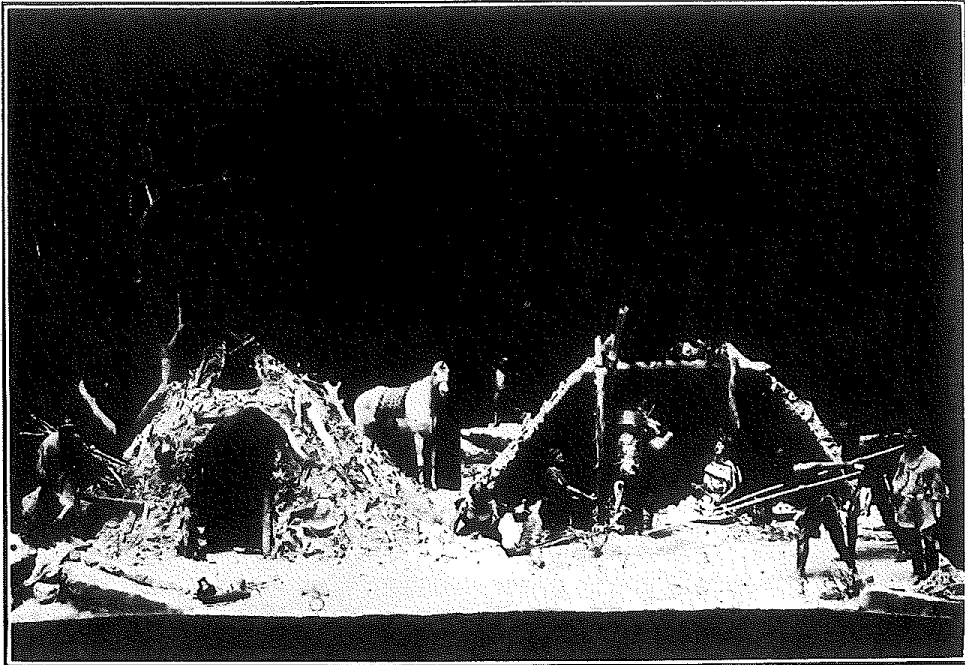


DENVER ART MUSEUM

1300 LOGAN STREET, DENVER, COLORADO

DEPARTMENT OF INDIAN ART

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NAVAHO INDIAN LIFE

From a model in the Field Museum of Natural History

Leaflet No. 21

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THE NAVAHO INDIANS

LOCATION. The Navaho Indians are a pastoral people of Athabaskan stock, at present living on a very large reservation located principally in northeast Arizona, but running over quite extensively into New Mexico and less so into Utah. The Navaho call themselves Dineh. The Spaniards called them Apaches de Navahu, the latter word being the name of a Tewa pueblo near which some of the Dineh lived. The tribe is outstanding among American Indians for its increase in population, having grown from about ten thousand to seventy thousand in the last sixty-five years.

HISTORY. It seems certain that the Navaho and their close kin, the Apache, came to their present homes from the northwest, but the exact date cannot be closely determined. Some authorities place their arrival within the last five hundred years, but others feel that it occurred much earlier. According to their origin legend they split with the Apache about four hundred years ago. Sometime after the split, being a small tribe, they fled to the depths of the Canyon de Chelly, in Arizona, and from there conducted a series of raids and wholesale adoptions of conquered peoples that rapidly increased their number. Clans from Acoma and Zuni voluntarily joined them. After 1848 these raids brought them in conflict with the newly arrived Americans and a constant struggle was kept up until the defeat of the Indians by Kit Carson in 1863. Most of the tribe was taken to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, (Bosque Redondo). Here they suffered greatly from sickness and hunger. In 1867 they were allowed to return to their old homes.

PHYSIQUE. There is no distinctive Navaho physical type because of the extensive mixing by marriage and adoption with the tribes surrounding them. All types of stature and head shape are found.

