Working on the Railroad, Walking in Beauty

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Life on the Tracks

*Tóhajiilee, New Mexico*

Meeting Jerry Sandoval

On a cold, sunny day in late December, I struggled to guide our truck through the mud on the roads of the Navajo Nation. With my two Navajo friends and translators, Julie and Zina Benally, my wife and I were on our way to visit a retired railroad worker, Jerry Sandoval. Jerry lived with his son at the end of a road on a beautiful small mesa overlooking the main settlement of Tóhajiilee, New Mexico, a portion of the Navajo Nation located southeast of the main body of their land. Spanish records show contact with the descendants of this Cañoncito group of Navajo people as far back as 1583, as they were some of the Navajos living closest to the Spanish settlements. This would suggest that ancestors of the present-day residents have certainly lived on this land since long before the Spanish intrusion.

However, according to legend, the actual community of Tóhajiilee was founded when the Navajos returned from Fort Sumner on the Bosque Redondo Reservation, where they had been forcibly sent in 1868.¹ On the walk back, a group of Navajos encountered a large hole that contained a spring. But the hole, it

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¹ Bosque Redondo was a large internment camp for Navajos and Mescalero Apache Indians, southeast of present-day Santa Rosa, New Mexico. This shameful chapter in American history will be explored in more detail a bit later.
seems, was too deep for anyone to climb down to get the water. So, as the story was related by Charley Sandoval, a resident of the town:

The Diné used to carry with them some sort of tóshjee’ (water jug). They tied a braided, narrow yucca leaf rope to a jug to bring up water with; but the jug would not sink in the water. It just floated on top. So the Diné tied a stone to the bottom of the jug to make it sink down. That is how they fished out their water. And that’s the reason this place is called Tóhajiilee.²

The community is now a part of the “checkerboard” section of the Navajo Nation and is separated from the “big rez” by miles of government and private, non-Navajo-owned land. Today, however, there is no question that Tóhajiilee is a secure section of the Navajo Nation. Ronald Kurtz, who studied the ethnohistory of the area, found a complicated overlapping relationship over time between

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² Broderick H. Johnson, Navajo Stories, 143. Tóhajiilee is also known as Cañoncito or Canyoncito. For an interesting discussion of the attitude of Navajos toward dual English and Navajo place names, especially as such is considered in current linguistic practice, see Anthony K. Webster, Explorations in Navajo Poetry and Poetics (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2009), 202.
this group of Navajos, the Spanish, other Native American groups, and Navajos living in other areas.³ This complexity is partially reflected in the Spanish surnames of many of the men I met.

In meeting, legally representing, and interviewing Navajo railroad workers, I had found that among them, as with all people who constitute a community, there were many similarities as well as differences. Clyde Kluckhohn and Dorothea Leighton were correct when they wrote in The Navajo that “the Navaho way of life may be learned only by knowing individual Navajos; conversely, Navaho personality may be fully understood only insofar as it is seen in relation to this life-way and to other factors in the environment in the widest sense.”⁴ Jerry Sandoval’s is a representative story.

On the frigid day of our visit to Jerry, the community of Tóhajiilee had just seen the biggest snowstorm in years. While

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the sun shone brightly, the melting of the snow made the byways in this area nearly impassable. To our chagrin, we fishtailed to and fro on the sloppy roads as we drove out to Tóhajiilee. We met Jerry and his son at the small windswept compound where their home adjoins those of several close relatives. Jerry’s house was surrounded by extraordinary vistas in all directions, featuring multihued mesas, snowy mountains, and dark volcanic plugs piercing the desert landscape. We drove onto Jerry’s property and sat in the car. Jerry’s three menacing, though thankfully chained, dogs barked frantically. Finally, the dogs calmed down a bit and Julie knocked at Jerry’s door. He motioned us in.

Entering Jerry’s house, we encountered a wall festooned with drawings from his son, evidently made at school, which expressed the son’s affection for Jerry. Sitting in his cozy living room, we made small talk as I took out my tape recorder and pad. When I began to ask questions, Jerry, a pleasant, stocky man in his forties, told us that he had gone to work for the Missouri Pacific Railroad in 1978. The MoPac Railroad, as it was known, is now part of the Union Pacific through merger.

