River Flowing From The Sunrise

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As the San Juan River has coursed through the Four Corners area, it has both encouraged and denied economic opportunities to Native American and Anglo-American entrepreneurs alike. Its system of canyons and floodplains offers forage for livestock, channels movement, suggests strategic locations for trade, and provides possibilities for agriculture. On the other hand, the river can swell uncontrollably to flood stage, ripping out everything in its path; it has served as a clearly defined legal boundary, restricting access to resources by people on both banks; and, due to the mere presence of its water in a desert environment, has created countless disputes over who should use it.

This chapter and the next focus on the role the river has played in two acts of the human drama staged across its narrow belt of riparian wealth. This chapter discusses the evolution of both the Navajo and Anglo livestock industry, the growth of trading posts that encouraged large herds to depend on the river’s resources, and the subsequent development of a road system to move ranching products to market. It is a multifaceted history that extends far beyond the San Juan and throughout the Four Corners region.

The next chapter looks at Navajo farming, especially activities supported by the federal government to move the tribe to economic independence. With both livestock and agriculture, the key to success lay in access to water along the banks of the river. For this reason, the upper portion of the Lower San Juan, where there are broad floodplains and the water flow is less constricted by canyon walls, was the scene of much of this drama.

The earliest reports of Navajo use of the San Juan River date back to the 1820s and 1830s. Military accounts suggest that the lands surrounding the river, especially on the Upper San Juan, were favored planting areas, while in times of trouble, the Lower San Juan provided an escape route for those pursued. Certain bands of Navajos enjoyed friendly relations with Utes living north of the river, while other groups were denied favored status. When intertribal strife reached its peak in the 1860s, the Utes became inveterate enemies of most Navajos. With government encouragement to round up the Navajos and move them to Fort Sumner, the Utes chased their neighbors far south, away from the richer agricultural sites and grasslands bordering the San Juan. Only small groups of Navajos remained, usually in peripheral areas.

The main body of Navajos (around eighty-five hundred), between one-half to two-thirds of the entire population, spent four years (1864–68) in abject poverty and misery at Fort Sumner, New Mexico. This group always hoped to return to their lands, yet feared encountering their Ute neighbors to the north. As early as 1866, Navajos told soldiers at Fort Sumner that “without protection from the Utahs who are our enemies, we would not care to go back.” Thus, even though the government released the Navajos from Fort Sumner in 1868, large numbers did not return to the Lower San Juan until the last quarter of the nineteenth century. One of the major forces that encouraged this move north was the demand for more grass to feed growing livestock herds. Ever since the Navajos had first stolen or traded sheep from the Spanish more than two centuries earlier, livestock and grazing had become increasingly important in their economy.

When the Navajos returned from Fort Sumner, they said, “We will go back to our land.
The people will multiply, the horses and the sheep too, the corn will reproduce itself, plants of all kinds will grow . . . and it will rain.” This was not just poetic thinking. To the Navajos, the sheep held supernatural powers that attracted rain and encouraged the growth of plants. The Diné explained their relationship with livestock in the simple but profound belief that “sheep are life.”

In the time of myths, when the holy beings created the world, the landscape was predestined to support livestock. The holy beings provided wealth in animals and instructed herders to ask them for supernatural help. The sheep, therefore, became partners with the holy beings to benefit human beings. One of the four sacred mountains, Dibé Ntsaa or Big Sheep Mountain (Hesperus Peak in southwestern Colorado), was “made of sheep—both rams and ewes.” The holy beings associated with this mountain poured forth their riches in livestock and were petitioned by herders for supernatural assistance. The holy beings worked through this and other mountains to provide livestock to support the Navajos: “The mountains were put here for our [Navajos’] continuing existence. . . . All of the living creatures, like sheep, horses, cows, etc., said we will help with furthering man’s existence.”

Medicine men still gather soil, dzilleezh, from these mountains and bring it home to protect Navajo land and livestock. One person explained that blessing the animals with prayers through dzilleezh brings rain to nurture the land: livestock is what life is about, so people ask for this blessing through dzilleezh. From the sheep and cattle, life renews itself. Who would give birth in a dry place? This does not happen. You get many lambs and calves from the plants around here. On the tip of these plants are horses, cattle, and sheep. They are made of plants which are sheep.

Thus, Navajo expansion north and the use of natural resources were based in religious faith, not scientific practice. For this reason, Navajos believed the more sheep there were, the more rain and plants would be available to feed them.

This philosophical belief, however, took its toll on the landscape. Information about Navajo activity along the river in this early stage of expansion comes from military reports and citizen correspondence, most of it anecdotal.
When numbers of livestock are given, they obviously are guesstimates, since no one but the Navajo owners were traveling about to count animals.

But no one can deny the unparalleled growth of the herds between 1880 and the beginning of livestock reduction in the 1930s. A quick survey of eyewitnesses reveals the intensity of livestock use by Native Americans. In 1883 Bluff settlers complained that the Indians had been given permission by Henry Mitchell for “absolute possession of every spear of feed on the north side [of the San Juan River] and if it continues it will do us great injury.” Later that year the same people reported eighteen Navajo herds of sheep in Recapture, Cottonwood, and Comb Washes, as well as some in Montezuma Canyon. It is not difficult to accept reports of herds as large as twenty thousand animals running along the Lower San Juan. Complaints of “thousands of sheep and hundreds of horses north of the river” continued for years.

