Adversaries and Advocates

The Bureau of Indian Affairs: Friend or foe to the Navajo worker?

The story of Navajo railroad workers cannot be complete without a look at the specific relationship between these Navajo men and the main US government agency responsible for relations with Americans Indians, the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA).1 This agency has been and continues to be a major force affecting the life of Navajos. While the next chapters describe the role of the primary governmental actor in this story, the Railroad Retirement Board, the BIA did poke its head into issues regarding Navajo railroad work. With the help of kind federal archivists, I was able to find a number of documents related to this story that outline some of the issues faced by these men.2

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1 The predecessor to this agency was formed on March 11, 1824, by Secretary of War John C. Calhoun. Alice Littlefield has noted an overemphasis on governmental actions by those writing about Native Americans. “Even when scholars have addressed Indians’ relationships to the larger political economy of the United States, they have all too often concentrated on federal Indian policy and its political consequences rather than on empirical discussions of the reality of Native economic lives as they were and are being lived.” Littlefield and Knack, Native Americans and Wage Labor, 3. This book attempts to partially speak to this concern.

2 The records examined for this section concerning the role of the BIA can be found in the National Archives and Records Administration Pacific
These archives help set a background for the events in this book and reinforce the context in which these Navajo men employed the strategies that I detail here.

Since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, the BIA has been concerned about economic conditions on the reservation. After World War II, the BIA made a special effort to promote off-reservation wage labor. It is fair to say that their paternalistic attitudes and hell-bent crusade to integrate Navajos into contemporary American society set a framework that is partially responsible for many of the existential problems faced by Navajo railroad workers and their families.

The Bureau of Indian Affairs was guided by a mantra of assimilation. In *The Navajo Yearbook: Fiscal Year 1957*, then BIA official Robert W. Young expressed the attitude of this agency when he wrote:

> President Thomas Jefferson, in one of his messages to Congress probably came close to forecasting the future of our Indian minorities when he said, “in truth, the ultimate point of rest and happiness for them (the Indians) is to let our settlements and theirs meet and blend together, to intermix and become one people. Incorporating themselves with us as citizens of the United States is what the natural process of things will bring on; it is better to promote than retard it. It is better for them to be identified with us and preserved in the occupation of their lands than to be exposed to the dangers of being a separate people.”

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Many American governments have tried to make this intermixing succeed. None has been successful. The surprising feature is that it is only in the last short period of American history that it has been acknowledged that perhaps another path respecting the differences as well as the similarities between cultures is the proper attitude.\footnote{This area remains one of heated contention throughout the world even today. The idea of the importance of assimilation received a recent boost with the publication of a book by Samuel Huntington, a political scientist at Harvard University and foreign policy aide to President Clinton. Huntington made the argument, inter alia, that nations with greater homogeneity were more successful than those that allowed great cultural divisions among people. And, as is often the case with books like this, “our” culture, Huntington argued, is the best one. See Samuel P. Huntington, \textit{The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order} (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1993).}

However, consistent with official attitudes of the period, on October 13, 1948, Lucy W. Adams, the welfare and placement director of the Navajo Employment Service of the BIA, gave a presentation to the Tribal Council Advisory Committee. Off-reservation employment, Adams told the group, is “essential to the maintenance of the Navajo economy,” as it “provides the only source of income for many thousands of Navajo families who have no resources on the reservation and for whom there are no reservation jobs.” She noted, however, that off-reservation work entailed many hardships for these Navajo men and their families, because of the nature of the unskilled work and the lack of proper housing and sanitary conditions for the workers. It is especially cruel to a worker’s family relationships, she argued, as “his family may suffer and he himself gets into bad company.”

While Adams recognized that much needed to be done by government and employers, including improvement in facilities and job training, in what was a depressingly constant theme, she placed much of the onus on the Navajos themselves. “Navajos must recognize an obligation to the employer to perform a fair day’s work, report regularly for work, and remain on the job for a
reasonable period. The treatment they receive will depend partly on the reputation they establish as productive workers.” Little assistance was forthcoming, however, on how workers should establish such a reputation, other than to bend their culture to that demanded by railroad employers.