Wage labor and the Navajo

Jerry’s story provides an opportune place for a short review of the history of Navajo wage labor, which, as with that of other native peoples, has generally been overlooked by American society. As Alice Littlefield and Martha C. Knack write in their book Native Americans and Wage Labor, “Studies of North American Indian economic life have largely ignored the participation of indigenous people in wage labor, even though for over a century such participation has often been essential for the survival of Native individuals and communities.”

They continue, “Anthropological fascinations with the traditional, or compulsions to salvage the aboriginal before it became hopelessly contaminated by the modern, may account for part of this silence.” Littlefield and Knack, Native Americans and Wage Labor, 41.
This lack of interest has been especially harmful, because although Navajos are separate in many important ways from the dominant culture that surrounds them, in considering their economic life it is their commonality with other workers that should be stressed, not their difference. As railroad workers, they operated in basically the same environment as railroad workers in other parts of the country. Littlefield and Knack argue that “these professional biases toward the past, coupled with the habit of studying the Indian community as separate from the non-Indian, have all too often led to constructions that treat Native life as an isolate. Such theories are too narrow to account for the phenomenon of Indian wage labor, which of historical necessity has existed along the contact zone between Indian and non-Indian communities and culture.”

Further complicating the area, many sympathetic scholars often romanticize the conditions faced by the Navajo and the ways in which they have reacted.

Any visitor to this beautiful and meaningful area of the Navajo Nation can see the large degree to which Navajo people are part of the economic as well as the natural landscape. Thus, Navajo railroad work was important for both the Navajo Nation and for the economies of the mountain and desert West. A contemporary historian of Native American labor in the West, Colleen O’Neill, argues that Navajo wage earners were

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6 Ibid., 41.
7 An example can be seen in a quotation from Mabel Dodge Lujan, an iconic New Mexican figure. In a review in the Chicago Sun of Kluckhohn and Leighton’s The Navajo, she wrote, “The book is so sympathetic and unbiased that anyone can approximately realize the problems that have harassed these people for years, and that have stood between them and those who surround them, the predatory whites as well as those who honestly attempt to reorganize their economic system without understanding its workability.” “The Navaho: Revised Edition,” Amazon.com, http://www.amazon.com/Navaho-Revised-Harvard-Paperbacks/dp/0674606035, accessed April 2, 2011. While Lujan’s sympathies are justified, her description is simplistic.
“significant actors who shaped the regional dynamics of U.S. economic development.”\(^8\) Today, Navajo people are involved in all aspects of the regional economy. They have made up the bulk of workers in some industries such as mining and power production and were important to the development of farming in the Southwest and West.\(^9\) O’Neill argues that when and how “Native Americans participate in the market economy [of the American West], as producers and as wage workers, largely defined the terms of local economic conditions.”\(^10\) But, as O’Neill has recognized, this subject area is complex, because to understand “indigenous people’s experience with wage work, we need to think about questions not often addressed by labor historians.”\(^11\)

While the major upsurge in Navajo railroad work occurred after World War II, their work on the railroad is over 125 years old, dating from the beginning of the intrusion of railroad tracks into the Southwest. After the tragic events of Bosque Redondo and the Long Walk, for many Navajo the railroad was their next point of large-scale contact with American society: thus railroad work presented new opportunities as well as obstacles through which they had to navigate.

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8 Colleen O’Neill, *Working the Navajo Way: Labor and Culture in the Twentieth Century* (Lawrence: University Press of Kansas, 2005), 4–5. For O’Neill this includes a subjective view of class and the general replacement of questions of class with questions of kinship.

9 For a discussion of attempts of the Bureau of Indian Affairs and state employment agencies in the West to encourage Navajo wage labor, see Colleen O’Neill, “The Making of the Navajo Worker: Navajo Households, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, and Off-Reservation Wage Work, 1948–1960,” *New Mexico Historical Review* 74, no. 4 (October 1999).