Navajo testimony confirms these reports. In 1905 agent William T. Shelton estimated one thousand Navajos lived in the vicinity of Aneth. Just one of these people, Mexican Clansmen, said that he owned almost three thousand sheep and a “good bunch” of horses. Another person, named Headman, claimed fifty horses, twenty-five cattle, and seven hundred sheep. Herds of up to three thousand sheep grazed on the Montezuma range, while others just as large munched on grass along Mancos Creek, attracted by feed and water. The result: “They [herds of sheep, goats, and ponies] keep the grass from seeding and destroy the feed for the coming winter.” A scholarly estimate places the total number of sheep on the reservation as high as 1,700,000 by 1892.

As Native American herds grew, so, too, did the cattle and sheep industry in Anglo-American settlements. The largest livestock center on the San Juan was the Mormon town of Bluff. When these settlers arrived in 1880, they brought more than one thousand head of cattle and a large herd of horses. Like the Navajos’ herds, Anglo livestock holdings did nothing but expand.

In 1887 Francis Hammond estimated that there were fifty thousand head of sheep and eight-to-ten-thousand cattle grazing the ranges of San Juan County. Of that number, six thousand sheep and two thousand cattle belonged to the Mormons and the rest to outsiders. Ten months later, the Mormon sheep herd had doubled. That same year the Bluff Co-op Store sold the wool from the biannual shearing of its eleven thousand sheep for between eleven and fourteen cents a pound in Durango, Colorado.

Add to these figures the activities of settlers from Colorado, and the “invasion” of Mormon ranges on Elk Ridge and in Comb Wash, Recapture Wash, and Montezuma Canyon by non-Mormon cattle companies, and it becomes clear that the problem of overgrazing and erosion skyrocketed. Indeed some of the outfits near Blue Mountain pastured as many as twenty to thirty thousand cattle on county soil, and this number did not include the estimated one hundred thousand cattle brought in from Colorado for winter graze and a lower tax assessment.

Intensifying the stress on the environment caused by overstocking the range was a decade of drought, beginning in 1886. By 1896 Hammond declared, “We have just passed through the driest winter in the history of this county. . . . As a result, streams that were formerly large and springs that gave forth abundantly are now almost devoid of moisture as a tinder box.” Range grasses that were not eaten or trampled withered in the heat and drought. Frank Silvey, who lived through these times, tells of losing half his cattle to starvation. The days of large-scale, open-range cattle operations appeared to be coming to a close.

Ironically, as most large companies were suffering, John Albert Scorup, a Mormon cowboy who had settled in Bluff, started his own livestock operation. Hard work and good investments made his rags-to-riches story a lasting tribute to the dedication of the livestock industry in this difficult environment. He labored throughout the canyons and mesas, rounding up cattle for the Bluff Pool, saving his money, holding out during the economic slumps of the 1890s and post–World War I years, and always taking advantage of less-accessible rangeland. His company grazed from seven to ten thousand cattle each year on a two-million-acre range that extended from Blue Mountain to the confluence of the San Juan and Colorado. Scorup continued to supervise this operation until his death in 1959.
Thus, the ranges in the canyons and washes that stretched from mountain to river were of prime interest to everyone—settlers, cowboys, and Indians—in their search for grass, water, and shelter from cold winter storms. When all the horses, cattle, and sheep from the Anglo settlements combined with Native American livestock, the environment deteriorated rapidly. Many variables must be considered when reconstructing the ecological effects of livestock from the historical record. Today scientific studies vary on the extent of these effects but agree on certain points. For instance, cattle concentrate a lot of weight onto their four hooves. They have a tendency to cut and loosen the surface of the sandy soils of southeastern Utah, whereas other soil types compact. Sheep hooves, though smaller and bearing less weight, also cut deeply. If there is a slope or an embankment, hooves have a powerful mechanical ability to shear off clods of earth.

Livestock also have a tendency to create trails by pounding and displacing soil. The net effect in a riparian corridor is that certain areas are overused, sudden rainstorms flush down well-trodden avenues, and erosion intensifies. Gullying from heavy animal traffic and overgrazing speeds the process, drying out the subsurface moisture. Thus, the entire landscape has less ability to support plant life.

Yet plant life is one of the main attractions of livestock to water. A recent study in semiarid rangelands showed that cattle favored riparian areas, which accounted for only 2 percent of the total grazing space but 81 percent of the damaged vegetation. Food in these areas is more plentiful and often tenderer, water is close by, and there is added shade from the sun and protection from the wind. The drawbacks are that the riverbanks become badly trampled, grass and vegetation are removed, erosion increases, and the soil dries out. In the case of cottonwoods along the San Juan, cattle graze on the young, tender trees until the saplings are either dead or tall enough to keep the leaves out of reach.
Plant regimes also change. In a study conducted on the Boise River watershed in Idaho, for instance, bunchgrass, a desirable natural feed for livestock, was eaten first and replaced with downy-chess and needlegrass types of vegetation. Their root systems were shallower and less able to stabilize the soil, increasing runoff with all its erosive effects. Also much less water percolates into the soil with the type of plants in overgrazed soils.

While early settlers and Navajos were largely unaware of these ecological factors, a few keen observers noticed the effects of increased livestock activity. Frank Hyde, raised at a trading post and on the ranges of the San Juan, came to the Montezuma Creek area in 1880. His description of the land in its relatively pristine condition is important, especially since he went into the cattle business shortly after his arrival:

The river, when we moved into that country, was confined in a permanent channel, more so than it is now [1929]. There were willows and bullberry bushes on each side of it, [with] sloping grass banks. We could ride ponies across it most anywhere we came to without fords. As the country settled up, livestock tramped the grass down, made trails into the river; the timbers were cut off the headwaters, and the floods started to come. . . .

