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KNOW THE NAVAJO



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by Sandy Hassell

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KNOW THE NAVAJO

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Acknowledgement and thanks to the
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made this booklet possible.

"Sandy" Hassell



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KNOW THE NAVAJO

The Navajo is the largest tribe of Indians in the United States, estimated at 75,000 in 1958. Their Reservation is the largest in the area, approximately sixteen million acres. They are also the best known of any Indians for their arts and crafts.

The population of the tribe has increased six times in the last eighty years.

Additions have been made to their Reservation since 1868 until it is now five times the original size.

All Navajos do not live on their own Reservation; many live on other Indian reservations close by and on adjacent public land.

Most Navajos are full-blooded Indians but they have mixed considerably with other tribes close by, especially the Pueblos.

The complexion of full-blooded Navajos is lighter than other Indians as their skin often lacks that copperish tinge which is noticeable in many tribes.

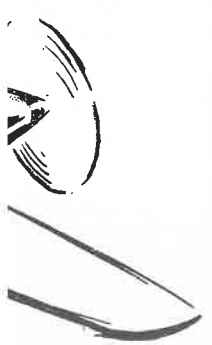
Navajos have had less contacts with the whites than most other tribes in the U. S. Large areas on the Reservation are seldom visited by the white man.

There are some adult Navajos who have never ridden in an automobile. A large majority of Navajos will ride in an airplane if invited. Most of them seem eager for a chance.

Practically all of the Reservation is over a mile high. Due to the high altitude the weather seldom gets extremely hot; the nights are cool. The winters are severe; deep snows and below zero temperatures are not unusual.

Rainfall is light and vegetation is sparse over most of the Reservation.

The only place in the United States where four states



Navajos can express a very complex thought with a single word. It is difficult to give some Navajo words English interpretations.

The Navajo language is one of the hardest for a matured white person to learn and harder yet to pronounce.

Several tribes of Indians in the interior of Northern Canada and Alaska speak a language closely related to the Navajo.

The Navajos and Apaches speak practically the same language. The Apaches speak faster.

The Navajos have a name for only one day in the week—Sunday. Other days are counted as so many days to or from Sunday. Like many other Indians their months are counted by the moon with a descriptive name for each month.

Navajos call their first cousins brothers and sisters.

A penny is "a red", a nickel, "a yellow", a dime, "one blue", sugar is "sweet salt", and a Negro is a "black Mexican".

Navajos have no curse words. The most insulting thing one can call another is a coyote.

During the war special units of Navajos were trained to send and receive communications in their own language. The enemy was never able to interpret any of these messages.

When a Navajo learns to write, he is a better scribe than the average white person.

Navajos do not use smoke or drum signals but many believe the Navajos may have mysterious forms of communications unknown to white people.

The Navajo home or hogan is a one-room dome-like structure, usually made of logs and covered with dirt. It has a dirt floor, no windows, and the door always faces east. An open fire in the center serves for both cooking and heating. A hole in the center of the roof permits the smoke to escape and gives light. These hogans are cool in summer and warm in winter and give protection against violent desert sand-

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their Reservation.

Some years Navajos will gather and sell as much as half a
million dollars worth of pinon (pine) nuts. Whole families
migrate to the area where the nuts are most abundant and
camp there until the crop is harvested.

Navajos are not lazy and will work at almost any kind of
a job if given a chance. It is a Navajo custom to arise at day-
light or a little before and to work until sundown when
necessary.

Under their old system the Navajos had both war chiefs
and peace chiefs who governed certain areas. They were
chosen from the rank and file by popular acclamation—war
chiefs, for their daring and cunning, and peace chiefs for
their eloquence and wisdom. Their rank was determined by
their individual ability.

On the Reservation the Navajos have their own police
force and judges. They are appointed by the Indian De-
partment. Only misdemeanor cases are tried by these judges.
They are very stern in administering justice but their de-
cisions are seldom questioned by the culprits.



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ajos. Tribal customs do not frown on a Navajo for marry-
ing an Indian from another tribe, a white person, or a Mexi-
can.

A Navajo is governed more by his own tribal code than
he is by the laws of the white man. He doesn't ignore the
laws of the whites and most Navajos are law-abiding by their
own code.

Navajo etiquette is just as rigid and more elaborate than
any prescribed by Emily Post, but it is not publicized—often
not even noticed or suspected by strangers.

Never ask a Navajo his name. If you want to know what
it is ask one of his friends or acquaintances.

When being spoken to, a Navajo never looks directly
into the eyes of the speaker; he watches the lips.

When offering a Navajo anything such as a match, cigar-
ette, pencil or even a stick of candy never point toward him.

It is improper to enter a hogan and pass on the north side
of a fire; always pass on the left side when entering.



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Navajos do not show their affection in public. Men and women do not kiss but a mother will kiss her baby. Newlyweds are sometimes seen to give each other a fleeting look of adoration or a gentle nudge.

Navajos are cleaner than other primitive tribes. Before and after taking long journeys they take sweat baths. After taking these baths they jump into cold water or have it thrown on them. If water is scarce they will roll in dry sand or snow.

Sweat-hogans are built in the same fashion as their homes, only much smaller and there is no hole in the roof. Hot stones are placed inside and water poured on them to create steam.

When passing hot stones from a fire outside to the sweat-hogan sticks are used. An iron shovel is taboo.

While taking sweat baths a given number of songs are sung to govern the duration of the baths.



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Both men and women are very modest. When a man and his wife take a sweat bath together, and they sometimes do, the man wears a g-string and the woman a small apron.