The work of railroad trackmen

Railroad surveyors came through the southern portion of the Navajo Reservation as early as 1876. Employing several hundred Navajo trackmen for the manual labor of laying the tracks, the Santa Fe Railroad ran continuously from New Mexico to the Pacific by the dawn of the twentieth century. Historian James Ducker reports that for a period around 1900, the Santa Fe Railroad brought in Japanese workers, who were paid less than a dollar a day, to displace the “higher paid” Indian workers. This substitution, however, did not last.

As the tracks have continued their advance through the unmarred deserts and mountains of the Southwest, Navajo men have ventured far from their land in greater and greater numbers to work for the railroads. And today, as they have for the past century, Navajo workers make up a large percentage of those who man many western railroad track gangs. Numerous gangs are completely staffed by Navajo workers except for the foremen and higher management. In his meticulous ethnographic study of the Navajo community of Shónte, Arizona, William Adams reported that in 1955 the combination of wages and unemployment compensation from the railroads and the Railroad Retirement Board made up over half of the total income for many Navajo families.

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12 Garrick Bailey and Roberta Glenn Bailey, *A History of the Navajos: The Reservation Years* (Santa Fe, NM: School of American Research Press, 1986). Only two major freight railroads exist in the western United States today, the Union Pacific (UP) and the Burlington Northern Santa Fe (BNSF). While not an exhaustive list, the Union Pacific includes the former Southern Pacific and Missouri Pacific lines. The Burlington Northern Santa Fe includes the former Burlington Northern and the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe. Each is a combination of numerous smaller former railroad companies. Without a scorecard, it is impossible to know the history of mergers and consolidations in this industry.

13 “Gangs” are the name railroad management gives to groups of workers assembled by the companies, numbering from just a few to several hundred, who work on specific projects in the building and maintaining of railroad tracks.
of this Navajo community. For the Navajo Nation as a whole at the time, railroad work was the “single most important source of income for Navajos, accounting for almost one-third of their total income.”

When Lorraine Turner Ruffing, of the American Indian Policy Review Commission, returned to Shónto in 1971 carrying Adams’s original data with her, she found that to survive, “Shónto Navajos were forced either to combine subsistence activities with local temporary wage work or to leave the reservation.” She observed that many individuals worked for the railroad year after year, constituting a “long-established and well-known work gang who were accustomed to working together.”

So today, as they have for many years, these Navajo men leave their homeland after the snow begins to melt in the spring and travel between the Pacific Ocean and the Mississippi River in gangs of up to one hundred men, maintaining and replacing aging railroad tracks. On the northern rail route come the trains from the strip-mined hills of Wyoming, with coal to feed midwestern power plants. On the southern double-tracked route near the boundary of the Navajo Nation, trains made up of railroad cars specially produced to carry Japanese and Korean automobiles rumble night and day. They are interspersed with two-mile-long trains speeding along at sixty miles an hour and carrying containers from China and the East, often covered with the tagging of California graffiti artists, heading to Chicago or Kansas City. There the containers


15 Ibid.


will be placed on trucks and sent off to the Costco, Target, or Wal-Mart Super Centers around the country. Empty, the containers will return west on trains headed to the coast, where they will be placed on giant ocean freighters to be shipped off for refilling in Asia.

Often these men work on steel gangs, laying long, dark gray strips of heavy rail which are often well over a hundred feet long. After the rail has been laid, huge quantities of granite are poured on the track to create a solid base. As part of the ballast gang, the men doing this job must walk ghostlike along the sides of slowly moving trains, intermittently pulling levers on the ballast cars to emit loads of rock on the track and enveloping themselves in clouds of silica dust as the rocks fall. Others ride and walk behind, tamping down the ballast and securing the rail and the bed. As part of the process, rail anchors are installed, tools which are “designed to eliminate creepage of track by providing a large bearing surface against the rail base and tie.”

The anchors hold the tracks in place and keep the trains on the track as they constantly rumble over the steel rails. When they are complete, the tracks can absorb the hourly pounding of heavy locomotives and the vast array of railroad cars that they pull.