Hyde then went on to tell that in 1884, his father’s trading post, waterwheel, and farmlands were wiped out by the water-choked San Juan. His family remained for a short time, then moved down to Comb Ridge to open another post. This store also provided a ferry service, dependent on a cable system, at the mouth of Chinle Wash. And like others along the river, this post capitalized on the natural trail system used by travelers to cross the San Juan, water livestock, and trade outside the reservation.

Livestock were an important part of this operation. Hyde pointed out that cattle grazed as far away as Blue Mountain in the summertime but always returned to winter on the "sand flats"
near the river and in adjoining washes. There was no doubt about the animals’ importance to the trading-post economy: “My father traded a great many horses to the Indians for cattle and sheep, and we boys run them.”

To complicate the obvious competition among livestock owners over diminishing resources, two new economic possibilities arose: manufacturing wool cloth and running trading posts. One Anglo entrepreneur from Bluff wrote to the Deseret News in 1885 that the town was an ideal location for opening a woolen factory. He said, “Some of them [Navajos] own as many as twelve-to-fifteen-thousand head of sheep and goats. The wool can be purchased at the rate of 5 cents for white and 3 cents for black wool per pound.” While no factory materialized, trading posts purchased the wool, and this practice became an integral part of life along the river.

Thus, in addition to the San Juan serving as a magnet for the livestock industry, Anglo settlements drew Navajos to their trading posts. Beginning in the 1880s, posts became increasingly important for exchanging materials—wool, rugs, and silver—for products provided by Anglo-American society. Although they were usually friendly places, sometimes conflict flared. The stretch of river between Four Corners and Comb Ridge is a good example of the growth and problems encountered during this formative period between 1880 and 1895.

This was a colorful and important era, one when the reader can easily get distracted by details and lose sight of environmental trends. The first, and most important, is that posts attracted growing numbers of people into the region to trade. Also the stores were a nucleus for the development of communities later on: Montezuma Creek and Aneth are two of the clearest examples. And finally, sections of land along the riverine corridor were eventually added to the reservation because of conflicts over livestock. Unknown to the Anglos, some of this land was rich in oil, an economic boon to the Navajos starting in the 1950s. Thus, the posts that started as seemingly benign institutions actually had significant effects on the environmental history of the region.

Nine posts sprouted, bloomed, and died, some almost as quickly as they were created. D. M. Riordan, a Navajo agent, complained in 1883 that “the Indians are persistently encouraged to leave the reservation by the 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.” From a purely environmental standpoint, the posts encouraged more and more human and livestock activity along the river, which was then the boundary between the Navajo and Anglo world.

Most of these posts followed a general pattern. The earliest structures were made of riverbed cottonwood logs and mud, eventually replaced by more substantial sandstone buildings, roofed with pine lumber from the mountains. Almost all the posts had skiffs, between twelve and sixteen feet long and five or six feet wide, flat bottomed and pointed on one end. Some of these were tethered by a cable system that prevented the boat from drifting downstream too far; to gain sufficient height above the river, the cable was suspended on a wood-and-rock crib, with sturdy poles protruding from the top.

The largest of the cable ferries was at the Hyde Trading Post at Comb Wash. It was thirty feet long, twelve feet wide, flat bottomed, and held fifteen to twenty Indian ponies with their loads or two full-sized wagons. But even this sophisticated operation could not withstand the force of the river at full flood. Hyde reported that as the channel of the river filled with sand, the main current thrust against the banks, causing them to cave in; the river then took a new course until it was eventually forced back into the old streambed. The waves in the tumultuous river tipped over the cribbing that anchored the ferry’s cable, causing all to be lost.

Boats not attached to a cable drifted on the current and were loaded upstream from the desired destination, then angled to the far shore. Regardless of the boat’s size and mooring, the river exacted its toll. During flood stage, the San Juan might claim three or four boats from one store in a season. Small wonder that some traders manufactured boats at their own posts.

The Navajo reaction to riding in these boats was predictable. Many people mentioned their anxiety about crossing the river, with its supernatural power, at flood stage. Martha Nez, who
lived on the south side of the river near Bluff, recalled, “Sometimes the river would have sand waves. It was a scary experience crossing over it. The water sloshed against the boat and flopped over its edge. There was a man who lived close to the boat and rowed it. He was given five dollars for taking people’s belongings to the other side.”

The four major trading posts—Noland’s Four Corners Post, the Riverview-Aneth Post, the Montezuma Creek Post, and the Bluff Co-op—are good examples of the ebb and flow of commercial success. Each had its own history, continuous turnover of owners, and special personality, but all shared a common dependence upon Navajo trade and livestock for their survival. Each also drew its own clientele with their herds to foster economic development on the San Juan.