Several issues stand out in Adams’s statement, which reflects the complaints that railroad and farming companies often made about Navajo workers. First, there is no recognition of the familial and ceremonial reasons that many Navajos left off-reservation work. Even today this important issue remains inadequately addressed by employers of Navajo workers in lands surrounding the Navajo Nation. Colleen O’Neill has written about this issue and is correct in her observation of one type of response:

Working for wages in the Navajo way was a form of contestation over the labor process itself. The Navajo workers defined the terms of employment when they refused to work longer than four months at a time and left their jobs for ceremonials and to tend to familial obligations. Holding on to the land and maintaining the reservation household, however symbolic, gave them a means to negotiate the terms of work.5

However, government officials and railroad employers, in the past and today, see this activity as nothing more than the refusal of the Navajos to hew to the “rational” conditions of the employment relationship.

Further, as facts have made clear, in spite of universal recognition that Navajo workers are extraordinarily productive, this fine reputation has not improved the treatment they receive from railroad employers. One wonders what effect these official attitudes had on the railroad workplace conditions that were permitted by the government officials who supposedly oversaw the safety of Navajo workers.

From my interviews and legal work I know that Adams’s statements ignore the reality of the treatment of the Navajos. Research proves this conclusion as well. Two examples should suffice. As we shall see in greater detail later in the book, Navajo trading post owners often supplied workers to the railroads. As part of their financial relationship with the railroads and the Railroad Retirement Board, it was the responsibility of the traders to transport the men to a location off the reservation where they could be placed on buses or trains and taken to a railroad work site; or sometimes the traders carried the men to the work site itself. The way that they were often transported was nothing short of inhuman.

When I interviewed Ben Lewis, an older Navajo worker who lived in Rincon, New Mexico, I asked him how he had gotten to his jobs. Ben told me that he worked for the Union Pacific Railroad. The owner of the Star Lake Trading Post put Ben and over twenty other men in the uncovered bed of a large truck and drove them from the rez to Nebraska, a distance of hundreds of miles.

In another example, one Indian trader, Elijah Blair, whose oral history is contained in the archive of the United Indian Traders Association (UITA) at Northern Arizona University, told about how he transported Navajo men to the staging area. Blair owned several trading posts and was a president of the UITA. He told his interviewer:

So then when the railroads opened up in the spring and the jobs opened up, then they would call—the headquarters was like in Gallup—then they would start to saying, “Well, Mexican Water has fifty claimants, so then they need forty workers in Idaho,” or something like that. And then they would call and say, “Okay, from Dinnebito we want five workers or ten workers,” and stuff like this. And then we delivered them on such and such a date to Farmington, New Mexico, where they would be put on a bus and shipped to wherever in trucks. We have pictures. And we
haul them in a pickup. Sometimes you’d have as many as twenty people. So we would have a truck that you all stand up in the back. And I have pictures where these guys are standing in the back, and we hauled them from Mexican Water to Farmington, New Mexico, which was 130 miles, 80 miles of dirt road, and we delivered them there.6

So the transportation system that carried Navajo men to their railroad work could be twenty men standing in the back of an open pickup truck for 130 miles, with 80 of these miles on dirt roads! Or, in Ben’s case, even farther.

6 “Oral History Interview with Elijah Blair, February 9, 1998.” United Indian Traders Association Oral History Project, Cline Library, Northern Arizona University, NAU.OH.75.11.
Efforts at “de-culturating” the Navajo worker

Periodically, the BIA would send out staff to survey Navajo railroad gangs. In June 1949, John D. Wallace, a placement assistant with the BIA, visited Navajo gangs working for the Union Pacific Railroad in Wyoming, with short visits to gangs in Colorado and Utah. In his report, the difference between his observations and those from the Navajo perspective is jarring:

It is very definite that the Union Pacific Railroad Company is trying to make the life of the Navajo as pleasant as they can as long as he (Navajo) is on the job. The company still prefers Navajo labor and all signs indicate that they will continue to do so. Of all the gangs that I visited the workers were satisfied with everything in most cases. There were only three cases where adjustment had to be made so that the workers might be more satisfied. On the other hand there were also several instances where the Navajo workers were making things a bit hard for other workers and their employer and of course for themselves.7

Sounding like a public relations man for the railroad, in his concluding paragraphs Wallace wrote, “The Union Pacific Rail Road is really doing all it can for the Navajos and there was nothing that I ran across that really needed to be brought to their attention.” Echoing the official governmental line of Director Adams, he found fault with the Navajo attitude and wrote, “Since the railroad company is so interested in Navajo labor we in the placement Division, the traders and the recruiters cannot over stress the idea of inducing the Navajo to stay on the job once he gets up there.”

However, when the scholars were writing the history of the union of track workers, they noted that the rigors of maintenance of way work take a toll on the workers, a factor ignored by

7 All quotations are from his report, received from the archives in Laguna Niguel, with a copy in the possession of the author.
Adams and Wallace. At the time of the report, the maintenance of way craft had the smallest proportion of workers with over ten years seniority of all of the crafts on the railroads. “The turnover is costly to the employer, not only because of the need to train new men but also because by a process of self-selection there is some tendency for the better quality workers to leave the industry. Moreover, good workers often avoid railroad employment—especially in lower-rated maintenance of way jobs—in the first place.”

The National Archives also contain a long report from Robert W. Young, a man who will appear several times in this story. Young, who was working at the time with BIA official Lucy W. Adams, wrote “A Report on Off-Reservation Employment in Utah and Colorado Especially with Reference to the Railroad and Mine Work,” which was compiled in 1948 and 1949, and written in August 1949. Young, who later became a well-recognized linguist, taught at the University of New Mexico for many years. Young began his report with the premise that “stated in its simplest terms, the absorption of a large portion of the Navajo populations into off-reservation industries is an economic necessity. The reservation proper is not today nor has it ever been, capable of supporting the population forced by circumstances to depend upon it.” For Young, the mission of the BIA was to help the Navajo make the “social and economic

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8 The story of the relationship of their union, the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees, to the Navajo trackmen has yet to be told. As Littlefield and Knack have observed, “the relationship of American Indians to labor organizations is one of the most poorly documented aspects of Native American labor history.” Littlefield and Knack, Native Americans and Wage Labor, 30. As will be seen later in this narrative, based on personal observation and a few snippets of material in the literature, their treatment of these workers was not the union movement’s finest hour.

9 Haber et al., Maintenance of Way Employment, 9.

10 Hereinafter, “Young BIA Report.” All quotes from Young in this section are from that report.
adjustments” necessary to prosper, which meant serious changes in Navajo culture and identity. “The habits of a lifetime, and the traditional values and institutions of a culture,” Young wrote, “can and do undergo the changes required by a changing environment. We can accelerate these adaptations, but we cannot produce them abruptly.”

Visiting work sites, Young gave an in-depth description of the conditions in which the track workers were forced to live. In contrast to his contemporary, John Wallace, who was writing at the same time, Young worked hard to accurately describe the difficult life on the railroad for workers.

The railroad camps in which trackmen lived while working on the railroad consisted of a small number of railroad cars which had been retrofitted into bunk cars, kitchen cars, and a diner. Young found the conditions horrific. “Bunk cars are jammed to capacity with double deck beds . . . the air is often fetid,” and the “bunk car floors may be covered with a layer of filth, half organic in composition.” He continues, “The occurrence of bedbugs or lice is not uncommon.” There were no toilet facilities of any type nor lime for sewage disposal, so “about the bunk cars is a heavy odor of urea” and “as often as not the area is alive with flies.”

Young also noted that “during the war years when labor was difficult to secure, some of the railroads provided ‘deluxe’ equipment for the extra gangs. There were nicely painted quarters, shower and recreation facilities, a dynamo to supply power, adequate lighting fixtures, and the like.” Now that many Navajos were available, however, it seems that such “deluxe” facilities were not needed. The quality of working conditions for Navajos seemed to vary based on the necessity for their labor.

