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Northern Navajo Frontier 1860 1900

Robert Mcpherson

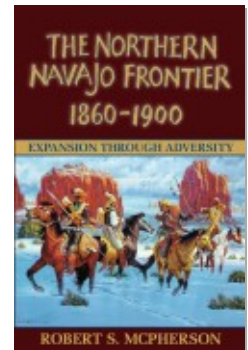
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7 / Boundaries, Bonanzas, and Bickering: Consolidation of the Northern Navajo Frontier, 1870–1905

Nati' nesthani, He Who Teaches Himself, floated down the San Juan River in a cottonwood log hollowed out for him by the gods. His journey was prompted by problems at home and a search for new opportunities; his only companion was a pet turkey, ceremonially prepared to help the young man. Adventure followed adventure, but finally Nati' nesthani reached the end of the river where he left his log and sat pondering his future. Speaking to his companion he said, "My pet, what a beautiful farm I could make here if I only had the seeds." The bird responded by spreading its wings, walking in the four cardinal directions and at each point dropping seeds of corn, pumpkin, beans, and melons. These were soon planted and eventually harvested by the hero, who at the end of the story returns to his farm on the river, having found a wife, survived supernatural tests, and achieved peace with a dangerous foe. He lives there still.¹

This myth, recorded by Washington Matthews in 1897, explains some of the beliefs behind the "Plume Way" and other ceremonies. But more important, it recognizes the San Juan River as a fruitful area for the Navajo to practice agriculture. From 1870 to 1905, the people of this region became embroiled in a series of disputes over land that involved Navajos and Utes against white settlers and miners, as each group tried to establish and then maintain control of the land. This was also a period when the Navajos, like He Who Teaches Himself, began to adopt new agricultural techniques under the direction of the federal government, while still trying to maintain their traditional values. The problems encountered in Navajo interaction with Mormons, gentile

settlers, cattle companies, trading posts, and others had a cumulative effect that reached fruition in this period. By 1900, government policies defined the boundaries of the northern part of the reservation in such a way that Navajo expansion onto the public domain was accented with reservation lands being added and protected. But this came about only after a turbulent period of give and take, which is the topic of this chapter.

In the 1870s and 80s, the Four Corners area saw a marked increase in white population. Mormon and gentile settlers, cattle companies, mining interests, the railroad, and the subsequent establishment of towns all served to change the Indians' lifestyle. Perhaps the most permanent force of change was the settler, whose homesteading of the public domain centered on the most important of natural resources—water. The Navajos also sought water. As early as 1872, Navajo agents looked to the San Juan as the most practical place to encourage their charges to become more dependent on agriculture. Although the Navajos had always been involved in farming on a limited scale—on flood plains and perennial streams, using small-scale irrigation or dry farming—the agents were now hoping for large acres of planted crops, dependent on more complex irrigation systems. High yields in agriculture were a goal stated in the *Report of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs* throughout this period.

There were two reasons for this. First, by increasing the amount and variety of food grown by the Indians, the government could theoretically decrease expenses involved in purchasing and shipping supplies. In reality, the Navajos and Utes during this period depended upon the government for survival, though in many instances they made valiant attempts to become more self-sufficient. Second, many experts viewed agriculture as a tool that would move the Indian from “blanket” to overalls and from barbarism to civilization. Whether or not farming was practical in all geographic regions, government representatives saw it as a tool to promote change. Although the reservation at this time comprised 3,328,000 acres in northwestern New Mexico and northeastern Arizona, there were few places in this desert land that could support intensive agriculture for the estimated 9,114 Navajos living there.²

So it was that in 1872 the government launched a formal attempt to identify a site that could be developed as a garden spot for the ever-increasing number of Navajos. Agent James H. Miller and B. M. Thomas, agency farmer, realized that the agricultural returns of the past year at their headquarters in Fort Defiance were meager at best. In June, therefore, the two men along with a trader and interpreter set out for the San Juan Valley to find a place to establish at least a subagency to be used eventually as the main post. Unfortunately, as this party camped along the river two Utes attacked them and in the act of stealing the horses killed Miller.³ This incident highlights one reason why this northern part of the reservation was not already heavily populated. Anxiety over the Utes kept most Navajos in check. They remembered the “Fearing Time” of the late 1850s and 60s, when Kit Carson encouraged Utes

to prey on their enemies. Some groups of Navajos befriended the Utes and Paiutes in the area, but far larger numbers considered the Utes dangerous.

