Working on the Railroad, Walking in Beauty

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Five

How Did Navajo Men Come to Work for the Railroads?

“The Indian still is a child of nature who lives by the wind, sun and his gods. With the help of others, the Indian is becoming conscious of modern needs—the benefits of education, medicine and communication with the outside world.”

L. Hubbell Parker, employment supervisor, Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe Railroad (1955)

**Cuba, New Mexico**

Tom Caydaittto—Using the Blessingway and the Enemyway

I met Tom Caydaittto in Cuba, New Mexico, on a bright August morning. The story Tom told me combined many of the elements that I had seen repeated in the lives of Navajo railroad workers I had met. Tom, a friend of Julie’s, began work for the Union

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1 Quoted on page 20, *Chicago Sun-Times*, May 1, 1955. Except for the books specifically cited herein, all documents referenced in this chapter and the next are contained in the library of the Railroad Retirement Board in Chicago, Illinois. They come from files sent to Chicago from their southwestern offices when they were closed. These documents have not been formally cataloged. Copies of all cited documents are in the possession of the author.
Pacific Railroad in the early 1950s, getting his job through the local trading post on the rez. As with most Navajo trackmen, his employment was sporadic. However, by the early 1980s work steadied and he worked all over the Union Pacific system. The gangs he worked on often had Native Americans from other tribes as well as his own, such as Indians from South Dakota and Idaho. Some of them had intermarried with Navajos. Around the year 2000 he was able to retire with a pension.

In 1986, Tom told me, he was working on Union Pacific tracks in Utah when, in a mishap, he hurt his back. He was sent by his boss at the railroad to physical rehabilitation in Salt Lake City. Returning to the rez, one month later he went to the medicine man for ceremonies directed at the injury. Tom believes that both the modern orthopedic doctor and the medicine man helped him.

Tom told me that he made extensive use of traditional ceremonies to protect himself while working at the railroad. Each year when he prepared to leave the reservation to go to work, he would have a Blessingway ceremony performed to ensure his safety while he was away from the reservation. Then, when he returned, he would have an Enemyway ceremony performed in order to restore his hózhó. Leland Wyman, chronicler of the Blessingway and other traditional ceremonies, observed that “the Blessingway rite is concerned with peace, harmony, and good things, and should exclude all evil, while the Enemyway rite, designed to exorcise the ghosts of aliens, makes much of war, violence, and ugly conditions.”

Like several others with whom I spoke, Tom recalled that a tincture of burned herbs mixed with bobcat oil was used in these ceremonies. I asked Tom if his coworkers used religious ceremonies for similar purposes. He told me that other native men with whom he worked, not only other Navajos, engaged in similar ceremonies, but many were secretive about their ceremonies and religion. In addition, many of his coworkers carried objects to

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2 Wyman, Blessingway, 4.
How Did Navajo Men Come to Work for the Railroads?

Today Tom uses several forms of religious assistance. Occasionally he goes to a Christian church. He sometimes sees medicine men, often trying different ones. And he attends meetings of the Native American Church. They all work, he believes. But the traditional way is the most important, he maintains, and the Blessingway ceremony is the most efficacious. His five children live off the reservation. When they have problems they come back to the reservation and he takes them to a medicine man.

A visit to Chicago

Tom, like most of the men I met and interviewed, got his job on the railroad through his local trading post. Despite my years of involvement with railroad workers, and a number of allusions to this relationship with trading posts from my clients, I did not know how or why this was. How could a trading post owner get these men these jobs? Why would these merchants tell Navajo men to “go round up some Navajos,” as one trading post owner told me? What was in it for the traders? Why would the railroad subcontract this function to them? What were the financial arrangements? My questions led me on a historical detective chase to answer them once and for all.