DWELLINGS. The Navaho live in dome shaped huts of logs and earth, called hogans. In the summer they build crude shelters of poles and leafy boughs. For details of construction see Leaflet No. 9.

CLOTHING. The earliest costumes of the Navaho were wraps and leggings of woven yucca and grass fibre, sometimes mixed with rabbit fur. Later they made shirts, trousers, etc., of buckskin, much of which was obtained from the Utes. After weaving was introduced shirts, dresses, blankets and shawls were woven. Probably cotton articles were obtained from the Pueblo weavers. The men wore loose cotton trousers split up to the knee and fastened closely about the calf with silver buttons, like a legging. At present both sexes are much inclined to wear velveteen shirts in solid colors. The women wear long, full calico skirts and the men American trousers or overalls. The old cotton trousers are still seen. Old men and children often wear only a breech-cloth when herding. Ankle high, hard soled moccasins of brown leather are worn by both sexes. They fasten across the instep with a silver button. The hair is worn long and is tied in an hour-glass club low on the neck. Long narrow belts, garters and hair ties woven by themselves or the Hopi are much used. Formerly the men wore quite elaborate caps of leather, but their use has long since ended. As a substitute they now like to wear heavy fur caps. Nowadays the men wear cloth head bands or broad brimmed felt hats. Much silver, shell and turquoise jewelry is worn by both sexes.

FOOD. Corn, beans, squash and melons have long been staple foods. But the wandering life of the old days often kept the Navahos from raising field crops and forced them to depend on many grass seeds and the fruit and roots of various bushes and plants. The meat of almost all

wild animals and birds was eaten fresh or preserved by drying. Now the old foods have nearly all gone. Mutton is the chief meat dish. Beef and horse meat are sometimes used. Corn, peaches and other garden crops are still grown in quantity. Great dependence is placed on the American made foods procurable at the many trading posts on the reservation. Candies, sweets and soda pop are very popular. They used to make an intoxicating drink like Apache tiswin, but now whiskey is preferred. But drunkenness is uncommon except in a few of the railroad towns.

STOCK RAISING. Sheep, goats and horses were obtained at a very early date from the Spaniards. The flocks have increased greatly and their care is now the chief occupation of the tribe. The original herds have often been increased by grants from Congress. Some cattle are raised. The horses are small and of poor quality, though the Government has improved the stock considerably in recent years.

WEAVING. That the Navaho learned weaving from the Hopi and Zuni about 250 years ago is indicated by the available evidence, though from their legends it might be supposed that they wove much earlier. The art reached its greatest height in the middle years of the 19th century, when blankets of unequalled perfection in design, color and execution were woven from hand spun ravelings of several kinds of commercial wool cloth, English baize (bayeta), American flannel and blankets. Fine blankets of native wool were also made. Aniline dyes and machine-spun yarn (Germantown) introduced about 1875-80 began a decline in artistic quality. Blanket making gradually yielded to the weaving for sale of rugs showing oriental design influence. A revival of old designs done with plant dyes began about 1920 but has been limited. All weaving is slowly declining in quantity. See Leaflet No. 3.

BASKETRY. Formerly baskets were made in considerable quantities, shallow bowls, water bottles and several deep shapes being the common varieties. The baskets were coiled, with sumac splints and a two rod and grass bunch foundation. These baskets are quite flexible. Nowadays no baskets are made, but those that are needed for ceremonial use, shallow bowls, are made by the Ute, Paiute and Apache who copy the Navaho shapes and designs, but use the stiff three rod coil. The ceremonial bowls, commonly called marriage baskets, usually show a red and black zigzag band, broken at one point. This break is to help the medicine men to place the basket in its proper ceremonial position. These baskets are often inverted and used as drums. Straight bands and crosses with boxes on the arms are other common patterns.

POTTERY was formerly of two types, decorated jars, bowls and canteens and undecorated cooking pots with bullet shaped bottoms. The latter were often headed with buckskin and used for drums. The decorated ware, which showed brown or black designs on a cream or light tan ground, has not been made for a long time, and it is doubtful if many cook pots are now made.