Yet Miller's death and the Navajo's fear were still not enough to discourage the Superintendent of Indian Affairs, Nathaniel Pope, who wrote that "should the farming facilities in the San Juan Valley prove to be as reported, that the Department will be almost entirely relieved of the expense of furnishing subsistence. Aside from this, the possession of large herds of stock . . . will tend to keep them at home and peaceable."⁴ In reality, events proved the opposite.

The next few years witnessed fluctuations of interest in the project. Cost estimates ranged from \$15,000 to \$57,500, with the scope of the undertaking varying from a temporary summer camp to be used only for agricultural purposes to a full-time agency with school, chapel, irrigation ditches, and a new road system to tie in with the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad, which by this time was completed to Fort Garland, Colorado.⁵ Additional factors helped encourage change, such as a land grant to the Atlantic and Pacific Railroad on the southern end of the reservation, blocking a desired extension, which in turn fostered the idea of settling Navajos to the north.⁶ The belief was that if the agent located a place on the San Juan, it could provide "all the corn, wheat and vegetables for twice the number of Indians in the tribe."⁷ Another belief was that the government should "afford to be a little magnanimous and give to a peaceable and industrious tribe of Indians a few more square miles of barren sand."⁸ Thus, by 1880 the way was paved for the northward expansion of the Navajo Reservation, to accompany previous extensions of lands on the west in 1878 and the east in 1880.⁹

The Southern Utes, however, were in a similar situation: Their agency had been moved from Abiquiu to Ignacio in southern Colorado. Although the new reservation had more streams—La Plata, Animas, Florida, Los Pinos, and Piedra—the San Juan tied all of them together as a primary source of water. The Ute agent, George Manypenny, traveled over much of the reservation trying to determine what lands were most suitable for agriculture. Many of the river valleys were appropriate for cultivation, but Manypenny received increasing pressure from white settlers who had similar ideas. He would not accede to their desire to have the Utes settled on barren wasteland, but at the same time he realized that "to assume that the Utes will not be disturbed but permitted to dwell in peace, would be to nurture a delusion of the gravest kind."¹⁰ Thus, as the Utes were being squeezed into the southwestern corner of Colorado, the Navajos were being encouraged to move into the northern reaches of their reservation in the Four Corners area.

The natural result was conflict, which characterized life in this region during the 1880s and first half of the 1890s, though sporadic trouble persisted into the early 1900s. Incidents ranged from murder to destruction of property and intimidation; the catalog of crimes is extensive. Examples of Navajo and Ute activities, however, illustrate the problems faced by the settlers. The

most common offense was begging, stealing, or destroying property. Stolen livestock, ruined fences, demands of food, and threats of harm became so common that many settlers feared leaving their farm and family for only a day. But even when the men were home, incidents occurred. At one ranch in McElmo, Colorado, a man had his tools, harness, and blankets stolen and was then approached by seven Utes who called him "vile names," pulled his ears, told him to "go right now," and then tried to drag him out of his house. He escaped; shots were fired at him, which he returned; and then the Utes pursued him in a cat-and-mouse chase to his neighbor's home where he hid, undetected.¹¹

One comparatively minor incident involved George Washington (Ute), a "hideous old cuss," who considered himself a "big Ike." He went to the home of E. T. Walker, a settler whose wife was lying sick in bed. Finding the door and front windows locked, George walked around to her bedroom and "stuck his head in with one of his cursed grunts and so frightened her that she has been confined to her bed with doctor bills for me [Walker] to foot up in consequence of Mr. Washington's call."¹²

The Navajos also did their share of intimidating settlers; constant patrolling by cavalry from Fort Lewis and Fort Wingate, the two military posts used by Navajo agents, helped control the situation.¹³ There were also fears that the Navajos and Utes were supporting each other in their attempts to frustrate white settlers, reports to this effect being issued in 1879, 1885, and 1889.¹⁴ Turbulence was characteristic of events in this period and was a part of the Navajos' aggressive defensive activities on the northern Navajo frontier.