Most histories of wage work and the Navajo highlight the engagement of the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA). I researched the scholarly literature, made contact with the BIA archivists, and presented some of these findings earlier. But I was unable to come up with much that detailed any relationship that could have assisted thousands of Navajo men to leave the reservation every year and travel hundreds of hard miles to work on railroad tracks. Many have argued that Navajo men came to work on the railroad “in much the same way the Chinese did a century before them: through a visit by a labor contractor unable to
hire enough help locally.”

3 Others ascribe more agency to the Navajo, claiming that regarding railroad work, “they perceived those openings and sought them out.”

4 But there seemed to be more to this story.

From my legal work, I knew that many railroad workers, native and nonnative, have a relationship with the Railroad Retirement Board (RRB), an obscure federal agency that serves as both the social security and unemployment benefits administration for railroad workers. For historical reasons, railroad workers are excluded from most federal social security and state unemployment compensation programs. When assisting injured Navajo workers, our law office ensured that the men got the pension and benefits from the RRB to which they were entitled. Often this was as important in the successful legal representation for an injured worker as were the settlement negotiations with the railroad.

Searching for answers to my questions, I contacted the RRB’s public information staff. At first they had little for me, but after a diligent search by one of their research staff, I received a note from them that in their library they had found a cache of uncollected official records from their offices in the Southwest. The number and geographic reach of the offices outside of Chicago had been slowly contracting. When the southwestern offices closed, it seems, their office staff boxed up their records and sent them to the home office in Chicago. Once there, someone, though no present employees know who, placed these records, not fully organized, in a set of filing cabinets in the RRB library. The librarian told me I was welcome to go through these cabinets and copy what I wanted. I headed to Chicago and spent several days looking through the filing cabinets, copying what I thought was important. Fortunately for me and for our understanding


4 Littlefield and Knack, Native Americans and Wage Labor, 14.
of history, some office staff in these southwestern offices were meticulous record keepers.\(^5\)

The following is the story that unfolded from these records.\(^6\) It is the untold story of the point of contact between the US government, American business, and Navajo workers. It is a story of these Navajo railroad workers facing a paternalistic triangle of the US government, mainly represented by the RRB; the western railroads; and the trading post owners on the reservation.\(^7\) This

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\(^5\) In an odd incident in early 2008, after I had returned home from the RRB office in Chicago with the documents that they had allowed me to view and copy for ten cents a page, I received a call from men identifying themselves as enforcement representatives of the RRB. They said they had traveled from Philadelphia and that they were outside my home. In the background I heard one of them say, “shouldn’t we get off his property.” They demanded that I come outside and return all the records immediately. No reason was given for this demand. I did not do so but called the Reporters Committee for Freedom of the Press who spoke with these agents on my behalf. I soon retained Jeffrey J. Pyle, a Boston lawyer, who negotiated with the lawyers at the RRB. After discussion, the RRB claimed they wanted the records back because some of them contained social security numbers of Navajo workers. Given the revelations in these documents and the fact that nearly all, if not all, of the Navajo men referenced in the papers were deceased, I doubt this was the real reason for sending men without warning to my home. However, a procedure was developed to redact those numbers and the matter was concluded. I thank Jeff Pyle and the Reporters Committee for their assistance.

\(^6\) All RRB documents referenced in this chapter are contained in the files of the RRB in its Chicago headquarters; a copy of each is in the possession of the author as well. In addition, I wish to thank Sam Tolth, a former RRB employee in Gallup, New Mexico, who met with me to help me confirm the actual functioning of the office and the affairs of the RRB that are reflected in these documents.

\(^7\) Addressing a complicated issue in the scholarship concerning Navajos, David Brugge wrote, “The history of a nonliterate people cannot be written by ‘letting the documents speak for themselves,’ for the documents were penned by outsiders and aliens.” Brugge, *Navajos in the Catholic Church Records of New Mexico 1694–1875* (Tsaile, AZ: Navajo Community College Press, 1985), xii. Brugge’s point is a valid one, as simply reciting the views of the colonizing people seldom gives justice to the nonliterate peoples. However, what is presented in this
paternalistic triangle formed an enclosure around the Navajo men and their families that defined their ability to work off the reservation for railroads. While bringing wages into a reservation starved for disposable income, the effect of this arrangement on the Navajo railroad workers and their families was often painful and confusing. The three parties allowed the Navajo men little or no say about their lives on the railroad. It is easy to see how many of the Navajos’ religious coping strategies that are described in this book arose in direct reaction to the setup of this confining relationship.

