usual Mitchell style, this became an instant war, and though one cannot doubt the seriousness of the event, there also was that imaginative flair that Mitchell added to any incident. The settlers made preparations to withstand a siege by hauling water from the river, boarding the trading post windows, and sending word to the military that the "ranch was surrounded by Navajos, fight in progress."³⁸ Near the ranch, a group of Utes had pitched camp and had witnessed the events. Taking advantage of the action, they rode to Spencer's store four miles up the river and told the two hired men working there that a fight had broken out. Leaving the post, the two men went to

Mitchell's, thus providing a wonderful opportunity for the Utes to clean the shelves of goods, which they did. Spencer later claimed a \$2,400 loss.³⁹

One interesting sidelight to this action is that Edgar O. Noland, owner of the Four Corners trading post thirteen miles above Spencer's, knowingly purchased some of the stolen goods from the Utes and then wrote to the Navajo Agent D. M. Riordan, using this as "proof" that both Utes and Navajos were involved in the Mitchell fight. This led Riordan to say, "I do not see what can be expected from Indians who get their moral training from contact with such men, and there are many such."⁴⁰ Both Noland and Spencer were related to Mitchell through marriage.

That night, the Navajos returned with a large party and ran off the stock at Mitchell's post and other nearby settlements. Mitchell claimed a loss of fifty horses. Cowboys from the Carlisle Ranch, herding cattle on Blue Mountain, willingly came to the assistance of the Mitchell group, eventually swelling the ranks to a total of twenty-three people at the trading post.

Within a week, a detachment of cavalry arrived under Lieutenant J. F. Kreps from Fort Lewis. He reported that both Utes and Navajos had watched him during much of his trip, "the two tribes evidently being banded together for mischief. . . . It is the opinion here that the two tribes are assembling on the other side of the river, about seven miles distant and that the Mormons are urging them on to war. At any rate every person here is badly scared and believe what they say."⁴¹ In reality, the Mormons had little to do with the conflict. One Navajo, named Old Peejo, warned a woman, Mrs. James Allan, to stay home and keep her children nearby because trouble with the whites was expected.⁴² Platte D. Lyman, a Mormon settler, mentioned how a party of Navajos came in to trade, their main group being two days' ride back from the river. His diary then reported, "They are, as usual, very friendly to our people."⁴³ Also, Kumen Jones, another Mormon settler, told how he traveled to the Navajos to assure them that peace was most desirable, while at the same time allaying their fears of the cavalry.⁴⁴ There was no conspiracy on the part of the Mormons.

Short on supplies and expecting a company of cavalry from Fort Lewis and one from Fort Wingate, Lieutenant Kreps departed from the Mitchell ranch on April 27, leaving two soldiers behind to keep guard. The lieutenant was convinced that the Indians "want to kill the white gentile settlers" and that the whole affair could explode into a large-scale war.⁴⁵

This was not true of Captain Ketchum or Captain Smith, who arrived at Mitchell's four or five days later. Both were convinced that the Indians did not want trouble, that Mitchell was the cause of the incident, and that there was no need for two companies of soldiers to be stationed there, when a squad with a noncommissioned officer would suffice. Captain Ketchum's report was illuminating: in it Mitchell claimed that he had been threatened by the Navajos because he did not give in to their demands for a better price on wool. They then threatened to kill the whites in the store, went outside and pre-

pared their weapons, and threatened to shoot his son. "The fifteen Indians present at the 'battle' as Mr. Mitchell terms it . . . kept up a constant fire for several hours on his ranch of from two to three hundred yards range, but I failed to discover the effects of any shots upon his establishment or out buildings." Ketchum believed the reasons for animosity between white men and Indians were that Mitchell now forbade the Indians to herd sheep on the north side of the river and that "the Mitchells have not the faculty of preserving friendly relations with the Indians; three are quick tempered, especially the sons. The question naturally arises why should they have trouble with the Navajo and no other San Juan traders."⁴⁶ Captain Smith concurred with many of these findings, adding, "It is the general verdict among both whites and Indians that he [Mitchell] is a firebrand among them. I do not believe half of what he told me as there is no evidence to bear out his statements."⁴⁷

Life did not get easier. On June 18, the San Juan River reached flood stage and washed away Mitchell's place, as well as William Hyde's and Fort Montezuma.⁴⁸ In December, Navajos came to the ranch, now established on the bank overlooking the river, to explain their need to graze flocks north of the San Juan.⁴⁹ Mitchell complained to the agent that he was being overwhelmed by the Navajos and their livestock. An investigation into the problem showed only thirteen Navajo families across the river; these were on Southern Ute land, not the public domain. The settlers living near McElmo stated that they had no complaints to make about any Navajos, but "their opinion was that Mr. Mitchell had originated the reports for his own benefit and wholly without cause."⁵⁰

In September 1885, Mitchell was accused of withholding jewelry stripped from the body of one of the Navajos killed in the previous shooting affair. The slain man's mother and father first went to Agent Bowman and procured written permission to go and visit Mitchell, but once they reached his post, he gave them only part of the property and a promise of ten horses in exchange for the remainder. The Navajos left peacefully, going to the agent for assistance with the transaction. But as usual, Mitchell contacted the military authorities, saying the "Indians came to his house in large numbers, heavily armed and in a hostile and threatening manner; that they made threats of violence and injured his buildings, etc. [and he asked] for the presence of troops for protection." Even the Navajo Agent was attacked for the Navajo's "letter of an incendiary character." Bowman responded to Mitchell's charges with a request to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs for a letter chastising Mitchell, "who has had and makes more trouble for and with the Navajos than all of the settlers living the entire length of the San Juan River. He lies to the Indians, gives them passes, tells them that he is a brother to the Great Father, etc."⁵¹

Yet by the end of 1885, a change occurred. There is no further mention of Henry L. Mitchell. Indian depredations continued in 1886, 1887, and 1888, each time resulting in petitions from settlers in McElmo Canyon, but Mitchell's name is absent, although in the 1886 correspondence, Porter and Henry

F. Mitchell's names appeared. Both these men moved back to the Cortez-Mancos area, but nothing was said about their "Old Man."⁵² Records of Montezuma County, Colorado, and San Juan County, Utah, are silent also. The only clue to Mitchell's departure is provided by Kumen Jones, who noted that the Mitchells spent "a very few troublesome years" in the area and then "hit the trail back out, much worse off than when they came in."⁵³ No doubt, this departure must have been welcomed by both the Indians and the Mormons.

In Henry L. Mitchell, one finds a quarrelsome man who rarely lacked words. Through word and deed, he was able to involve Navajos, Utes, Indian agents, Mormons, cavalry, the Governor of Utah, and the Commissioner of Indian Affairs in a series of incidents that encouraged seven years of turbulence and indecision. The Navajos and Utes responded by using intimidation and furthering their goals when practical. While Mitchell's actions at times seem inconsistent—such as his encouraging Navajos to graze their herds north of the river, then later complaining about it—he was effective in playing one group against another.