One of the pressing questions asked by the white settler was how the Navajos could justify being away from the reservation. Part of the problem stemmed from the Navajo lifestyle. Ever-increasing herds of sheep and a growing population placed greater demands on the lands for both agricultural and grazing purposes. Estimates of the number of Navajos off the reservation were as high as 8,000; although this figure seems excessive, it emphasizes that many Indians chose to look for greener pastures.¹⁵ The natural place to find free land was the public domain, since the Navajos had as much right to use it for grazing and homesteading purposes as did their white neighbors. This was the ideal; the reality proved quite different. In 1885, Navajo Agent John H. Bowman addressed this problem in his annual report:

The non-confinement of these Indians to their reservation will soon be the important issue of this section and one with which your office must deal. The country around here is fast being settled up with whites; earnest men, most of whom do not believe that an Indian has any business off of his reservation; men who have no great love for them anyway and who will be inclined to make them stand aside if they get in their way. It is impossible for these Indians to understand our land laws or the system of public surveys and harder still for

them to comply with the requirements of the homestead laws.¹⁶

Another difficulty the Indians faced was the unscrupulous machinations of white men, who took unfair advantage of the Navajos' lack of familiarity with the law. For example, one Indian lived for twelve years on a piece of property located 100 miles from the reservation. On it he raised his family of seven children, built a house and corral, and was generally productive. But when he went to Santa Fe to file for a land title, he gave his \$160 fee to a man who pretended to be the land agent and who then absconded with the money. The Navajo notified the authorities but nothing was done.¹⁷

Still others opposed giving more land to the Navajos, believing that the Indians already had enough. There had been recent additions made to the reservation and to add more would compound the folly. Major General John Pope, Commander of the Department of the Missouri, reasoned, "If these Indians want more land, because of their great prosperity, surely they can afford to buy it as well as the whites. . . . That the white settlers will make far better use of the land than the Indians is certain."¹⁸

Other people closer to the problem felt differently. Special Agent William Parsons noted that in some places Navajos and whites were trying to cultivate the same quarter section of land and that "the only permanent solution of the difficulty on the San Juan River will be to add all the land south of that river to the Navajo Reservation. . . . It is in fact all desert and mountain with the exception of 2,000 acres of bottom land susceptible of irrigation. . . . This land the Navajo must have in order to get to water with their herds and flocks."¹⁹

On May 17, 1884, President Chester A. Arthur signed an executive order expanding the northern part of the reservation into Utah to the south side of the San Juan River, hoping to eliminate conflict over lands by providing official recognition of Navajo rights. In the same order, however, a small portion of land in New Mexico, which had been made part of the reservation by an executive order on January 6, 1880, was now removed from Navajo control.

Twenty-one Anglo families utilizing this land in the corner of northwestern New Mexico favored the policy of restoring to the public domain a portion of Township 29 north, Ranges 14, 15, and 16 west, located south of the river.²⁰ The Indians, however, were adamantly opposed to giving up this territory, since to do so prevented access to the water they needed for their herds, and this in turn made the land fifty to seventy miles back from the river unusable for grazing purposes. A conflict ensued that legally ended on April 24, 1886, by an executive order restoring the land to the Navajos. The settlers were slow to respond, both sides demanding their rights, while the Navajos obtained "an ample supply of the best ammunition" in order to "maintain these possessions and their just rights as they understand them."²¹ This is a good example of the Navajos' defensive policy in operation.

Subsequently, two cavalry troops were stationed on the river to help prevent trouble and to enforce evacuation of the white settlers, twelve to fifteen of whom "manifested a dogged determination to stay until paid for their improvements."²² Further investigation of the various claims coming from this area revealed that only three of the settlers had actually made improvements like log cabins or farms, that in three places access to the river was denied by hostile claimants who threatened violence, and that the Indians had just as bitter feelings towards the settlers but had shown forbearance in avoiding trouble.²³ The government removed the settlers by November 1887, withdrew the cavalry, and gave the job of seeing that the homesteaders did not return to one lieutenant and five privates of the Indian police force.²⁴ The Navajos also helped ensure that the settlers would stay out of the area by destroying any "improvements" on the land. Claims of twenty-one whites were settled by June 1889, the amounts ranging from \$14.66 to \$1,237.71 with an aggregate sum of \$10,000.²⁵ Fortunately, no bloodshed occurred during this transfer of property.