Thus, while Navajo men have labored on the railroads for over one hundred years, this chapter and the next tell the story of how railroad track work became an important component of Navajo interaction with life off the reservation in the mid-twentieth century. The arrangement between the US government’s Railroad Retirement Board, the western railroad companies, and the Anglo-owned trading posts on the Navajo Reservation provided important benefits for each party. The exclusion of the Navajo people from the structure and administration of the arrangement, however, was based on wholly questionable assumptions claiming the inability of the Navajos to consider and resolve questions affecting their own lives and livelihoods. In the process the Navajos were treated with little more respect than strangers normally accord children. This fact contributed to the sense of dislocation and powerlessness that plagues Navajo railroad workers even today when they leave the reservation to perform track work.

The impetus from World War II

During World War II the US government became extremely active in manpower issues in vital industries in the United

chapter is an unvarnished internal look at the US government speaking for and to itself. It is quite revealing, I believe.
States. At the beginning of US involvement in the war, President Roosevelt created the Office of Defense Transportation (ODT). Among its duties, the ODT coordinated transportation facilities and expedited the movement of railway traffic. Labor shortages were a major concern, especially in transportation, given the staffing needed for the war effort. As the war continued, the employment situation worsened. To the annoyance of railroad workers and their unions, the ODT and the War Manpower Commission attempted to “freeze” railroad employees to their jobs. To fill the jobs of track workers, the railroads lobbied for the use of Mexican nationals and the 125,000 relocated Japanese being held in internment camps.  

Unions opposed the railroads’ efforts to use Japanese and Mexican workers, arguing that the issue was not “a shortage of labor but a shortage of wages” and that the lack of suitable workers “resulted from low wages, unfair overtime rules, and highly unsatisfactory commissary conditions.” The plan to use relocated Japanese was scrapped, but on April 29, 1943, the United States entered into an agreement with the government of Mexico to import track workers. Earlier, in 1942, the governments of Mexico and the United States had entered into an official “Bracero Agreement,” in which Mexican workers were brought into the United States to harvest sugar beets in the area of Stockton, California. The program soon spread to agricultural areas throughout the United States. Using a similar model, a railroad Bracero program was established, and over 100,000 individual contracts were signed between 1943 and 1945 to recruit and transport Mexican workers to the United States for employment on the railroads. This program continued until the end of the war.

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8 Hertel, History of the Brotherhood, 174.
9 Ibid.
10 While the railroads would have liked to continue the effort and retain these Mexican workers on individual contracts after the war ended, such was not to be the case, and the workers were returned to Mexico. See
On the Navajo reservation, times had never been harder. The economy was in crisis after the government forced a reduction in the number of sheep on the reservation. This requirement was opposed by many Navajo families and resistance was widespread. The result was that, with their traditional means of livelihood taken from them and their access to jobs off the reservation problematic, hunger and deprivation were serious problems for many Navajo families. In addition, the sheep reduction program had an unsettling psychological effect on the Navajo psyche that had not been seen since the difficulties with the relocation to Bosque Redondo nearly a century before.