SILVERWORK. The Navaho learned silversmithing from the Mexicans... about 1855 but little was done till about 1870. It is now a large industry. Commercial sheet and ingot silver have replaced the coins once used. Cast or hammered pieces of many types are stamped with designs taken from Mexican leatherwork. Setting with turquoise began about 1900. For details see Leaflet No. 15.

RELIGION. The Navaho faith is very complicated. There is no supreme God. The Woman who Changes—probably Nature—shares power with her sister the White Shell Woman, the Sun and the twin brothers, often called War Gods. After these leaders come a host of minor dieties, both male and female, called yei (yea). The ancestors of many animals are worshipped as divine. There are innumerable small local gods, the spirits of rocks, springs, canyons, etc. On the evil side are several alien gods of vast size, corresponding to the giants and ogres of Europe, and the devils (chindee) which inhabit every dead body. These evil beings are not worshipped.

CEREMONIES. In connection with the worship of their gods the Navaho practise a wide variety of ceremonies, lasting from a few hours to nine days. The great ceremonies are usually conducted for the healing of one person, though everyone

within reach attends. These gatherings are the occasion for prayers for the general welfare of the people. Minor rites exist for almost every phase of human activity, such as planting, harvesting, marriage, travel, etc. Most of these ceremonies are conducted indoors by shamans or priests, and consist of prayers, songs, and the use of sand paintings, sacrificial and other paraphernalia. Open air dances in masks and costumes occur in connection with the longer ceremonies. Now social dances are quite common.

MUSIC, almost entirely vocal, plays a very important part in the life of the Navaho. There are traditional songs for every conceivable activity or situation in daily life and thousands of songs connected with the religious practises of the people. As many as two hundred songs, some long and involved, go with one ceremony. Great importance is attached to the exact rendition of these songs. In addition to these traditional songs the Navaho are constantly improvising new melodies. With few exceptions men are the singers of the tribe. Their singing is characterised by a very high quavering falsetto.

SAND PAINTING. This term is applied to the pictures made from colored sand on the floors of the medicine lodges during the different ceremonies. They are from three to twelve feet across and are made by spreading dry pigments in five colors on a smooth sand bed. The colors are white, red, yellow, black and blue-grey. The paintings depict divine beings and objects connected with them. One to a dozen men do the work. The pictures must be made and destroyed in one day. The pictures are destroyed in the evening by applying pinches of the colors to the sick person.

GAMES. Archery, dice and stick games, hidden ball, hoop and pole, cat's cradle, quoits, shinny, foot racing, horse racing and various equestrian exercises are the principal amusements of the Navaho. Cards and baseball have been learned from the whites.

TRIBAL ORGANIZATION. The tribe is divided into clans, of which about 50 have been listed. These in turn are grouped into phratries, of which there are about ten. These larger groups are not very strongly organized. Descent is through the mother. Marriage must be out of the mother's clan. There is no head chief. Each locality has a leading man, who holds his position by wealth, oratory and wisdom. Their authority is not great. In recent years a tribal council has been organized, with leading men acting as representatives of the different parts of the widespread reservation. Women have a very considerable power in the affairs of the tribe. The medicine men in general do not seek political power.

CUSTOMS. Childbirth is accompanied by family rejoicing and religious ceremonies. The children are brought up by the mother till the age of about six, when the father takes over the education of the boys. Now many of the children go to Government schools. Marriages were formerly arranged for the young people. The native wedding called the "basket ceremony," which was attended with feasting, gift giving and religious practises, is now giving way to white civil or religious marriages. Polygamy, legally outlawed, is still kept up to a small extent. The dead are greatly feared, and after a hasty burial in or near the hogan the family abandon the dwelling. Hospitality is stressed. The people are quiet with strangers, but among themselves are very cheerful and animated.

Compiled from the following sources by Jean Allard Jeançon and F. H. Douglas:

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