But the extension of reservation lands proved to be of only temporary value in stopping Navajo expansion. The agent's estimates of the numbers of off-reservation Navajos continued to climb, reaching 10,000 for the entire reservation in 1889.²⁶ He received letters and petitions from residents and officials in Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico, complaining of Navajo activities ranging from flooding an area with large sheep herds to small parties of livestock thieves roaming the territory. These provide further examples of Navajos aggressively using the surrounding borderlands.

Even the Ute agent, Charles Bartholomew, who was struggling to introduce agriculture on this reservation, complained of Navajo encroachment. Writing to the Navajo agent, he charged that "the western part of this reserve was over run with your Navajo Indians. . . . Our Utes are very anxious that you keep your Indians at home. They are afraid that the Navajos will commit some overt act which will cause the whites to retaliate and mistaking the acts of the Navajos for the Utes. This could not very well occur if you will keep your Indians across the line and I am anxious that this should be done."²⁷ The Navajo agent's response was conciliatory. He pointed out that with a population of 25,000 spread over a territory of about 11,000 square miles, it was hard to watch everyone, but that if he could "catch and punish a few troublesome members of the tribe," the news would spread over the reservation to produce the desired effect.²⁸ He also dispatched Navajo police to drive the offenders back to the appropriate reservation, with instructions that no one was to leave again without a pass from the agent.

This solution, however, was only temporary. As late as 1901, Ute Agent Joseph O. Smith wrote to the Commissioner of Indian Affairs, stating there were eight or ten Navajo families on his reservation who claimed to have been there for five or six years but who should be removed. The Navajo agent responded that he was unaware of this situation and that the Navajos should

be brought back after they harvested their crops, to which the Commissioner agreed.²⁹

Once the government established the boundaries of the northern part of the reservation, interest grew in implementing agricultural plans. It was a formidable undertaking to cultivate these lands, which were described by one agent as "my ideal of a desert; and although very large, it might have been much larger without covering any land of the least value. It is merely a space on the map of so many degrees and parallels. Three fourths of it is about as valuable for stock grazing as that many acres of clear sky. . . . The valleys are composed of sand formed by wash and erosion; no soil worthy of the name."³⁰ Other estimates, not as pessimistic, looked to the San Juan with the hope that, if the Navajos dug a large irrigation ditch, from 5,000 to 7,000 acres "could be made into a complete garden."³¹

Keeping this goal in mind, the government ordered a general survey of the reservation in 1892 "with a view to establishing and maintaining a system of irrigation and developing a stock water supply sufficient for the Navajo Indians. . . . That an estimate of the cost of constructing the proposed ditches, dams . . . be submitted in detail," and that a complete report be made concerning feasibility.³² The study, finished in 1893, contained a section on the San Juan that mentioned the dry washes on the northern side of the river and recommended that the settlers of Bluff, Utah, be given a contract to develop a three-mile-long ditch at a cost of \$650 to irrigate an estimated 260 acres of land.³³ No mention was made, however, of lands further east along the San Juan in New Mexico.

The 1890s were characterized by severe drought, early frosts, and miserable harvests, thus underscoring the need to develop a steady flow of water. The citizens of Farmington, New Mexico, observed the struggles of the Navajos as crops failed and livestock ranged farther from their appointed lands to graze. Surprisingly, the settlers wrote to the Secretary of the Interior requesting help and defending the character of their neighbors. They insisted that the Navajos were not professional beggars but were in need of immediate governmental assistance, since their situation had grown so bad that they were now eating their horses. Many Indians were expected to die in the spring of 1895, if something was not done.³⁴ The people of Bluff wrote a similar letter in 1902, saying that the past nine years had left the Navajos without any means of subsistence.³⁵ One Indian on the lower San Juan was so anxious to change his situation that he rode 100 miles in the winter to ask the agent to help reconstruct a ditch that had fallen in disrepair.³⁶

The agents were not insensitive to the Navajos' plight. One man bought 10,000 pounds of flour on his own initiative, hoping that the government would reimburse him when it realized how serious the situation was.³⁷ Pleas for additional irrigation development funds were made through government channels while further studies were conducted to ensure effective expenditures.

