Journey Of Navajo Oshley

Mcpherson, Robert

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Foreword

Barre Toelken

The force of this book lies in its insider’s portrayal of everyday Navajo life in one of the West’s most culturally dynamic areas: the so-called “Four Corners,” where Utah, Colorado, Arizona, and New Mexico meet. While that distinctive spot—the only place in the United States where four states intersect—is clearly visible on today’s maps, the fascinating cultural forces that shaped the surrounding area’s human identities are not so well recognized. Not only did the Anasazi culture leave a material legacy of abandoned cities and cliff dwellings, pottery, irrigation systems, and petroglyphs, but more recent arrivals over the past five to seven hundred years—Navajos from the far north, Utes and Southern Paiutes from the west, Spaniards and later Mexicans from the southeast—added their active presence to the ancient tenure of the Pueblo peoples.

In this vast desert area, people once traveled by foot or horseback, and virtually every large stone, hillock, arroyo, and water seep had a name used for direction, comfort, protection, and survival. For the Navajo, the fading of a minutely articulated landscape probably started with the advent of cars, pickup trucks, and a more formal road system. Many of the old names and places have become obsolete, having been replaced by the names of gas stations, trading posts, schools, missions, and mines. To be sure, some old names are still there, many of them because they represent water sources: Oljato (Moon Water), Chilchinbeto (Sumac Springs), Mexican Water, Sweetwater. Navajo Oshley lived intimately in the older, intensely familiar Navajo world in which places like Teec Nos Pos (Cottonwoods in a Circle, or Whirling Cottonwoods) were common, not quaint puzzlements on a tourist’s map. He lived during a period many would consider the zenith of that cultural era, between the trauma of Navajo internment at Fort Sumner in the 1860s and the bureaucratization of the Navajo tribe in the 1950s. Make no mistake: the Navajo tribe did not vanish conveniently during that time, as many Americans supposed it would; rather, the people grew from an estimated twenty thousand to
about fifty thousand by the 1950s and over two hundred thousand today. The Navajos are very much still there, inhabiting a reservation about the size of Belgium, the possessors of a complex political system, the speakers of a language so esoteric it was used as an unbreakable code during World War II. But the rich cultural world of hogans, horse herds, singers (“medicine men” as glossed in English), and thrilling exploits out in desert country among the Utes, the whites, the Mexicans—that world has been eroding so rapidly that only the recollections of elderly people who experienced it can bring it back into focus for us.

Navajo Oshley’s account, along with the helpful comments and perspectives of family, friends, and neighbors, provides a colorful and moving view of an everyday Navajo man who lived traditionally in a rapidly changing world. Unlike the Native American subjects of similar studies, he was not a powerful or famous singer, nor a tribal leader, nor a mysterious philosopher. He was instead a traveler in an everyday world in which he was simultaneously part of an extended Navajo family system, with its obligations and expectations, and a livestock worker, farmhand, and early settler in Blanding (just north of the Navajo Reservation). That predominantly Mormon village later became a prominent location in the 1950s uranium rush and, more recently, the site of an army missile station and the home of a uranium mill.

His age alone would recommend him to our attention as an exceptional character, for the mortality rate among Navajos of his generation was extremely high, the average life expectancy for a man being about forty. Thus, in Navajo Oshley’s recollections we have a view that extends from the 1880s almost to our own moment and displays a striking command of detail rarely encountered in vernacular biographies. Oshley does not simply provide what a modern historian might call reliable data: he gives insight into the interactions between the Navajos and the Mormons; he holds forth on the love/hate relationships between the Navajos and Utes and the Navajos and Mexicans; he describes in great detail the family networks of the Navajo and recalls the complex logic by which personal and family problems were resolved. In ethnographic terms, his account is a treasure: avoiding the severe focus on the individual that has become the fashion in ethnographic writing today, his cultural narrative, given from the inside, uses himself as a reflection of, and a critique on, the intersection of cultures he experienced. And he does not gloss over his frustrations—shared with most Navajos of his day—about family frictions, drudgery, grinding poverty, and the plainness of everyday life.
When I visited Blanding in the mid-1950s as a young uranium prospector, I usually stayed with Navajo friends who lived in Westwater, a small cluster of Navajo and Ute hogans, tents, and brush shelters situated across a small canyon to the west of town. As I recall, most Indians who came to Blanding lived at Westwater; some eventually moved into town, but the strained relations between Natives and whites, between Mormons and non-Mormons, made many of my friends nervous. Navajo Oshley, to the contrary, though he had lived earlier at Westwater, had already moved right to the center of town, lived in a frame house, had joined the Mormon church, and enjoyed cordial relations with everyone. He was considered a remarkable man, not only for his talents at diagnosing illnesses (he was a “hand-trembler” diagnostician and remained one for most of his life, seeing no discrepancy between that role and his new religion), but also because he was a cultural bridge, a living intersection between people, a promoter of cordiality and harmony. In short, he is one of those local monuments to humanity who exert a considerable impact on their neighbors but seldom come to our attention because they are not rich, powerful, or influential—or because they belong to a culture that is thought of as only marginally important. We are indebted to Robert McPherson for bringing Navajo Oshley’s account forward, for it is a genuine and compelling interpretation of cultural history that turns up the volume on the sort of Native voice seldom heard, often overlooked, and usually misunderstood.

Navajo Oshley’s voice speaks to us of a vibrant landscape full of personal and cultural richness, of an exciting time that has nearly vanished, of a traditional way of life that has changed immensely for better and for worse, of a geographic arena that has entertained everything from ancient petroglyphs to the atomic bomb. His voice may sound mundane on one level, but on another, we hear a rare articulation of the human conditions that have formed the living matrix of Indian everyday life in the American Southwest.