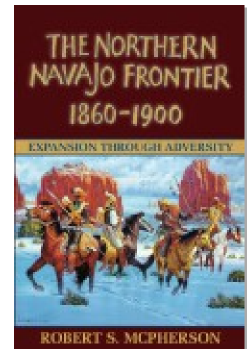
PROJECT MUSE®

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

Access provided at 24 Oct 2019 06:58 GMT with no institutional affiliation

8 / Conclusion

The northern Navajo frontier saw many changes during the period between 1860 and 1900. The type and quality of these changes depended on a variety of elements, including the different types of Euro-Americans the Indians had to face. Mormons, gentile settlers, cattlemen, traders, miners, and agents were all part of this collage. Yet the key to understanding the events of this era lies with the Navajos, who adapted their strategies to their opponents. Rather than passively accept white encroachment upon their lands, as did some Indians, the Navajos worked to obtain their desired ends.

An attitude of resistance, stopping short of war, was particularly important after the Navajos' defeat by Kit Carson in the 1860s. Those Navajos who remained at large in peripheral areas realized that friendship with the Paiutes, and eventually the Utes, was an important key to survival. The Utes had proved effective in ferreting out the Navajos, uprooting them from their homes and subsistence, and killing or enslaving those they captured. The Paiutes served as a protective link, not only in the immediate present by helping to hide Navajos, but for the future by establishing Navajo-Paiute and Ute-Paiute links of kinship.

Eventually, these bonds of relationship and trade connections developed into a restless peace among all three groups, so that by the 1880s many Euro-Americans believed they constituted a cohesive band of renegades. Trouble caused by this faction brought disclaimers from Ute and Navajo agents who either blamed those Indians not under their control or claimed these renegades were a small band of outlaws impossible to catch. The Native Americans

added to the confusion by insisting upon their innocence while blaming one of the other groups when an incident occurred.

The Navajos were also confronted by two types of settlers—the Mormons and the gentiles. The former based their Indian policy on peaceful relations, especially when missionary fervor and religious zeal were at their peak. This is not to suggest that the Mormons were sensitive to Navajo needs, but that the Saints recognized their own vulnerability due to isolation and realized that cooperation was the wisest policy. Only a select handful of Mormons actually served as missionaries, learning the Navajo language, preaching the Mormon gospel, and baptizing converts. Some Navajo families accepted these beliefs, but as time and pressures brought changes in the Mormons' beliefs and practices, the Navajos increasingly lost interest. Subsequent friction ended in the expulsion of the Mormons from reservation lands.

With a less friendly and accommodating attitude, gentile settlers, such as Henry L. Mitchell, were interested in the Indians only when there was an opportunity to benefit from them. The Navajos' reaction to these settlers was an aggressive policy that ranged from grazing large herds of sheep over public lands to threats of armed resistance. The Navajos had learned their lesson from the 1860s and realized that a large-scale outbreak would bring the military upon them. Instead, they adopted intimidation and covert action as the most effective means to obtain their ends.

The Ute reaction was far different. Open warfare in the form of killing, mutilating, and stealing livestock paved the way for armed conflict. Although the Mormons avoided shooting incidents, the gentile settlers and cattle companies harbored little love for the Indians and, when confronted with theft, would either call in the cavalry or handle the affair on their own terms. This was one reason that in San Juan County, Utah, alone, the Indians killed some twenty settlers and cowboys between 1880 and 1900, but only one Mormon.[1]

Trading posts were a powerful force that drew the Navajos to the boundaries of their reservation. Whether involved in legal trade or the illegal purchase of arms, ammunition, and liquor, the Navajos flocked to the northern side of the San Juan River, much to the consternation of their agents. The stores thrived on the Indians' business, bartering for wool, blankets, silver, and hides in exchange for commodities. Both local and national economic trends affected the trading posts, but the most important factor for the Navajos is that these stores increased the Indians' dependence on Euro-American goods. Although the depression of the 1890s forced many of the posts to close, the Navajos continued to desire their products, so that as conditions improved in the early 1900s, a flourishing trade exploded on the reservation.

The final stage in the settling of the northern Navajo frontier came with the agents' official introduction of agriculture into this region. The Navajos had always recognized the San Juan River as a profitable and continuous source of water for crop raising, but some feared Ute and Paiute depredations, while others desired to be close to their agency, and still others had land too distant

to make practical use of the river. But as Navajo population and livestock increased, the agents became seriously interested in developing the northern region into a more productive and settled area.

To do this, they first had to ensure that the lands occupied by the Navajos were clearly defined, protected from miners and settlers, and controlled by an agent. The first part of this challenge was accomplished by a series of executive orders that established Navajo title to the land and expelled Mormon and gentile settlers from homesteads along the San Juan and Little Colorado Rivers. The Indians helped in this process by aggressively defending their lands, using methods previously mentioned. Interest in mining increased in the 1890s and with it came tighter control by agents, cavalry, and Navajos, all of whom lent a hand in denying access to the reservation. Those miners who did venture on to Indian lands did so only by government and Navajo approval.

At this same time, the agents and private missionary groups launched efforts to establish large irrigation works to help the Indians feed themselves and to move them along the road toward civilization. Initial efforts proved frustrating but eventually bore results. By 1903, William T. Shelton created a subagency at Shiprock, New Mexico, to oversee agricultural efforts along the San Juan River, encourage the development of a boarding school, and enforce law and order in Navajo-white relations. This completed the process of firmly establishing under Navajo control the major landholdings in the northern part of the reservation.

To understand events in this frontier area, it is important to understand that the Navajos played an active role in determining their own destiny. While other Indian tribes were losing lands, the Navajos were gaining, to the point that they now have the largest reservation in the United States. Many of these land additions occurred in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, and the majority of them were in the northern part of the reservation. The government, its agents, and other Euro-Americans helped procure official title to the land, but it was the Navajos who created the atmosphere and established the need that led to these additions. By pursuing an aggressive defensive policy, they generally avoided bloodshed, curtailed white encroachment, and expanded their own land base. The beginning of the twentieth century saw the Navajos firmly entrenched along the southern side of the San Juan River, determined to accept or reject elements of Euro-American culture as they deemed appropriate. In the years to come, the Navajos continued to prove that they were pawns to no one.