The trackmen’s work, while routinized, has not benefited from the kinds of safety methods and equipment that have come into use in American factories in the last thirty years. Track work is still performed much as it was well over one hundred years ago.


19 Of course, this is not to say that sufficient attention is paid to contemporary factory safety, just that it must be observed that American factories are safer places today than they were fifty years ago. Certainly they are safer than they were in the early 1970s, when I worked in a Cincinnati sheet metal plant in which many of my coworkers were missing at least a part of one digit on their hand due to a workplace accident.
years ago and remains the most difficult work on the railroad. What a historian for the union of track workers, William Haber, wrote nearly fifty years ago, remains true today:

The work of the maintenance of way man is hazardous. In addition to the ordinary dangers that beset the worker who uses tools and machines, he must often work in high places, on bridges, trestles, and structures. And usually his work is done under the hazards of train traffic, on the main lines where he must keep a sharp lookout for trains or in busy railroad yards where the switching of cars is constantly going on.\(^\text{20}\)

Today, the increased use of machinery allows greater productivity but is no guarantee of safety. In just one recent gruesome example, newspapers reported on a disaster involving a maintenance train in northern California on November 9, 2006, in which two men were killed and six badly injured.\(^\text{21}\)

For years the relationship between the railroads and their Navajo workers has been a contentious one in which the profit motive of the railroads has received preference over the human needs of the Navajo. Even industry-friendly government officials have long recognized this fact. In 1947 F. H. Stapleton, the regional director of the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB), the government agency responsible for pension, sickness, and unemployment insurance benefits for railroad workers, wrote another RRB official: “There are several hundred Indians on the reservation who are eligible for sickness insurance benefits but no claims have yet been filed. Many of these Indians have been injured on the job and the railroads passed them back to the reservation on the request of the Indian and, as far as I know, in very few instances made any settlement with the Indian for the


injury incurred.”22 The story of the relationship of these workers to the Railroad Retirement Board is detailed in succeeding chapters.

According to a 2006 article in the Navajo Times, the newspaper of record for the Navajo Nation, others have noted that conditions have not changed much for these men.23 The article says that complaints of maltreatment of Navajo workers by the railroads have now been addressed to the Navajo Nation’s labor relations office but that those in the office have been forced to beg off because “the tribe lacks jurisdiction over labor disputes that occur outside its borders.” The present complaints mirror problems of the past—railroads giving Navajo workers the hardest jobs and being insensitive to their ceremonial needs. One advocate is quoted in the article as saying that “the reason why the companies like to hire Navajos is because they don’t complain and never speak up for themselves because they are afraid of losing their jobs.” Because they do not complain, they are assigned to the hardest jobs. He also claims that the railroads “deny requests from Navajos who want to take time off for ceremonies. As a result, a lot of young Navajos are being forced to make a choice—maintain their culture or lose it to keep their job.”

Navajo men have not been the only Native Americans to perform significant railroad work. In the Northwest today, Native Americans continue to perform track maintenance, especially for the Union Pacific Railroad. Scholars and others have noted significant historic railroad work by other Native Americans.24

22 Interoffice memo, December 8, 1947, regional director F. H. Stapleton to RRB director of employment. (This document is in the possession of the author; see chapter 5.)

23 Bill Donovan, “Help Requested for Railroad Workers,” Navajo Times, August 24, 2006. All quotations in this paragraph come from this newspaper story.