While the vast majority of those working as trackmen were Navajo, Young encountered some white workers on the gangs. These Anglos, he wrote, were often “winos” who “sometimes became crazed with delirium tremens and tear their bedding to shreds.” The “winos” were often “abusive,” and Young noted that compared with these men, “the Navajo is more often a
psychologically normal individual adjusted to the culture of his origin."

As the observations of David Brugge, of the Unitarian Service Committee, make clear later in this chapter, these Navajos tended to divide themselves into men “with homes and families on the reservation” who saved their pay and sent it home regularly, and younger men who often “go in search of recreation over the week-end.” Of the men who sought recreation, Young paints a vivid picture. Ogden, Utah, was the “most popular Mecca for recreation and section workers regularly visit it whenever they are working sufficiently close by.” Bars lined Twenty-Fifth Street: The Beehive and El Borracho were the most popular among Navajos. Until a few months before Young’s visit, prostitution had been licensed in Ogden. The municipal regulations required prostitutes to “operate only if they submitted to a physical examination every 10 days.” However, the citizens of Ogden “demanded that the police ‘clean up 25th street.’”

According to Young, the licensing policy was discontinued, with the result that prostitutes were routinely arrested, served thirty days in jail, and then returned to the streets to ply their trade. “Spokesmen for the city police department state that the venereal disease rate has increased since the beginning of the ‘new order.’” The issue of sexually transmitted diseases was one that troubled Young. He wrote:

One of the greatest disadvantages of section labor is that the men are unable to take their families with them. A certain percentage of these men can be expected to seek feminine companionship among the prostitutes, and of those it would appear probable that a large number would sooner or later become infected with venereal diseases.

The railroads knew of this situation, yet they showed a shocking lack of attention to the circumstances in which the men found themselves. To provide medical care for railroad workers of all crafts, some railroads, such as the Union Pacific (UP), set up
their own hospitals for workers and their families. Young writes, “As set forth in Section 3, UP Employee’s Hospital Association Regulations, the railroad disclaims any responsibility for venereal infections.” Thus, “when a man becomes incapacity [sic] for work, due to gonorrhea or syphilis, he is often summarily discharged and sent home to the reservation. Here, of course, he may infect his wife or other members of the communities in which he lives.”

For his report, Young also visited several mining companies that employed Navajos. To Young, the most striking difference from the railroads was that at the mines, Navajos were often able to bring their families and children. This, Young found, was a tremendous positive for these men as compared to their brothers on the railroad. Having family nearby provided a wholesome atmosphere that was of much comfort to these men, especially given their remoteness from the reservation.

The importance of having family nearby appears at a number of places in our narrative. As has been previously noted, it seems that the ability of the Pueblo Indians to survive their railroad experience well can be attributed to their ability to make traveling villages when they traveled the rails. Later we shall meet the Dickie Sandoval family. Dickie’s wife, Marilyn, and their children followed Dickie as he worked for the railroad, staying in hotels near the work sites.

As a result of his observations, Young made a number of recommendations to his superiors. They included adding shower cars and laundry facilities to the camps, improving the lighting, and providing recreational equipment. He also proposed that the foremen on the jobs take greater responsibility for the problem of sexually transmitted diseases by taking men to local doctors for treatment when they became infected.

Young concluded the report with the following:

Documentary history evidences the fact that the Navajo People have not been wholly self-supporting since the
establishment of the reservation. Since their return from Bosque Redondo there has been what is called a “Navajo Problem.” This problem has varied in minor details over the course of the past 80 years, and a variety of approaches have been made to its solution, but none have so far been effective, and the problem itself has not changed basically. To meet the demand for additional land the reservation has been periodically extended. Such extension is no longer possible. In order to relieve ethnic and economic pressures within the reservation, efforts have been made to “de-culturate” the Navajo, on the assumption that if he could be deprived of his own language and culture he would identify himself with “white civilization.”