With the convergence of these factors, the RRB began to consider a program to provide for the needs of railroads by supplying Navajo workers for their track work. In late 1942, F. H. Stapleton, the regional director of the RRB, whose region included the area of the Navajo Reservation, toured northern Arizona and northern New Mexico along with his regional employment officer in order to survey the ability of the RRB to get involved in this effort. Initially, the RRB was stymied in its recruitment efforts because the War Manpower Commission had mandated that only the US Employment Service would be allowed to recruit Navajos for work. In the report of his trip to the director of employment and claims for the RRB, Stapleton found that Navajos were being recruited by the US Employment Service to work in copper and coal mines. Stapleton was frustrated at this arrangement;

Barbara Driscoll, *The Tracks North: The Railroad Bracero Program of World War II* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1996). The issue of Mexican track workers remained a sore one for the railroad unions. After an initial surge of employment, the number of railroad workers entered a long, slow decline that continues to this day. Concerned about this trend, at the 1951 national convention of the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees, one unanimously approved resolution read, “Congress should take action to bar the illegal entry of ‘wetbacks’ into the United States from Mexico.” Hertel, *History of the Brotherhood*, 229.

Interoffice memo, December 19, 1942, regional director F. H. Stapleton to RRB director of employment and claims.
especially as—when he went to Flagstaff, Arizona—he found that there were a “large number of Indians on the street.” He wondered why they had not been placed into jobs by the US Employment Service, but concluded, “My own personal reaction is that the Indian in northern Arizona is thought of by the white man about the same as a Negro in the South. As a consequence of this, little effort is made to seek out the reason why these Indians will not work.”

The Railroad Retirement Board develops a system for Navajo railroad work

A few additional words about the Railroad Retirement Board are necessary. The RRB, established in the mid-1930s, has two major functions. First, it administers a pension system covering railroad employees that is similar, but basically unconnected to the Social Security system that covers other groups of workers in the United States. While prior to the passage of the Railroad Retirement Act, which established the RRB, many railroads had a pension system for their workers, in practice few workers could ever reach the amount of continuous service necessary to receive a pension. The result was that in the social and political climate after the Great Depression, this private system was viewed as inadequate by nearly all who examined it. In response, the Railroad Retirement Act of 1935 put a railroad pension system into place that was financed by contributions from management and labor and had benefits administered by the RRB and its staff.

The second major function of the RRB was and is to administer an unemployment insurance system, again covering only railroad workers. Unemployment insurance was an especially difficult problem for railroad workers before the passage of the federal laws establishing the program, because the legislative scheme for such insurance was based on varied laws regulated by several states. The result of this arrangement was that many railroad workers were unable to receive any unemployment benefits when they were laid off, given that they often lived in one state, worked for a company that was headquartered in another, and worked in many other states. One story cited by the proponents of a federal system for railroad workers concerned a group who worked for the Western Maryland Railroad prior to the establishment of the RRB. Upon being laid off, they applied for benefits in Maryland but were told by officials there that they were ineligible for benefits in Maryland because their employer had paid unemployment taxes to the state of Pennsylvania. The men crossed into Pennsylvania and applied for benefits. There, however, they were told by Pennsylvania officials that since their work and unemployment occurred in Maryland, the Pennsylvania law did not cover them.\footnote{In the hearings in the US House of Representatives on the original bill, several examples were given. David B. Schreiber, \textit{Legislative History}, 31.}

In response, and in concert with many aspects of law affecting railroads, the railroad unemployment system became a federal system, unconnected to the various state schemes.\footnote{The railroad unemployment system came into effect in 1939, following the passage of the Railroad Unemployment Insurance Act, which was signed by President Roosevelt on June 25, 1938. The safety and operational regulation of railroads is generally federal as well, and much is administered by the Federal Railroad Administration. See http://www.fra.dot.gov/.} Funding for the system is wholly employer financed by an industry-wide method of experience or merit rating, in which the employer contribution rate varies with the balance contained in the Railroad Unemployment Insurance Fund. Over the years various provisions
of the pension and unemployment systems have been amended but the original, basic system remains intact today.

In spite of the obstacles regional director F. H. Stapleton observed, a system for supplying Navajo labor to the railroads was developed and implemented by the RRB. However, as will be described below, there were many logistical and financial hurdles to be surmounted, among which was the isolated nature of life on the reservation itself. How could the Navajo workers be integrated into the industrial transportation system of the time? As a solution, the RRB developed a triangular system around the Navajo composed of the RRB, the western railroads, and the trading posts. This triangular relationship benefited each of the three parties and was responsible for a steady flow of Navajo workers into railroad track gangs. The benefits to the Navajo, however, were more difficult to discern.