But one of the most interesting forms of aid came to the northern Nava-

jo in the guise of the Methodist Ladies Home Missionary Society of New York, who in 1891 built a parsonage and church in Jewett, New Mexico.³⁸ Initially assigned to teach school, Field Matron Mary Eldridge quickly became involved in the fundamental needs of health and welfare. Logging in long hours of Indian instruction in 1893—305 in cleanliness, 251 in sewing, 347 in sick care, 503 in receiving medicine—and recording a total of 4,680 Navajo visitors in her home, she appears to have been well accepted.³⁹

Eldridge's operating expenses ranged between \$1,000 and \$2,000 per year, which included plows, shovels, axes, hoes, and other implements that citizens loaned to help meet the Indians' agricultural needs. Supporters in the East as well as the Indian Department sent seeds. On one occasion, Eldridge nursed back to health a woman who had been given up to die by the medicine men. According to the agent, "some of the most desperate characters of the tribe who have come under her influence have developed into steady, hard working men."⁴⁰ In 1895, Eldridge was able to report that because of the help she received from the Cambridge, Massachusetts, branch of the Indian Relief Association, Navajos who had previously had only one ax and a broken-handled shovel to construct a ditch were provided with sufficient tools to build the "Cambridge Ditch" to serve nearly 600 acres of land.⁴¹ All of this was done in the belief that "irrigation, allotment of land and education of all the children will civilize these people, and the love of God will save them."⁴²

Initially the agents were not in favor of missionaries on the reservation. One was reported to have said, "Put those women just as far from the agency as you can; we don't want missionary women watching us and reporting."⁴³ But subsequent results and reports indicate both admiration of and dependence upon the work done on the San Juan. Agent Constant Williams said of Eldridge that she could "not be too highly commended. Her life is one of hardship and devotion and whatever she undertakes she does well."⁴⁴ One visitor from the East felt that "these motherly, warm hearted and courageous women should be upheld by the Government in every way, and every facility should be provided by it to further their legitimate work."⁴⁵ Positive reports of this and other missionary activities continued into the early 1900s, until the establishment of the San Juan Agency eclipsed their efforts.

In addition to agriculture and missionary work, another issue confronted the northern Navajos in the 1890s: mining. Interest in the mineral wealth of the San Juan country goes back to the 1850s and 60s as miners moved on Ute territory in southwestern Colorado in a series of strikes. But there was only sporadic interest in Navajo lands, much of which centered on the legendary silver mine alleged to have been discovered at Navajo Mountain by the Navajos in the 1860s.⁴⁶ Adding to this tale of secret Navajo mineral wealth were the murders by Paiutes of James Merrick and Ernest Mitchell in 1879, and the deaths of Samuel Walcott and James McNally in 1884.⁴⁷

These incidents, along with others, were the result of anti-white sentiment and greed, rather than any Navajo aversion toward miners, though the

Indians realized the danger of encroachment that miners represented. Proof of this lies in the testimony provided by Navajos through Indian police involved in each instance as well as the fact that Hashkeneinii, around the same time that Walcott and McNally were killed, spent several weeks showing some prospectors the northwestern part of the reservation.⁴⁸ Though the miners discovered no precious minerals, this action shows the Navajos did not resent individual miners. In fact, in 1885 one of these men, William F. Williams, and his sons set up a trading post near Navajo Mountain and had the Indians bring in ore samples. These were carelessly put in a sack and later analyzed. One stone had a significant amount of gold in it, but at this late date it was impossible to determine who brought it in or where it came from.⁴⁹

Starting in 1889, however, large groups of miners placed increasing pressure on the northern part of the reservation, and the Indians reacted. Navajo Agent C. E. Vandever prevented a band of prospectors and cowboys that was forming in Gallup from entering Navajo lands. Fired by the report of rich silver and gold lodes, fifty men were preparing to invade the Carrizo Mountains. They were stopped by both the agent and military authorities—or so it was believed.⁵⁰