With Young’s report we see the beginning of a change in attitude among some government officials with responsibility for Indian affairs.

The Unitarian Service Committee’s project with Navajo railroad workers

Sporadically over the years, other Americans recognized the plight of Native Americans, including Navajos, and even Navajo railroad workers. In my research, I came across a fascinating cache of correspondence regarding Navajo railroad workers in the archives of the Unitarian Universalist Association, located in the library of the Harvard Divinity School.  

The Unitarian Service Committee (USC) has a long and proud tradition of humanitarian service. Founded in 1940, it maintained projects in the United States and throughout the world where it felt it could provide assistance. In 1954, the USC decided to sponsor a project teaching English to adult Navajos

11 All documents upon which this section is based are to be found in the library of the Harvard Divinity School (bms 16048 UUSC – Box 1/bms16032 UUSE – Box 1). The Curator of Manuscripts and Archives, Frances O’Donnell, was extremely kind to me in my research there.
called the “English Language-Recreation Program.” The USC had established the Gallup Indian Community Center the year before as part of their efforts to improve conditions on the Navajo Reservation. The center and the project were led by a man named L. B. Moore and sponsored a number of educational, civil, and health-related activities for Navajo people. In addition, it hosted recreational activities for local Navajo families, such as dances and movies. The Santa Fe Railroad agreed to work with the USC on the language project, as it was concerned about its image with regard to its Navajo workforce. It also felt that the USC project could improve the morale of these men, making them more productive. The railroad agreed to provide a railroad bunk car for the project to be used in language classes, and a recreation program. This railroad car would store the necessary equipment and would be carried along with the cars used for sleeping and other equipment as gangs made their way east, repairing tracks.

David M. Brugge, who today is well known as a scholar and advocate for the Navajo, applied for the job leading the program on the ground. Brugge was studying for a master’s degree at the University of New Mexico (UNM) at the time. Prior to applying for the position, he had received his BA in anthropology at UNM and then worked a series of jobs that brought him into close contact with the Navajos. He was a partner in a “curio” company in Albuquerque, the Ayani Trading Company. He worked as a truck driver delivering commodities to Navajo families and as a seasonal ranger at the El Morro National Monument in western New Mexico, near the Navajo Reservation. Brugge got the USC job, which paid $3,000 for the year, and by the middle of June 1954 was on his way to a Santa Fe Railroad extra gang that was working near Martinez, California. The Harvard archive contains the reports he furnished on a semiweekly basis to Moore or the USC leadership back east.¹²

¹² Copies of materials quoted in this section are in the archives of the Harvard Divinity School library and in the possession of the author.
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The first group of workers Brugge joined, known as the Gaddis Extra Gang, named after foreman W. D. Gaddis, was primarily Navajo. Brugge’s initial letters to his USC superiors describe his work in setting up the education project in Instruction Car #5007. Brugge quickly learned that many of the men spoke some English, so he considered making his English courses more advanced. He also wanted to make the men comfortable with the bunk car and so gave much thought to their recreational needs. He had a ping-pong table, though none of the Navajos knew how to play this game; checkers was popular, but “by far the most popular item was the phonograph.” Some of the men carried their own phonograph records, usually preferring “western and hillbilly” songs. One man even had a few “specially recorded Navaho records.” Brugge asked the USC committee for a number of items, including boxing gloves. Boxing gloves, he felt, “would give the men a chance to settle some of their arguments that would otherwise probably lead to fights when drinking.” He pondered whether he should allow gambling in the Instruction Car, so as to encourage the men to use it. He wrote that the Negroes on the gang liked to throw dice, and the Navajos played a “card game that I couldn’t figure out” and “they didn’t want to take time out from it to explain.” “Gambling,” Brugge observed, “is an old Navaho custom and they go for this with as little moderation as their drinking, but fortunately, seldom, if ever, get into fights over this.”