Claiming the title of the oldest-continuing mercantile business in San Juan County, the Aneth Trading Post began in 1885. Built of sculpted sandstone in an L-shaped configuration, the store sits on top of a bluff with a commanding view of the river. The Aneth post capitalized on a number of natural and man-made features. It was located on 160 acres of school-section property and so was exempt from becoming part of the reservation during the boundary changes of 1905. The wide floodplain at the base of the hill offered easy access, camping spots, and, at certain times of the year, fording sites along the riverbanks. McElmo Canyon provided a natural thoroughfare through the redrock country of southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah, while McElmo Creek twisted its way to the San Juan, a water source for both agriculture and livestock. The road that followed the stream forded only shallow washes, effecting a year-round link with the Cortez-Mancos area beyond the slopes of Sleeping Ute Mountain.
Aneth, then, was at a communications choke point for travelers coming into the area. An accounting of every trader at each post would read like a telephone directory. But a quick synopsis of the history of Aneth over a fifteen-year period illustrates the turnover rate. The first trader was an irascible troublemaker named Henry L. Mitchell. He hailed from Missouri, established a post on the floodplain below the present location, spent approximately six troublesome years antagonizing Navajo, Ute, and Mormon neighbors, and, eventually, with the help of other whites, killed or wounded some Navajo customers. That same year, 1884, the San Juan flooded its banks and took Mitchell’s store, ranch, and crops, becoming one more inducement for him to leave. In 1885 he did just that.

Shortly after Mitchell departed, Owen Edgar Noland, his son-in-law, relinquished control of the new post, built above the floodplain, to Peter and Herman Guillette, two brothers who also originally hailed from Missouri. Both men freighted goods for a living and after they sold the Aneth post to Sterl Thomas, operated a flour mill in Mancos. Thomas in turn sold his rights to A. J. Ames and Jesse West.

Although Aneth by this time was suffering from a dwindling population and economic frustration due to the national depression of the 1890s, its importance lay in establishing a trade pattern. Navajos tell of ranging their herds on the far side of the river, then descending to a spot directly opposite the post, where they sheared their sheep. The traders provided ten-foot-long sacks to bag the wool, a boat to haul the goods across the river, and a burro to bring them up the hill to the store. There the owner weighed the wool, paid the customer around sixteen dollars a sack, and placed the goods in a nearby stone shed. Coffee, sugar, cloth, and flour were the staples of trade: to obtain these supplies, the Navajos took their pay in goods, at times never seeing the shine of a silver dollar or gold piece.

Left Handed, a Navajo who visited the Aneth post in the late 1880s, described a typical transaction when the store was run by a man...
called Round (possibly one of the Guillette brothers). When Left Handed arrived, the trader came out, shook hands with his “friends,” and helped carry the skins and hides into the store, where he weighed them. In exchange the proprietor gave them the usual commodities as well as a pair of overalls, shirt, red scarf, and box of .44 cartridges, after which the Navajos went on their way.\textsuperscript{37}

In 1899 James M. Holley bought the Aneth post. Unlike many of the earlier traders, Holley took a great interest in developing the store as a center for the Navajo community and encouraging the Indians to adopt Anglo methods of farming and organization. One important contribution was his hiring Indians as workers. Not only did he pay them for improving the roads that led to his post, but he depended heavily upon their services as freighters. Holley hired Old Mexican, a Navajo whom he recognized as a hard worker, to freight goods between Aneth and Cortez, Mancos, or Durango in Colorado or Shiprock, New Mexico. For a three-day round trip to Cortez, he received ten dollars; for a six-day round trip to Mancos, twelve dollars.\textsuperscript{38} He hauled sacks of wool, blankets, and hides and brought back two thousand pounds of flour and other supplies, including clothing and utensils for his personal use.

Another form of employment, derived directly from the river, was hauling Navajos and their goods from one side to the other. For instance, Jimmy Boatman, a Navajo, received his name for his long-standing service as a ferryman for wool, hides, and customers when the water peaked during spring runoff.\textsuperscript{39} The traders, government farmers (men hired by the Indian Service to teach Navajos the latest agricultural techniques), and Navajos sponsored his entrepreneurial efforts by sharing the cost, which ranged between a quarter and two dollars. Jimmy started rowing on the south side of the river and tried to angle his wooden bark through the sand waves for the landing spot beneath the post. Occasionally he missed the mark and ended up downstream, much to the chagrin of the customers, who had to help drag the boat back. By mid-June, when the shearing season was over and the river level went down, he became unemployed, but when the waters rose, Jimmy was back in business.\textsuperscript{40}

Owen Noland opened another post around the same time (1884) that Aneth started. Often referred to as the Four Corners Trading Post, it was located approximately four miles downstream from the current monument. After selecting a spot on the river with fordable access for both Ute and Navajo trade, Noland built a structure of large cottonwood logs. He soon replaced it with a sturdier edifice of rocks, quarried from the sandstone formations to the west on the San Juan. The western wall, the stem of an L-shaped configuration, was 117 feet long with walls more than two feet thick and eleven feet high, while the short stem was 65 feet in length. Eight large windows dotted the walls, with firing ports in places where there were no openings to see outside. Adobe covered the sandstone and coated the three fireplaces that heated the spacious rooms where blankets, silver, and trade goods lined the shelves.\textsuperscript{41}

The San Juan Co-op was another post that started in the early 1880s but did not close until the 1920s. Founded on 29 April 1882, just two years after the Mormons settled the town, the San Juan Cooperative Company or Bluff Co-op reflected the leadership strengths of this tiny community. Platte D. Lyman was president; Jens Nielson, vice president; and C. E. Walton, Kumen Jones, and Ben Perkins, directors. These men founded the co-op for the purpose of “engaging in general merchandising” and divided their profits amongst its shareholders.\textsuperscript{42}

Like other posts, it bought wool, pelts, and blankets from the Navajos and deer hides from the Utes and depended heavily on goods shipped from Mancos, Cortez, and Durango. But unlike the others, each stockholder took his turn at freighting and was paid accordingly. The first dividend came in five months, paying at a rate of 10 percent; within a year it had jumped to 25 percent.\textsuperscript{43} The facility evolved from a roughly hewn log structure to a large, two-story rock building with a store and post office below and a meeting and social hall above.