In the system developed by the RRB, when a railroad needed track workers, the company would contact the RRB. However, given that the RRB had neither offices on the reservation nor any other way to gain access to the Navajo men, the RRB turned to trading posts to fulfill the function of communication, recruitment, and claims administration. In this way, these Navajo workers would be identified and provided to railroads as track workers.

The RRB implements its manpower system for the railroads

When Congress passed the Railroad Unemployment Insurance Act in 1938, establishing the provision and administration of unemployment insurance benefits by the RRB for railroad workers, employees entitled to such benefits were to register at an “employment office.” Concerned about the financial ramifications of this mandate for in-person registration, the RRB privatized the administrative work relating to claims taking. Forty-five thousand railroad officials were designated railroad unemployment claims agents. Thus, the railroads provided the manpower and facilities for these
sign-ups and, in exchange, were paid by the RRB fifty cents per claim taken. This fifty cents per claim figure was never raised.

On the Navajo Reservation, there were no offices maintained by railroads, labor unions, or the RRB that could be used for such a purpose. Because the railroad had no personnel on the reservation or desire to locate any there, the RRB designated the owners of trading posts as Special Unemployment Claims Agents (SCAs) and their trading posts as “employment offices,” as mandated by the statute. The manual that the RRB required the traders to sign upon becoming SCAs defined their duties as “claims taking and related functions, including recruitment for railroad employment.” Thus, on the reservation, when the railroads contacted the RRB wanting employees, the RRB would notify some or all of the trading posts that acted as labor brokers and communicate the employment needs of the railroads. In order to reduce costs, the railroads—through their member on the governing body of the RRB—made a particular effort to stimulate the hiring of men who were currently on layoff, and in this way a preferential system was set up by the RRB through the trading posts.\footnote{To do otherwise was considered to be a wasteful use of the RRB’s unemployment insurance system. Efforts in the mid-1950s in this regard are detailed in Haber, \textit{Maintenance of Way Employment}.} Calling men on layoff first had a double benefit for the railroads. It assured the companies that they were getting experienced workers and, by getting these men off of the unemployment rolls, it reduced the need for company contributions to the RRB unemployment trust fund.

When the trader and the RRB agreed on the number of workers that would be sent to the railroad from a certain trading post, the owners of that post were responsible for getting the men to an embarkation point designated by the RRB. While each trading post had a different arrangement for how the workers would pay for their transportation from the trading post to the embarkation point, it appears that at certain times—especially in the 1960s—some traders charged Navajo men more than $100 to transport
them to an RRB embarkation location. Upon the men’s arrival, the RRB would check them in and be sure they had the proper paperwork. The men would then be placed in buses operated either by an independent bus company or railroad, or—in some cases—they traveled on a passenger train. They would then be transported to a work site designated by the railroad.16

Within a few years after its inception, the triangular system was functioning well, the RRB believed. In March 1949, RRB regional director Stapleton wrote the director of employment and claims, H. L. Carter, to report on a meeting in Window Rock, Arizona, called by the Navajo Indian Employment Service of the US Department of the Interior. Stapleton was blunt in his report. “It seems that since the Board started Indians in employment with the railroad industry, everybody and his brother wants them.” He further reported that from December 15, 1948, until March 14, 1949, the RRB had paid out $400,000 in unemployment benefits to 6,000 laid-off Navajo railroad workers.