The gang moved west as they worked on the tracks. By July 6, 1954, they were in Needles, California, a dusty, sun-scorched town along the Colorado River. The heat was so “intense that nobody wanted to think about anything.” Turnover was constant on the gang and Brugge felt he needed all the help he could get to convince the men to come for lessons after work. But the use of the car became a pattern. The men divided themselves into two groups—those who saved their paychecks and sent them home, and those who took their paychecks to town and were broke when they returned to the camp. Young had observed a
similar divide. This dynamic changed when they got closer to the reservation. Then, when men had a few days off, such as over a short holiday period, they would take the passenger train back to the reservation.

Brugge’s dispatches reflect that later in July the railroad moved Brugge’s car to another gang that proceeded into Arizona, where Navajo workers were in the minority, and blacks in the majority. Most of the Navajos were from the Shónto area of the reservation and included a few “longhairs.” The issue of alcohol continued to be a contentious one. According to Brugge, Arizona prohibited Navajo people from possessing alcohol, though they seemed to be able to get it when they wanted it. The other workers on the gangs were unhappy that they were not permitted alcohol by the railroad, either.

The correspondence from the USC reflects a number of tensions between the USC and the railroad, mainly revolving around
who would get credit for the project. A controversial issue arose when Baptist missionaries wished to use the education car for proselytizing and services. (After discussion, they were turned down.) In addition, the “officials” were constantly trying to replace men on the crews with others who were currently receiving unemployment compensation from the RRB. Many of those who would be replaced would not have sufficient time to receive such benefits when they were replaced, thereby saving money for the unemployment fund and the railroad. Quietly, the USC questioned the personnel policies of the railroad that resulted in this situation.

Brugge struggled to provide educational services to the Navajos. In his description, he also discussed the “racial prejudice of the Navahos toward the Negroes.” Conflicts showed up in things like music and food, but also in “the belief by the
groups that they are the only ones doing all the real work in the gang.” Brugge was a keen observer of the relations of the men among themselves. He also noted a tendency of the Navajo men to stay closest to those from their area of the reservation and to even ignore other Navajos on the gang who were from distant parts of the reservation. This factor predominated over age or other attributes.

Instruction Car #5007 was then moved to Melrose, New Mexico. Brugge went to Albuquerque for a weekend in early August and while he was gone the car was broken into. All that was taken, however, was the sporting equipment, which was returned in good condition. On only one occasion in Brugge’s time with the gangs was a Navajo worker ever thought to have stolen anything.

The gang continued its easterly march. In the middle of September they moved from the small community of Hereford, New Mexico, to Raton, New Mexico, a good-sized town. Over one weekend, a number of the Navajo men wanted to go to the Laguna Pueblo fiesta, several hundred miles from their camp near Raton. At the time, Brugge owned a 1940 Studebaker truck and agreed to take them. On the first leg of the trip, which ended in Albuquerque, one Navajo, Tom Jim, helped Brugge drive. The rest of the men sat in the back of the truck “singing Yeibichai songs all night” and drinking.\(^\text{13}\) At a stop, Brugge lost sight of these men. The next day he stopped off in Cañoncito to pick up a friend of Jim’s. He saw the men at the fiesta and when it was over drove some of them back. The other men, however, apparently tried to drink and drive their way back to the work camp. Tragedy was the result. Lee Chavez “collided with a bar in San Fidel” and Dan Jim got run

\(^{13}\) *Yeibichai* are an important kind of song usually sung in relation to Nightway ceremonies, which are popular events on the Navajo Nation. Often teams of singers sing old favorites and produce new renditions. The sound of “yei” is often repeated in the lyrics.
over when he tried to get in a moving car, resulting in the loss of an arm and both legs.