But by the end of March 1890, eighteen of this group were in the Carrizos holding out against the Indians. The Navajos, under Black Horse, offered half the prospectors' horses to the Utes if they would help rid the area of miners.⁵¹ Two troops of cavalry and the agent evicted the prospectors, warned them not to return, and escorted them off the reservation. Some, however, persisted and came back in June. Vandever feared that "threats of invasion by other parties have been made and other attempts will surely follow, until such time as the Department investigates the extent of the alleged mineral wealth of that region and determines either to close it against miners or open it for development."⁵²

This was a prophetic statement. While Vandever was reporting his action concerning the prospectors, local newspapers helped generate increasing interest in the Carrizos. The *Albuquerque Citizen* claimed that "the whole truth has not been told and he [Vandever] believes the district to be much richer in the abundance of precious metals which it contains than the most extravagant accounts have ever represented it to be."⁵³ The newspaper went on to say that Vandever believed the area should be opened up to miners since Indians cared nothing about mineral wealth, that it was impossible to stop "enterprising white men," that the Carrizo country was "one of the richest gold districts ever yet discovered in the United States," and that the mountains were too rich to remain in the possession of "savages." The *Durango Herald* chimed in, confirming the existence of tremendous wealth and stating, "The whole United States Army could not protect these mountains now that it is known to a certainty that gold exists. It will be the Black Hills over again."⁵⁴

On May 10, 1892, the Navajo Commission met at Fort Wingate and proceeded to the Carrizos to inspect the gold and silver deposits. General A.

McCook, chairman of this committee, was to determine if there was a basis for opening land negotiations with the Indians. After scouring the countryside, geologists, scientists, and prospectors all agreed that the sandstone formations that composed most of the mountain range were barren of precious metals and that the Indians could keep their land.⁵⁵

The Navajo perspective on these events is instructive. Old Mexican, a young man at this time, told how he was called to a meeting at Red Rock by a very old man with white hair and an eagle on his shoulder. This soldier sent out two men each day to prospect for minerals, but they always returned having found nothing. The leader then called the Navajos together and explained that the army had come to help and protect the Indians:

But the fellows who sent the note to Washington are not going to give up the mountain. Therefore I want you Indians to build houses all around the mountain where there are springs and plenty of water. Those houses will represent a fence around the mountain. . . . The white men who gamble and drink and get into debt, with no way to pay their debts, they are the ones who come to this reservation looking for gold, scheming for some way to pay their debts. Don't let them get a chance to get the best of you. . . . If you ever see another white fellow around here prospecting for gold, saying that he was sent from Washington, don't believe him. If they ever want any more prospecting done, you will see me back again with my men.⁵⁶

Yet the gold fever persisted and only shifted to the lower San Juan where an invasion of miners in 1892 and 1893 caused as much concern to the Mormons in Bluff as it did to the Navajos on the south side of the river. Starting in early November, reports of gold became so numerous that the government revised the executive order of May 17, 1884, in the order of November 19, 1892, restoring to the public domain the lands that lay west of longitude 110° west within the territory of Utah.⁵⁷

Miners reported that this strip of land contained an immense deposit of gold in black sand, which varied from three to six miles in width and about fifteen miles in length, with sand from eighteen to twenty feet in depth.⁵⁸ The Atlantic and Pacific Railroad contemplated constructing a feeder line to this gold-rich area. The general consensus was that the Indians had no use for the minerals, so the land should be opened to exploration and development. The superintendent of the railroad, T. R. Gable, even went so far as to send out an exploring party that spent thirty days locating the minerals and a route to them for his train.⁵⁹

The response to these reports was electrifying. John Wetherill, a trader to the Navajos, passed through Bluff noting that the quiet Mormon community had turned into a wide-open boom town after 10,000 gold-mad men had rushed into the country.⁶⁰ F. A. Hammond, a Mormon leader, claimed that from

thirty to fifty people a day went through Bluff, bound for the gold fields.⁶¹ One Bluff resident complained, "They [miners] did not stop at our farms and our orchards and our houses and lands, but located every foot of ground on the borders of the river. They did not take in the sand rock bluffs above the town but otherwise than that, they located every inch and foot—my house where I live, my little orchard, my lucerne patch, corn patch is all under placer claim."⁶²

The Navajos reacted to these events by moving toward the river in large numbers and aggressively defending their lands. They drove the prospectors from the south side of the San Juan, destroyed claim markers, and scattered the miners' horses and burros.⁶³ Fortunately, when little actual wealth resulted, the gold rush died in 1893 and relieved the pressure on both Mormon and Navajo lands.