Albert R. Lyman, a local historian raised in Bluff during its earliest years, believed that this store, with its freighting and stockholder revenues, allowed the town to survive economically until it made the transition from an agricultural community to the more profitable cattle industry.
Lyman gave a colorful description of the post in its heyday:

The Navajos came with their produce to trade in the little log store, which was generally surrounded with a motley tangle of cayuse saddle ponies, rawhide ropes, bundles of wool pelts, and snarling, mangy dogs. Trading was, to the Navajos, a rather festive occasion, deliberate and drawn-out. They camped nearby until it was finished to their satisfaction, crowding against the rude lumber counters in noisy talk and laughter, and always in a stifling cloud of tobacco smoke.44

The citizens of Bluff generally encouraged the trading business. In 1902 the co-op and citizens of the town held a fair, where Navajos exhibited their rugs, jewelry, silverware, and beads. It was such a success that the Aneth post followed suit.45 This was seven years before the first Shiprock Fair, an institution that continues today.

The effectiveness of this type of business and the peaceful attitude of the Mormons are reflected in a report a few years later by a military group evaluating Navajo life in this area. Captain E. A. Sturgis visited Bluff and found that 950 adult Navajos had traded there in 1908, although only half of them lived within a sixty-mile radius.46 As with other posts, the co-op ran a wooden boat, piloted, at one point, by a Navajo named Red Spotted Neck. The Bluff Co-op clearly served as a drawing card for the community.47

The San Juan Co-op began in 1882 as a Mormon enterprise to trade with the Indians. Business success eventually gave rise to this building, which housed not only the store and post office but also a dance hall and stage in the upper story. (Charles Goodman photo, San Juan Historical Commission)
Government policy also indirectly encouraged Native Americans to take up individual allotments on public domain. The Dawes Act of 1887 fostered the ideal of the Indian making his living as a farmer. Along the San Juan, Navajos had always used dry farming and small irrigation canals to water their crops on the floodplain and in tributary canyons. Now ever-increasing herds of sheep and a growing interest in farming intensified competition between Anglo settlers and Indians over resources. Commissioner of Indian Affairs T. J. Morgan watched the situation fester to a bursting point and claimed, "In the meantime I know of no other way to maintain peace between the non-reservation Navajo Indians who are on the public lands and the white residents except by the aid of the military." 48

No one doubted the necessity for some type of controlling agency in this far-flung corner of the Navajo Reservation. Problems over land, water, trade, hunting, cultural values, and government control underscored the need for someone who could deal with issues in the Four Corners area before they became inflamed. Starting in 1903, the Shiprock Agency was founded by subagent William T. Shelton to address these problems.

Another person who settled along the San Juan to be an advocate for the Indian was Howard Ray Antes, a Methodist missionary. Antes and his wife, Evelyn, came to the Aneth area in 1895. 49 They built their first home of logs but soon started construction on a much larger and more elaborate sandstone structure. How much actual preaching Antes did to the few whites and numerous Indians is questionable, but the Navajos did name him Hasteen (Hastiin) Domingo or Mister Sunday. Facilities at the mission continued to grow. By 1904 the site boasted a large house, a smaller school building, and surrounding farmlands and orchards on the river’s floodplain. Antes, however, never took up homestead rights on this property. 50

At the time of his arrival, no real spokesman for the Navajos lived along the river, though the government owned a vast amount of territory in San Juan County available for settlement. The county commissioners oversaw
activities and collected revenue for use, but land was open to any applicant. At the same time, reservation lands strained to feed the expanding livestock herds, unclaimed water holes were nonexistent or inadequate, and agents could not effectively patrol the boundaries. This situation, coupled with the attitude that Native Americans needed to become self-sufficient by taking out individual allotments, encouraged Navajos and agents alike to look for solutions across the San Juan.

By 1898 Antes took pen in hand on behalf of the Navajos. He accused Fred Adams, county tax assessor from Bluff, of locating Indian livestock north of the river and charging an inflated license fee of three or four sheep or goats per one hundred. Anglo livestock owners, on the other hand, paid only two-and-a-half cents per head. To Antes this was pure and simple extortion designed to force the Navajos with their large herds back on the reservation. He was told that the “interference of a missionary” was unnecessary, and so he wrote Secretary of the Interior C. R. Bliss, requesting that he intervene.51

Antes argued that the land was so barren and rocky it was suitable for nothing but grazing. He maintained that “fifty miles above us and twenty-five miles below us along the San Juan River, there are but two [white] men who have a few acres of cultivation” and a couple of trading posts; that Indian flocks would starve on the sandy, rocky wastes of the reservation; and so the Navajo should have untaxed access to the resources north of the river.52

Antes got what he wanted. Federal officials agreed that the Indians had the right to be there, they should not be taxed, and Adams had overstepped his legal bounds by using “false pretense.”53 Antes then assumed the responsibility of writing passes “on the authority of the Commissioner of Indian Affairs and the Secretary of the Interior of the United States” for Navajos wishing to graze livestock on the north side of the river.54 The county commission was irate.