Throughout Brugge’s time on the gangs, alcohol was a major issue. During their stay in Raton, however, problems with alcohol intensified. Alcohol provided unbeatable competition for Brugge’s English lessons and recreational offerings. The bars on Raton’s Front Street, a strip similar to Gallup’s notorious Railroad Avenue or Ogden’s Twenty-Fifth Street, catered to Navajos and provided a magnetic draw. The bars stayed open until two in the morning, except on Sunday, and featured a guitar and violin player using loudspeakers that produced more volume than “when a really good bunch of singers get together at a squaw dance.” Brugge performed yeoman’s work trying to be sure that serious harm did not occur. On one especially bad weekend in October, in spite of Brugge’s efforts, “five new men were put in jail, at least one of the regulars fined, and one of the Indians beaten up and robbed of $45.00.” Brugge was quick to point out, however, that in spite of “[such] superstitions as the idea that Indians ‘revert to savagery’ when they drink,” many of these workers were able to drink without excess. Brugge observed that the variation in levels of alcohol consumption among these workers was similar to that which he saw among students at UNM and among GIs during his time of military service.

Brugge continued to struggle with his English classes. He had discovered that many of the Navajos were bilingual, and “some speak 3 or more languages.” He observed that the real problem in the classes was that most Navajos found no value in learning better English. Given the precariousness of the work, he wrote, “it is hard to find any who want to study the language, since most of them think of these track jobs about like a school boy thinks of a summer job, but with a less definite idea of how long they will stay with it.”

On October 9, “the day of the Oklahoma-Texas football game,” L. B. Moore drove to Raton to meet with Brugge. They
discussed Brugge’s lack of success with his English lessons. In his report after this trip, Moore observed:

It is apparent that we still need to seek for ways to stimulate the Navajos who want to learn English and want to learn something about the dominant society, but at the same time
we must realize that this cannot be done unless there is some tangible reward within the situation which makes it seem worthwhile to the Navajos. It may be very well for us of the dominant culture to regard this as an opportunity for them to learn, and an opportunity which they should not pass by. But the Navajos themselves do not feel this way, and so long as they do not take an interest in the program, there is nothing we can do to make them learn.

Discouraged by Brugge’s lack of sufficient success in improving the command of English language among the workers, the USC asked him to provide more sociological and anthropological information. In order to learn what he needed to do this, he wrote, “It is necessary to show the right kind of interest in it, more or less in between the overly curious prying attitude of an ethnologist and the half-humorous, half-contemptuous attitude of the average Anglo.”

In his remarks about this he spoke of the religious activities of the Navajo men in his gangs. Brugge writes that Tom Jim, a veteran from Continental Divide, New Mexico, who “spends more time dancing at the bars in Raton than most of the men,” was a Christian who made attempts to go to church while off working with the railroad gang. Jim retained a belief in Navajo religion and “dislikes behavior that he considers sacrilegious from that point of view, such as singing medicine songs while drinking.” Brugge bought a drum for the use of the men. A few of the young men used it when they sang songs that sounded to him like “Sioux peyote songs.” But, since the issue of the peyote church was quite contentious at the time, Brugge did not inquire further. Brugge also found connections between religious attitudes and desires to function in Navajo and white society. Speaking of younger Navajos who had the potential to become leaders, Brugge wrote, “Most of them seem to feel that to be anything but Christian makes their acceptance by whites more difficult, which may be true to some extent.”
At most of the camps, as the gangs moved along the tracks, the Navajos constructed a ceremonial sweat lodge, in the style of a hogan, in which ceremonies could be performed. Most sweat lodges were subterranean, Brugge observed, a fact which he found unusual compared to the “tipi shaped structure usually encountered on the reservation.” In Raton, the sweat lodge was dug into the side of a small hill with an ax.

It is oval, about 4 ft long and 3 ft wide, with the entrance in the long side toward the west, the orientation being due to the position of the bank. On the south side is a depression, perhaps 6 inches deep, semicircular and extending across most of the southern arc of the excavation. This is the place where the hot stones are heaped up, almost to the roof. The floor is covered with cardboard. The entrance widens from perhaps a foot wide at the bottom to about 2 feet wide at the top.

The roof was constructed with wood, using railroad ties and was covered with loose earth, creating a small place for ritual. Invited to join one of the sweats and the ceremony, Brugge declined, saying he was busy, but later regretted that decision.

Brugge’s time with the USC ended, but he continued to be a great friend to the Navajo people, especially in the contentious Navajo land dispute with their Hopi neighbors.14

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