Interest shifted back to the Carrizos. In 1894, J. H. P. Voorhies and some mining associates requested authority to inspect some valuable veins of minerals in a volcanic tract of ground "of no possible use to Indians . . . and one which they will no doubt be very willing to cede to the government."⁶⁴ General A. McCook, writing to the Adjutant General of the Army, recommended approval, since he knew these men from the 1892 exploratory expedition. He further suggested they be allowed to take 1,000 pounds of ore for sampling. His positive response may have been influenced by the fact that Voorhies had connections with senators from Colorado and Indiana.⁶⁵ The government granted the lease in February 1896, but no action was taken to develop the mineral claims, presumably because Voorhies was called away to Colorado on business.

Interest continued to circulate around the Carrizos with reports that a party of 100 men was preparing to intrude onto the reservation in search of gold and silver. The agent dispatched two troops of cavalry as a preventive measure as much as to keep the Navajos pacified. While they were in the area, the soldiers also drove a group of Navajos out of the western end of the Southern Ute domain and back onto their own land.⁶⁶ The government approved another lease in 1901, this time for George F. Hull of Greensburg, Pennsylvania. He was given 640 acres with the understanding that if he found anything of value, (1) the Navajos would have a share of the profits; (2) they would be employed in the mine's operation; (3) and other prospectors would be kept out. Twenty Navajo headmen signed the agreement, and the company employed six Indians, each at five dollars a day, and also rented pack animals and teams. But the camp was too high, the threat of deep snows too great, the assays of ore unspectacular—so this venture, like all the others, was abandoned.⁶⁷

At the same time as the San Juan gold rush and speculation on the Carrizos, yet another incident occurred in a series of unsettling events. On April 19, 1893, a Navajo man, Neesk'ahii (The Fat One), killed a trader named Welsh in Jewett. By April 24th, Agent E. H. Plummer took the offender into custody, but Neesk'ahii escaped, thanks to a poor performance by accompanying

Navajo police. Other Indians in the vicinity refused to help the authorities, were insolent, and were ready to stop the authorities if they made an arrest. Plummer sent for troops, causing the Indians' disposition to change. With a small group of Navajos, he was then able to put Neesk'ahii in the Aztec jail, but not before the threat of a lynch mob was quelled.⁶⁸

Both sides involved in the incident had frayed nerves. The *Denver Republican* fostered discontent by printing information given by "a regular attache from Farmington" who claimed that "the whites have resolved to forever put a stop to the depredations of marauding red men," that the Navajos were preparing to "wipe out the little band of whites," that "Indian sentinels adorned every prominent hill on the south side of the river," and that Welsh was buried "in plain sight of hundreds of armed savages."⁶⁹ Large parties of men came from Farmington, Aztec, and Durango to provide assistance, reacting to accounts of trouble that had never occurred.

But not everyone was swept up in this movement. When Colorado's lieutenant governor, acting in the governor's absence, was asked what he was going to do about Navajo depredations in southwestern Colorado in general and the Jewett affair in particular, he replied, "I don't think there will be any need for us looking after those fellows. If the cowboys and the United States troops cannot take care of them, it will be time enough then to think of sending our troops down there. I've had enough of Indian fighting."⁷⁰

The Navajos, however, were just as riled as the settlers. As soon as Plummer had his prisoner locked up, settlers notified him about more trouble in Jewett, this time at a besieged trading post owned by a man named Whyte. The problem started when a Navajo crossed to the north side of the river, left his pony with some friends, promised to return, but failed to do so. The friends heard some shots fired, assumed the Navajo had been killed, and decided that if the war had started, they were going to help it along. The missing man was later found, but not before tension increased.⁷¹