Yet for Antes and the Navajos, the time was right. Superintendent Shelton was well aware of this area’s potential, too. While Antes was reporting the Navajos’ wishes and championing their cause, Shelton wrote a letter to President Theodore Roosevelt on 10 April 1904, asking for an extension of the reservation. Chester A. Arthur had granted the first extension through executive order in 1884, which had moved the boundary to the San Juan River. These lands in the Aneth-Montezuma Creek area were the first that Navajos requested north of the river. Antes anticipated this additional land would lead to less friction between stockmen and Indians and more desirable economic conditions for the Navajos.55

Correspondence followed correspondence, but after much discussion and a few revisions due to survey problems, President Roosevelt signed Executive Order 324A on 15 May 1905, creating a new section of the reservation. Known today as the Aneth Addition, these lands encompass the region beginning at the mouth of Montezuma Creek, east to the Colorado state line, south along the boundary, then down the San Juan to Montezuma Creek. Lands previously claimed or settled were excluded from the reservation.56 Antes had fulfilled his goal of annexation.

What were the implications for the environment? Navajos now controlled both sides of the river from Four Corners to below Montezuma Creek. Access to more land and a burgeoning population encouraged the Navajos to move north of the river and lay the foundation for two new towns—Aneth and Montezuma Creek. Conflict between Anglo and Navajo stockmen continued over the ranges north of the river, where every blade of grass and water seep grew in importance. Also the oil that lay beneath in what would later be called the Greater Aneth Oil Field was now a Navajo treasure waiting to be discovered. But much of this lay in the future.

By 1900 trading posts as an institution entered a golden era that would not decline until the livestock reduction of the 1930s. While stores along the river continued to flourish in Aneth, Montezuma Creek, Bluff, and Mexican Hat, the trend now was to expand from the borders into the heart of the reservation. Relaxing government controls and requirements that encouraged traders to live among their clients on the reservation initiated the new growth. A contributing factor was the expanding network of roads that started out as horse trails, upgraded to wagon roads, and eventually became maintained dirt highways by the mid-1950s.
The establishment of a transportation system had started much earlier on the river. The isolated posts along the San Juan required these economic lifelines that snaked their way across floodplains and through canyons to reach the market towns of Mancos, Cortez, and Durango. As early as September 1882, the Bluff and Montezuma precincts spent $125 of their limited funds to pay settlers to improve what was called the Old Bluff Road. This expenditure facilitated the mail service that started a month later, linking Bluff through Mancos to the outside world. Even more important was the necessity to freight goods into and out of one of the roughest geographical parts of the Four Corners area. What with the steep hills and canyon walls, the mud and floods of the river, and the sand and rock in the washes, those responsible for pioneering and maintaining these fragile trails had their hands full.

Early descriptions of the roads are replete with the agony of those who traveled them. The old road to Colorado went from Bluff to Aneth and split after that. One fork wended its way up McElmo Canyon to Yellow Jacket Canyon, where Ismay is today, and then to Cortez and Mancos. Another road followed the river to the Four Corners Trading Post, then curled around the southern end of Sleeping Ute Mountain to Mancos. Another early road, with numerous modifications, curved its way up Recapture Wash from Bluff to Monticello, then continued to Thompson above Moab, where it eventually tied these towns into the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad in the 1880s.

One group of visitors to the Aneth area lamented that for every step forward, one seemed to slide back two more in the sand; that every rock and bush had a rattlesnake behind it; that the water tasted poorly; and that the surrounding hills and cliffs were tedious to the traveler’s soul. The spokesman concluded by saying, “I would rather walk five miles on an Ohio pike than one mile on any of the ‘roads’ in southern Utah or northern New Mexico. . . . [I] sigh for the green fields and shady woods of the East.”

Howard Ray Antes, “Mister Sunday,” believed that the real salvation of the Navajo rested in the children. Perhaps that is why he named his location Aneth, a Hebrew word meaning “the answer.” (San Juan Historical Commission)
Another traveler in that same year of 1892 felt differently, claiming that the thoroughfare “would do credit to a much richer settlement.” He noticed that the road in the river bottom actually had to be carved out of the bluffs and riprap lined areas where the water could wash the bank away.\(^6\)

Regardless of problems associated with weather, water, and terrain, interest in roads did not wane. The San Juan County Commissioners’ minutes are filled with instances of leaders spending significant amounts of money, time, and effort to improve conditions, and often traders took the lead. For example, Henry Mitchell accepted the responsibility for maintaining the roads in the McElmo area. That same year, 1885, William Hyde and twelve other men secured four hundred dollars to build a route along the river to Four Corners, bypassing the road up McElmo and offering easier access to Noland’s post.\(^6\) Freighters continued to use the Old Bluff Road, marked with a stack of rocks every mile, starting in the town and proceeding all along the canyon.\(^6\) Traders also paid crews of Navajos to improve roads near specific posts.

Later routes also linked the Four Corners region into a national network. By the 1920s many of the supplies for the posts came from either Grand Junction, Colorado, or Fruitland and Farmington, New Mexico, because of the railroad.\(^6\) For example, the government built the first of a series of bridges across the San Juan, Colorado, and Little Colorado Rivers, eliminating the need for ferries and opening up the northern part of the reservation to more vehicles. The first bridge began construction in 1909 near the Shiprock Agency School, followed by one at Mexican Hat.