24 See, e.g., Kurt Peters, “Santa Fe Indian Camp, House 21, Richmond, California: Persistence of Identity among Laguna Pueblo Railroad
Beginning in the late nineteenth century, members of the Laguna Pueblo began to work in large numbers for the AT&SF Railroad, in exchange for granting the AT&SF the right to build a line through their land. The Lagunas established colonies along the track that runs from Albuquerque to San Francisco, with large camps in Gallup, New Mexico; Winslow, Arizona; and Barstow and Richmond, California. The establishment of the colonies allowed families to accompany the men. Old railroad boxcars were used as housing. The men performed railroad track work and the women tended their homes, with some working in railroad hotels. The Lagunas were able to organize their colony in ways similar to the pueblo itself, arranging the boxcars to set up a central plaza in which feasts and other ceremonies could take place. It is likely that the ability of the Lagunas to incorporate their family life so closely into their work life allowed them to avoid some of the existential pain suffered by the Navajos. Laguna colonies faded out in the first half of the twentieth century, however, and the members of these colonies dispersed, some moving back to the pueblo in New Mexico, but many moving to large towns, such as Albuquerque. In the Southwest, only the Navajos have maintained their constant large-scale connection to the railroad.

Historically, only the most neglected and oppressed ethnic groups have performed this track work. In the South and East of the country today it is often African Americans who carry out this work. Prior to the Civil War, railroads often used slaves as trackmen. Conditions for these men were horrific. Consider the following startling passages from the “Book of Rules” issued to employees of the Tallahassee, Pensacola and Georgia Railroad in

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1858, which describe procedures for supervision of employees.\textsuperscript{26} The nauseating rules say much about treatment of slaves and treatment of trackmen.

No. 11—Overseers must not strike a negro with any other weapon than a switch except in defense of their person. Where a negro requires correction, his hands must be tied by the overseer and he will whip him with an ordinary switch or strap not to exceed 39 lashes at one time nor more than 60 for one offense in one day, unless ordered to do so by the supervisor in his presence.

No. 15—The use of intoxicants by employes [sic] on repairs of the road is positively prohibited. Any overseer or other employe [sic] who keeps it at his shanty or uses it in any other way than when prescribed by a physician as medicine or who allows the negroes to keep or use it at the shanty or on the work will be fined or discharged.

No. 19—No negroes must be allowed to bring or to have at the shanty any fresh meat or poultry, unless the overseer is satisfied he or she came by it honestly.\textsuperscript{27}

Certainly Navajo railroad workers are not treated as slaves, but a master-servant mentality has not been completely expunged from the culture of railroad employment.

Jerry Sandoval’s experience

Most of Jerry Sandoval’s railroad work was as a trackman on a steel gang laying rails. These gangs snake along the tracks in a choreographed movement as they build and clean up tracks from end to end. Like other Navajo trackmen, Jerry had been unable to find consistent work on the Navajo Nation and lived many tough

\textsuperscript{26} This railroad is now part of the CSX Railroad, a major eastern American railroad.

miles from the jobs in Albuquerque, Denver, and Phoenix, the urban centers of the Southwest. So, Jerry went to work on the railroad. Traveling throughout the Southwest and southern Midwest for parts of the next eight years, Jerry rose at one point to the position of assistant foreman. Jerry thought it was “pretty nice to see a lot of places” during his railroad work and to meet a lot of different people. Other Navajo workers, I knew, were not as pleased with leaving their homeland for wage work. To that end, wage work in the uranium mines on and very near the reservation was attractive to many men and their families, until the mines shut down and the health tragedy of work in those mines manifested itself.28

Jerry worked on some gangs that had Navajo, white, black, and Hispanic workers. But usually he worked on steel gangs that were all Navajo, consisting of over one hundred men, mostly from the Arizona side of the Navajo Nation. The men lived in railroad cars that were pulled along as the gangs traversed the tracks. They often worked twenty days straight without a day off, he told me. He was proud of the work of the Navajos, saying, “We Indians were the best.” He attributed this prowess mainly to the willingness of the Navajos to work in any weather. “We would leave them (blacks and Mexicans) behind.”

Jerry’s boast was almost identical to a comment I found in a Washington Post newspaper story about a Burlington Northern railroad track maintenance contractor, Neosho Construction. Railroads often use contractors so that they can pay wage and benefit rates below union scale and diminish pension costs. In addition, because of a legal loophole excluding the workers from the protection of the FELA, the monetary cost of personal injuries is reduced for the

employers. These efforts are a constant source of irritation to railroad unions. Donald Williamson, a white foreman with Neosho, is quoted as saying, “If I had my choice, I’d take an all-Mexican or an all-Indian crew over an all-white crew. My best workers have been Mexicans and Indians.”