The settlers believed it was time to end the Indian problem on the north side of the river, so they sent word to Plummer that starting at noon on April 28th, there was going to be a roundup to drive the Indians back to the reservation. The agent was able to halt the movement by persuading the white men to leave this job to the cavalry. This incident reinforced Plummer's determination to try to have the Navajos' boundary shifted to the San Juan River, with no holdings to its north. He argued that there was no wood, water, or grass to draw them across, that the Indians became confused with survey lines and angles that were not tied to recognizable terrain features, and that a decrease of white-Indian contact on a daily basis would lessen friction. The Commissioner of Indian Affairs, D. M. Browning, disagreed with this analysis, stating, "If whites have found their way into that section of the reservation and are encroaching upon the Indians, they should be removed therefrom in order that the Indians may enjoy peaceable use and occupation of the land which rightfully belongs to them."⁷² The matter was dropped.

Yet agency concern in developing the northern part of the reservation continued. As early as 1889 the Navajo Agency built a home for a resident farmer to live in the San Juan country and supervise ditch construction, crop development, and agent affairs in a region often cut off from the headquarters located 100 miles to the southwest.⁷³ Work progressed slowly during the first half of the 1890s but by 1900, when other parts of the reservation reported drought conditions so severe that crops did not even sprout, the ditches along the San Juan were “a great benefit to the people in that district.”⁷⁴

The years 1901 and 1902 saw increased survey activity for ditches, large and small, with the intent that 2,000 Navajos would eventually be located in permanent homes. One estimate even suggested that two thirds of the families on the reservation could have homes on the San Juan and become self-supporting.⁷⁵ Although these ideas completely ignored the social and economic realities of Navajo culture, they illustrate the hope that large field irrigation agriculture would act as both an economic and a civilizing boon to the Indian.

The other aspect of the process of bringing civilization to the northern Navajo frontier was education. In 1903, the government formulated plans to locate a school building eight miles below Farmington, near the main irrigation ditch that was expected eventually to water 3,500 acres.⁷⁶ The Navajo response was generally favorable. One Navajo leader, several years before the plans became a reality, said that if the agent built a facility so that the parents would not lose their children to distant boarding schools, they would have as many as 100 students enrolled, in direct competition with the agency school at Fort Defiance.⁷⁷

Thus, by 1905 construction of an educational facility with a capacity of 100 students was under way, with an anticipated opening date of September 1, 1906. A subagency headquarters, under the direction of William T. Shelton, moved to the same location. It was given the responsibility of controlling a district of 5,000 square miles with an estimated population of 8,000 Navajos, on and off the reservation. This district included a small portion of land in the Montezuma Creek area of Utah, added by an executive order dated March 10, 1905.⁷⁸ Government and stability—in the form of agricultural endeavors, a school, and the new Shiprock Agency—were now a permanent feature of the San Juan country. Although there were still trials and conflict ahead, a semblance of order concerning boundaries, economic development, and education was introduced.

The changes that occurred with the Navajo on the northern part of the reservation between 1870 and 1905, appear to form three general phases, though exceptions can be found in each. In the first, from the 1870s to 1884, government officials recognized the value of the San Juan area. Because of turmoil in the northern parts of the reservation, however, decisive action remained more of a hope than a reality. Coupled with a high rate of turnover in agents, a huge geographical area to be supervised, and a multiplicity of problems, this left any development in the north tentative at best.

The second phase, ending in 1895, saw a climax, then a lessening, of these problems, since more attention had to be focused on the area. This was caused by well-established white settlements and mining interests, who wanted either protection for themselves or the authority to exploit natural resources. At the same time, the Navajos aggressively maintained control of their reservation lands and expanded beyond them in order to graze their herds and raise some crops. Conflict called forth judgment, resulting in the expansion of Navajo lands.

The final phase, 1895–1905, was a consolidation of Navajo gains through governmental means and a realization of at least part of the economic potential of the San Juan. With farming developments and the introduction of the Shiprock Agency, the Navajos' rights to the area were firmly established. Just as Nati'nesthani (He Who Teaches Himself) experienced trials in establishing his way of life on the San Juan, so too did the Navajos in the late nineteenth century.