Internal RRB records reflect continuing efforts to streamline the placement system. On April 30, 1953, the RRB entered into a formal agreement with the Atchison, Topeka & Santa Fe, covering the recruitment and processing of Navajo workers for their track work at four locations: Gallup, New Mexico; and Holbrook, Winslow, and Flagstaff, Arizona. In Gallup, for example, the RRB agreed to be responsible to “recruit, sign, arrange for meals, lodging when appropriate, check and load on trains, arrange for passes” for these workers. The agreement varied only slightly at the other locations, depending on their proximity to a local office of the RRB.

The use of Navajos for railroad work created a number of difficult administrative issues for the RRB. For example, one of the ancillary functions of the RRB was to provide for certain

16 For example, a 1978 article in The All A-Board, an internal RRB newsletter, featured RRB officials in Gallup, New Mexico, who, as part of their “placement program,” organized groups of “Indian trackmen-laborers” for railroads such as the Rock Island, the Santa Fe, and the Union Pacific.
sickness benefits. RRB sickness benefit regulations required that those receiving the assistance had to have a statement from a doctor every sixty days as to their current medical situation. Yet in 1947, when over 4,500 Navajo workers were working the extra gang cycle of summer work and winter layoff, there were no doctors on the reservation except in the few Indian Health Service hospitals. Few ill men could make the long trek to those hospitals. In addition, RRB regional director Stapleton wrote, “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.” Stapleton asked the director of employment and claims for a special dispensation to waive the rule. It is unclear if Stapleton’s request was granted, but there is no doubt that proper resolution of railroad injury claims remains a problem today.

Another problem for the RRB, spotlighting the difficult interplay of Navajo culture and American industrial practice, was the difficulty it had in differentiating one specific group of Navajo workers from others. Special regional manager of Region 8 of the RRB, M. A. Robson, wrote to RRB director of employment and claims, H. L. Carter, about these issues in 1947: “During the eight benefit years the Navajos have been registering we have probably encountered every conceivable type of mix-up of name and number on the Board’s records.” Further, he wrote, “The story current on the reservation (and probably apocryphal) has it that in each hogan there is a bowl of social security cards. When one member of the family is shipping out, he dips into the bowl and takes out a social security card. Whatever the facts may be, the use of two or more claimants of the same number is a very real problem.”

17 Interoffice memo, December 8, 1947, regional director F. H. Stapleton to RRB director of employment and claims.
Language issues were large, too. White interpreters frequently made mistakes in “rendering Navajo into phonetic English” in writing Navajo names and addresses, and further, Robson wrote, “many Indians [adopt] Anglicized names in the place of long and awkward Navajo names.” To show the depth of the difficulty, he wrote his boss the following: “Many Navajo names vary considerably in spelling from trading post to trading post or even from year to year. Listed below are variations in spelling in a single common name taken from our index files:

| Tsinajinnie | Tsiningine |
| Tsineginnie | Tsinnijine |
| Tsingine    | Tsinniginni|
| Tsiniger    | Tsinniginnie|
| Tsinijinni  | Tsinnijini |
| Tsinijinnie | Tsinnijinnie |

The triangular relationship among the railroads, the RRB, and the traders was on full display in 1953, as the RRB held a series of meetings for Special Unemployment Claims Agents in the cities on the edge of the reservation, such as Farmington and Gallup, New Mexico, and Winslow, Arizona. At the meeting in Farmington, representatives of thirty-three trading posts were in attendance, along with two officials from the Union Pacific Railroad (UP), and three officials from the RRB. The UP was the only railroad represented at this meeting, as the RRB had divided the reservation into districts and tended to place men from particular districts with particular railroads. The United Indian Traders Association was specifically invited. It appears that no Navajo workers were present. The RRB distributed its “Manual for Special Unemployment Claims Agents.” In discussion, the UP explained that it would not pay travel costs for Navajos to get from the reservation to the work sites, often hundreds of miles

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18 Interoffice memo, September 30, 1953, special regional manager M. A. Robson to RRB director of employment and claims.
away. It was agreed that either the Navajos would have to pay the cost out of their own pockets or borrow the money from the trading posts. The RRB then provided a list of all Navajos who had drawn RRB unemployment claims over the last year. The RRB asked the trading posts to indicate which men “they did not consider to be good credit risks.” Such men would not be allowed to work on the railroads.