Unlike many Navajo railroad workers, Jerry stayed employed over several winters working on curb gangs and replacing switches, the devices on the tracks that guide moving trains in the proper direction when there are multiple tracks. He was on his way to permanent employment with the railroad.

The permanency of employment is crucial for railroad workers. Railroad unemployment and pension benefits are above average, but without sufficient “months of service,” entitlement is spotty. Navajo trackmen often have a very difficult time accumulating sufficient “months of service” to qualify for pensions and other benefits under the rules of the Railroad Retirement Board. Railroads often blame the Navajos for their inability to garner sufficient service to meet the requirements. But most of the reason for this predicament is the cavalier way that the railroads treat these men, with sporadic offers of work. However, it is true that this is a place in which Navajo culture does not mesh smoothly with governmental ways. Navajo workers do feel the pull to return to their homes, often in order to participate in certain ceremonies, a fact that justifies leaving the work site on their terms but that also reduces their ability to gain the necessary months of service for pension eligibility.

Jerry was on his way to qualifying for a pension, when, like many who fall out of the life of wage labor, he suffered an accident. He broke his leg in a car wreck on his way back from work. Jerry never recovered sufficiently from the accident to go back to the railroad, and his career on the tracks came to an end. He receives no railroad pension today.

As we settled in the comfortable chairs in his living room, I asked Jerry about his religious history. I was seeking to find, to use the lyrics of singer-songwriter Kris Kristofferson, what practices Jerry and others used to help them “make it through the night,” or in this case, their work away from their land. Jerry participates in the three forms of religious practice that predominate in the Navajo Nation today: “traditional” Navajo religion, the Native American Church, and several versions of Christianity. Jerry told me that his mother, a Pentecostal “churchgoer,” raised him. As a child he sometimes attended services with her, and today he occasionally goes to her church. He sometimes attends ceremonies of the Native American Church as well. Jerry’s father and brother practiced the traditional religion. His mother, in addition to her Pentecostalism, would occasionally help his father in participating in traditional Navajo religious ceremonies.

I wondered about the interplay of religion and work when he was on the job. Jerry told me of a variety of religious practices among his coworkers on the track gangs that were focused both on ensuring personal protection from injury and on securing and maintaining psychic balance. Some workers ritually applied corn pollen to their bodies before work. Some “churchgoers” used anointing oil before work in a similar manner. Native American Church practitioners had medicine pouches, and often after work they would put herbs on the diesel stoves in the bunk cars, filling the air with the aroma from their smoldering. The railroad

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30 I had seen anointing oil used by working-class families before. During my three years working for the US Postal Service in Houston in the 1970s, I often delivered letters from Reverend Ike, who preached that “the lack of money was the root of all evil.” Pieces of prayer cloth or small vials of anointing oil would often be in his letters, which he claimed the recipients could use to gain God’s grace to solve the problems facing them and their families. Of course, Reverend Ike instructed that the ritual was only effective if one sent money to him in return. It was not uncommon for me to pick up creased and stamped return envelopes from these homes in the days after I had delivered Reverend Ike’s missive, containing, I assume, a check for the reverend.
was concerned about the peyote ceremonies, however, and in spite of some of the men having permits for possession of peyote for use in Native American Church ceremonies, railroad officials brought trained dogs into the living quarters from time to time to check for this drug.

On Sundays when they were given a day off, Christian men would try to go to churches near where they were working. Coworkers who practiced traditional religion sometimes went into nearby mountains after work to “do their stuff,” Jerry told me. On some nights he could hear them singing in the mountains, and occasionally in the mornings he could hear “some of them praying.” Given the brutal schedule of life on a track gang, however, the men could only occasionally get away for these practices.

Sensing that the conversation was over, we got up to leave Jerry’s cozy house and its scene of obvious love between father and son. We said good-bye to Jerry, got back into our car, and navigated the difficult but breathtaking winter roads of the rez back to Albuquerque.