This 1928 photo shows part of the abandoned Colorado-Utah road one mile below the mouth of McElmo Creek, looking upstream towards Aneth. Notice both the scarcity of vegetation along the river and the road’s susceptibility to flooding. (Herbert E. Gregory photo, \#558, U. S. Geological Survey)
Rush hour on the Mexican Hat Bridge, constructed in 1909–10. Oil, not sheep, was the economic boost that encouraged the building of this suspension cable bridge. (San Juan Historical Commission)
(1909–10), Tanner’s Crossing (1910), and Lees Ferry (1925). As the Anasazi ruins of Mesa Verde became increasingly popular, the government made arrangements to connect Gallup to southwestern Colorado. Starting in 1916, funds paved the way for a major construction project that opened the area to tourism, but the route was not completed until the summer of 1930.66

This expanding road network opened many resources to more people. What had been available to only a handful now became known to many. Since transportation is one of the keys to economic development, the growing sophistication in number, length, construction, and placement of roads spurred growth in the region. In turn, the entire process had a greater impact on the land and its resources.

In strictly economic terms, the burgeoning road network proved salubrious. As early as 1896, Colorado newspapers touted the effects of the San Juan trading posts on the economy, claiming that freighting outfits “loaded out from the Bauer Store [Mancos] often $1000 worth of goods a day.”67 By 1913 the Mancos Times-Tribune felt that trade “naturally gravitated” to this area, with sometimes as many as six or seven heavily laden wagons groaning their way to the river. This economic boom made Mancos the “recognized commercial and financial center” of Montezuma County, Colorado.68

Like many businesses, the trading posts hit a growth plateau and then declined. Some events were precipitous and others slow and inexorable, but all helped end the golden days of this institution. Most dramatic was livestock reduction of the 1930s, when the John Collier administration of the Bureau of Indian Affairs began a program that cut into the mainstay of the Navajo economy—sheep, goats, and wool.

Livestock was one of the foundations of traditional Navajo livelihood during the first quarter of the twentieth century. Horses provided transportation and food for the winter months, while goats and sheep were a continuing source of sustenance, blankets, and clothing and an entry to the barter economy of the trading post. Livestock also became synonymous with social status and emotional satisfaction, as Navajos watched their herds multiply and prosper. Suddenly, it all ended.

Indian agent B. P. Six had little understanding of the role of livestock in Navajo culture at this time. He did see, however, that the herds were expanding. During 1930 in the Montezuma Creek and Aneth area alone, 19,514 sheep and goats passed through dip vats filled with medicine to prevent scabies. The Oljeto and Shonto areas produced 43,623 more animals, while some Utah Navajos undoubtedly used vats at Kayenta, Shiprock, Dennehotso, and Tec Nos Pos. Still others probably skipped the process entirely, but if the totals from the Aneth and Oljeto areas are combined, at least 63,137 sheep and goats ranged over the reservation lands of southeastern Utah.69

What would soon end in the cold, hard statistics of lost livestock had its genesis in a scientific attempt to save the range from these herds. Depleted vegetation, soil erosion, silt accumulation at Hoover Dam, expanding herds, restrictions on off-reservation grazing, poor animal quality, and the faltering national economy were all part of the motivation to reduce livestock and modernize the Navajos’ livelihood and management of resources.70

It should also be noted that range restrictions were not confined to Navajo herds. In 1934 the government placed controls on land use by Anglo stockmen through the Taylor Grazing Act. Science now dictated the carrying capacity of public land utilized by cattle, sheep, goats, and horses. The amount of feed was measured by animal unit month (AUM): the cost of feeding one cow, one horse, or five sheep for one month on a specific piece of land. Grazing districts subdivided the ranges and parceled them out in one-to-ten-year leases. The Grazing Service, later combined with the General Land Office to become the Bureau of Land Management (BLM), determined the capacity of the range, assigning permits and collecting fees from ranchers. In 1936 the Navajo Tribe adopted a similar system of livestock control and range management, bringing both sides of the San Juan into conformity.71

For older, traditional Navajos, however, who lacked a western cultural orientation, the whole process was difficult to understand and even harder to accept. Starting in 1933, Navajo goat herds were the first to be selected and gathered, then killed. A year later sheep came under the
knife, followed by horses and cattle. The reduction that had started out voluntarily, as just one more incomprehensible government program, soon became a major threat to the Navajos’ subsistence economy. Wealthier Navajos were more powerful and had better means of hiding their herds, so the poorer people, those who could least afford the losses and maintain self-sufficiency, were the ones who suffered. Impoverishment and dependency on the government became a part of reservation life.

In 1934 the Northern Navajo Agency reported that government officials had killed or sold seventy thousand animals and the Utah Navajos’ herds were down to an estimated thirty-six thousand. Because the nation’s economy was wallowing in the depths of the Great Depression, the agent could price a sheep at only two dollars and a goat at one dollar. The annual report went on to say that “an excessive number of goats and sheep were slaughtered for food. There is every reason to believe that the next dipping record will show even a greater reduction than indicated by the number sold.” Horses and cattle suffered a similar fate.

What was the Navajos’ reaction? Stunned disbelief and shock. Since cultural traditions taught that sheep bring rain and plants through prayer, it followed that there was plenty of vegetation before the sheep were killed. This was an exact reversal of the government’s theory about overgrazing and soil depletion. One Navajo explained, “During the midsummer, vegetation, like sunflowers, colored the place. It grew in such abundance that the livestock walked in tunnel-like paths amidst it... There is very little now for a sheep to take a bite of. All of this is due to the lack of precipitation. ... Maybe they [Anglos] reduced that, too.” When Collier killed the sheep, he also affected rain and vegetation, one of the main things he was trying to protect. According to the Navajo, he used this excuse to “cheat” them at a time when there was abundant forage. Without the livestock’s prayers for rain, the whole weather cycle collapsed.