The system matures

Things were much the same fifteen years later when the three parties came together to refine the system and the work life of the Navajo workers. A particularly well-documented meeting of the railroads, the RRB, and the traders was held in Gallup on February 4, 1968. On the first day, a meeting was held in which representatives from several railroads attended along with RRB officials. George Kanega, director of the RRB Bureau of Unemployment and Sickness Insurance, wrote the minutes. Shockingly, no worker who would directly suffer or benefit from the decisions made was present. For example, the issue of job-related insurance was discussed. Some railroads had mandatory accidental death/dismemberment policies, the premium for which was deducted from the pay of the men in their first paychecks. Others allowed the Travelers Insurance Company to sell insurance.

The insurance issue was especially problematic for two reasons. First, it appeared that the insurance often did not provide coverage in addition to that contained in the union agreement. Second, private insurance forms were often thrust at the Navajo men as they were getting on buses to go to work sites. Because most did not read English and believed they had to sign all the forms they were given in order to work, it is fair to assume that most bought insurance that they were unable to use. One RRB official, Paul Johnson, related that he had to shoo away
a Travelers representative who showed up when Johnson was massing men for transport to their workplace.19

A number of other concerns received attention at the meeting. The issue of union representation was discussed. Even though it appears that men were to join the Brotherhood of Maintenance of Way Employees (BMWE) after sixty days on the job, the railroads refused to allow payroll deduction for the union dues. Thus, the only way that the union could collect dues was to physically get the money from the men. Kanega observed that “there was not much activity by the union in terms of servicing the men. The union does have a problem with communicating with the men.” The union, however, does not appear to have been invited to the meeting to discuss the issue or give its views.

David Brugge had noted the issue of union representation in his work as well. In his last report in the archives, he spoke of the relationship between the Navajo men and their unions.20 At this time, in 1954, there were two union federations: the American Federation of Labor (AFL) and the Congress of Industrial Organizations (CIO). The small number of clerks who traveled with the gang, such as the timekeepers, belonged to the AFL union; the laborers belonged to the CIO. Like most observers, Brugge found relations between the unions and the workers problematic, although he was unable to talk with any union officials in his time with the gangs. Geographic isolation and the dif-

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19 Interestingly, several months later, the RRB and the governing body of the Navajo Nation, the Navajo Tribal Council, looked at the insurance issue and decided that the Travelers’ policy was in fact a positive thing for the Navajo, as there was no deduction made from their paycheck for it. The policies of the Rock Island and the UP, however, for which the men paid eighteen and twenty dollars, respectively, were “a waste of the Indians’ money.” Memo, April 11, 1963, Edmund D. Kahn, tribal attorney.

20 For an interesting review of other relationships between Navajo workers and the American labor movement, see O’Neill, Working the Navajo Way.
ficulty of maintaining contact between the union and the workers were clearly factors in this phenomenon.

The workers clearly had a need for unions, but it was impossible for the union to maintain a presence on the gangs. The reasons for this are numerous, but the geographic reach of the gangs, combined with cultural issues similar to those faced by the RRB, were most prominent. The cost of union dues may also have made Navajos somewhat distrustful of unions. Brugge observed:

Navajos, quite naturally, I suppose, have something of a persecution complex in their attitude toward Anglo-Americans and while they keep their grievances, real and imagined, to themselves most of the time, can be unusually bitter about them. The situation doesn’t seem to be too good for either the RR, the Unions, or the Navajos.

In addition, the relationship of the union of trackmen, the BMWE, to minority trackmen has been contested throughout the history of the union. The BMWE was formed as a fraternal organization in 1887 called the Order of Railroad Trackmen. In 1917 the BMWE held its first triennial convention in Detroit, Michigan. “The question of allowing colored maintenance of way workers to join the Brotherhood had become pressing. After much discussion, the convention voted to permit colored workers to affiliate with the brotherhood in allied lodges.”21 At the convention in 1919, the delegates voted to give “colored members more direct representation at Grand Lodge conventions by allowing them to be represented by white delegates.”22 This problem was especially vexing, as a high percentage of track work had historically been performed by minority members.