Since that time, everything has been different for the Navajos. The grass is gone. Russian thistle has become sharper and tougher, able to puncture a tire. It is so tough it can kill horses and sheep that eat it and make people ill if it scratches them. Weeds infest the soil, and droughts are common. The land is desolate and reflects the older people’s feelings about what happened to their way of life because of reduction.

Livestock loss not only forced Navajos into a wage economy but also pushed trading posts into a new system of cash and credit. The Civilian Conservation Corps, World War II factory work, seasonal migratory jobs, employment on railroad crews, and, in the 1950s, uranium mining offered the Navajos an alternative economy and lifestyle. The trading posts were a flexible-enough institution to struggle through these changes, and their final collapse didn’t occur until the 1970s.

In a purely ecological sense, government control of the livestock industry on the reservation lessened the problem of overgrazing and gave the land a rest. Yet many of the elements associated with a wage economy, such as oil exploration and its accompanying industry, brought their own headaches.

Today important environmental issues concerning livestock and their effect on the riparian corridor of the San Juan remain. Increased tourism and environmental ethics have come into direct conflict with stockmen grazing cattle in more highly traveled areas, especially Comb Wash. Five side canyons—Arch, Mule, Fish Creek, Owl, and Road—were part of the range used by the White Mesa Cattle Company, owned and operated by the Ute Mountain Tribe. Beginning in 1991, a lawsuit charged the BLM with not properly enforcing grazing regulations to the detriment of water quality, wildlife habitat, soil stability, and scenery. The end result of the litigation is that grazing in the five canyons is forbidden, with a new watershed management plan now under development for the entire Comb Wash area. While this does not directly affect the San Juan, it once again highlights the continuing conflict over area resources in the river’s drainages.

There is, however, another side to the issue. Ever since the 1950s and 1960s, when the BLM began a series of field inventories and range surveys to determine the carrying capacity of the land, a mutual understanding that many of the problems of the past can be overcome with proper management has been growing. Today there is seasonal (fall, winter, spring) grazing of cattle
Livestock reduction of the 1930s ended a way of life for the Navajos. No longer able to live through agriculture and animal husbandry, they were forced into a wage economy that took many off of the reservation. (National Archives, U.S. Signal Corps, #111-SC-89583)

‘not sheep), managed by the BLM, along the north side of the San Juan River. Four allotments allow cattle access to the river so they can have water in a high-desert environment. Because the number of livestock and season of use are regulated, much of the harm done previously by uncontrolled access in a highly competitive environment is now an issue of the past.

Indeed BLM officials comment that the ranges are in generally good condition and welcome the presence of cattle. They point out that grazing forage plants stimulates growth, that cattle moving in the area help plant seeds by burying and covering them with soil, and that, with sufficient moisture, the ranges spring back better than ever. Riverbanks do not show any significant deterioration or sloughing, and the introduction of foreign weeds, such as camelthorn and Russian knapweed, is not a problem created by livestock; these invaders appear to be coming from upstream.

The number of livestock on the south side of the river is also theoretically controlled by permits, but in this case they are issued by the Navajo Nation. Unfortunately, Navajo lands on both the south and north (Aneth-Montezuma Creek) sides of the river are badly overgrazed. The problem lies in enforcement of the allocation system introduced in the 1930s. Compliance with grazing laws is handled on the local level through the chapter system. Some range managers do an excellent job of ensuring that the required limit on animals is maintained. Other officials have a difficult time enforcing rules within their own community because of social pressures. Private transportation is the only means for these officials to get out into the canyons and mesas to check herd size, many of these district officials are not trained in soil conservation, and some Navajos rationalize that members of a growing family should have the same number of AUMs as their predecessors, thus increasing the actual
number of animals on the same amount of range.

The end result is land that has been classified by experts as “low/fair to poor.” Although the banks are stable because of tamarisk and other vegetation, there are extensive gullying and subsequent silt discharge into the river from eroded areas. The northern side of the river managed by the BLM is a one-way magnet that draws livestock to greener pastures. But what could be a troublesome conflict is being handled through peaceful cooperation. Both parties with livestock along the San Juan are sharing the responsibility of controlling the animals that range across the river when the water is low. This happens particularly around Recapture and Comb Washes. To prevent overgrazing from recurring, the BLM is providing individual Navajo families and Anglo livestock owners with materials to construct a three-mile fence in the Recapture area; the stockmen, in turn, supply the labor. The fences are built away from the river so they will not be washed out by high water. Thus, while livestock have been and will continue to be an issue in the San Juan region, there are strong indications that cooperation between the government and individual livestock owners is the key to defusing the problems.

A look at the past reveals that the early, most-intense period of grazing was associated with trading posts and road development along the river. This entire epoch revolved around the opening up of a relatively untouched reserve of grass. Navajo and Anglo herds of sheep, horses, and cattle descended upon the land from the north, east, and south to take advantage of open range. Trading posts and transportation followed, moving to market the products of this economy. Without vegetation for grazing and water to support life, there would have been little reason to establish the posts with their barter economy and the roads to feed the trade. There would also have been fewer reasons for Navajo and Anglo stockmen to expand as quickly as they did into peripheral areas of the San Juan. Each group came, saw, and acquired through various means what they could, precipitating a productive, yet destructive, period of history.

Not until government control divided and regulated land use based upon carrying capacity did the issue assume its present form. Now one of the big questions asked by local residents is whether there is too much control, too much intervention, for the livestock industry to exist. As the San Juan rolls into the twenty-first century, there will doubtless be other environmental issues, but never again will riverbanks feel the push, dig, and stomp of so many animal hooves in search of grass.