Housing for the men on the road was also on the agenda. The meeting notes reflected the comment that “Navajos are clean and keep their camps in good condition.” The discussion of housing was

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21 Hertel, History of the Brotherhood, 83.
22 Hertel, History of the Brotherhood, 90.
followed by “Arrangements for Sending Money Home,” in which “alternate schemes for getting money back to the reservation” were discussed. The concern was that if the money was given to the men at the conclusion of a payroll period, it would be spent before they got back to the reservation. Some railroads took the men into town to the bank and tried to have them purchase money orders to mail to their families on the reservation. There was talk of a special payroll deduction so that the money would go to someone back on the reservations. The notes reflect that there were certain risks with this procedure: “1) the company might have problems under the union agreements; 2) it was dangerous for the money to go to the traders; and 3) the company might have problems with the family if the man designated the wrong woman to whom the check was to be sent.”

On the second day of the meeting, Sunday, the trading post owners were invited and Judge Yazzie of the Navajo Tribal Court, a former RRB official, was also in attendance, along with an official from the BIA. Judge Yazzie’s comments to the traders were interesting. Kanega’s notes reflect the following: “He reminded the traders that they are interested in the Indians’ money and that this is not all bad. He told them to help the Navajo learn how to earn more money and how to get back to the reservation with more of it.” In the question and answer session, many of the traders were critical of the practices of the railroads toward the Navajos but also wanted to be sure that the checks of the Navajos came to their trading posts.23

The conditions of Indians in the United States received congressional attention from time to time, and the work of the RRB on the reservation was no exception. In 1956, the RRB was subject to congressional criticism for instructing its employees not to take unemployment insurance claims from Navajos during certain times of the year. A closed-door hearing was held before the House Appropriations Committee over the policy of

23 To his credit, after this meeting Kanega visited Chairman Raymond Nakai of the Navajo Tribal Council to discuss RRB activities in relation to the railroads and the Navajos.
the board to refuse to take claims of unemployment insurance from Navajos during the preceding summers. The chairman of the RRB, Col. Raymond J. Kelly, defending the actions of his agency in refusing to notify Navajos of the policy of the RRB as to when such claims could be filed, told the committee that “most Navajo Indians are not capable of reading. I do not believe that one out of five speak English. Their whole contact has to be made through Indian traders.” In response to criticism from the congressional committee, however, the RRB agreed to change its practices regarding the timing of claims taking.  

While there can be little doubt that many RRB officials who worked in the system thought that they were helping the Navajos, their own financial and administrative concerns were paramount for them. For example, in his March 1949 letter, Stapleton wrote that there had been very little paid out in sickness insurance benefits on the reservation. Stapleton expressed his concern about the amount of money that would be paid out pursuant to the sickness program if the Navajo workers realized that this government program actually covered them. Stapleton wrote, “Lord help us if they ever find out about the full benefits of our programs and we can accept a statement from the medicine man.”

For those who formed the paternalistic triangle that enclosed the Navajo workers, the benefits of the system were obvious and profound. The railroads were getting a trained, hard-working labor force to perform their least desirable jobs, a force that seldom complained in a way that was recognized. The RRB was building a bureaucracy that allowed it to claim it was providing a major benefit to its main constituent group, the railroad companies. Finally, the program spoke to the greatest problem that the trading post owners had—how to get income to the Navajos so that they could pay their tabs at the trading posts and buy more goods from the traders.

24 Arizona Republic, February 29, 1956. A copy of the article is in the archives.

25 Interoffice memo, March 14, 1949, regional director F. H. Stapleton to RRB director of employment and claims H. L. Carter.