Navajo women consider it immodest to expose more of their leg than the top of their shoe when mounting a horse. They consider it an indecent posture for a women to cross her legs when sitting in a chair.

The squaw dance is a get-together and a social event with the Navajos. Originally it was a war dance celebrating a victory or a call to battle. The dance lasts for three nights and is held in a different place each night; usually fifteen or twenty miles apart.

Only unmarried women dance at squaw dances. The men furnish the music by beating a drum and singing.

At these dances the women choose their partners and do all the dancing. The woman does not face her partner but holds to the rear waistband of his trousers; the man simply stands and pivots. The woman dances in a circle around him, and she dances backwards. An old Indian trader describes it as a cross between an Irish jig and a double shuffle. Their latest dance is just an arm and arm promenade with both parties using any fancy steps they may like.

A girl's method of selecting her partner is simply to stalk him in the crowd and grab him. If he doesn't want his clothes torn he had better go willingly. Singers in the group who are furnishing the music are immune, but if one leaves this group he becomes legitimate prey.





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At the end of the ceremony the girl has a race with younger boys. The boys are discouraged by their elders from winning by being told that if they win they will be the first to grow old.

Navajo courtship consists principally in just talking it over; petting is not indulged in. With oldtime Navajos the fathers of the bride and bridegroom would get together and make arrangements for a wedding ceremony. A gift of livestock or jewelry was expected from the bridegroom's family but this was offset by the bride's family standing the expense of the wedding ceremony.

Navajos do not sell their daughters but are very choicy about whom they marry. The fewer poor relations a young man has the more acceptable he is as a son-in-law.

In all ceremonies the Navajos use a round shallow basket. This is often called a wedding basket because eating cornmeal from this basket is the main part of a Navajo wedding.

After a wedding ceremony the bride and the bridegroom sit in the west side of the hogan and face east. Some headman in the community who is known for his wisdom tells in detail what are the duties of a man and his wife. Any young couple, red or white, could profit by one of these lectures.

When a young Navajo marries he establishes his home with his in-laws. A new hogan is built for the newlyweds.

It is taboo for a Navajo to speak to his mother-in-law or meet her face to face. This is sometimes overcome when a widow has a marriageable daughter by marrying the widow first and then the daughter.

In olden times the Navajos were polygamous and even today a second wife is not rare.

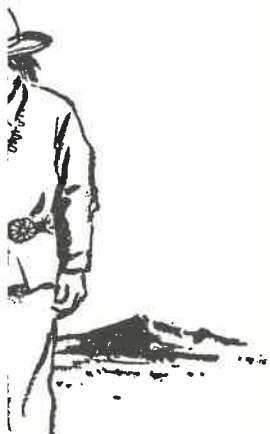
Navajos do not believe in intermarrying no matter how distant the relationship. They say that cohabitation between relatives will cause the offenders to go crazy

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The training a Navajo child receives before he reaches school age is a credit to any race or creed. Respect for his elders, moderation, industry, truthfulness, and morals are stressed.

Navajo children seldom have dolls; they play with pets instead, dogs, cats, and lambs, but their favorite is a baby goat.

Navajo mothers have full jurisdiction over their children. If a mother dies her family has the first claim on her children even if the father wishes to keep them.

Navajos love their children and seldom whip them. Sometimes they are punished by having water thrown on them. Navajo children seldom cry unless they are sick, hurt, or frightened.

When dividing property among children, Navajo parents do not show any discrimination between boys and girls.

Navajos have myths about all living creatures—their habits and creation. These are told as bedtime stories for children, but only during winter months.

Navajo fathers encourage their sons to take long runs in the morning, and roll in the snow when naked. This gives them endurance and inures them to hardships.

The modesty of Navajo girls is preserved from infancy; they are clothed in blouses and long skirts like mothers. Boys



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Instead of using pockets and purses many Navajo women women tie small possessions to the fringes of their belts.

In some districts unmarried Navajo girls tie sleigh bells to the fringes of their belts.

Navajo belles buy mirrors and inspect them very carefully—but always from the back side. It would be unladylike indeed to view oneself in public.

Navajo men still wear bowguards. They are ornamented with silver and many are set with turquoise. In olden times they were used as a protection against the bowstring, today as ornaments.

Moccasins made by the Navajos are not ornamented with beads, they are made for service. These moccasins are probably the best made by any Indian tribe in the United States. Before being worn they are buried in damp sand overnight, then dried on the feet. This makes them firm and form fitting.

Navajos seldom go barefooted away from home unless it is raining or muddy. This is done to preserve their moccasins.



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Navajos rarely smoke pipes. The average white man uses five times as much tobacco as a Navajo.

Indian traders find Navajos, if they know their ability to pay, better credit risks than whites. There is no law by which a trader can compel a Navajo to pay a debt so long as he is on the Reservation. Navajos seldom take advantage of this; they pay if they can.

In remote districts on the Reservation the credit system is still much in vogue, often extending over a period of six months or a year.

Navajo women do most of the trading for provisions and domestic supplies, but where large amounts are involved a man usually takes the leading part.

A Navajo will often help in an advisory capacity when his wife is making purchases but his advice is rejected about as often as it is taken, especially if it is his own money that is being spent.

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Plant when the moon is new and harvest when it is full says the Navajo.

very noticeable in cornmeal ground in this manner, no doubt accounts for the worn off teeth of many old Navajos.

A favorite food with Navajos is fried bread which is made with flour, baking powder, salt, and water. A stiff dough is made, patted into thin cakes, and fried in deep fat. For days at a time many families will have nothing but this to eat. This bread and a little weak coffee seems to satisfy them.

Navajos say: "Never eat the smallest lobe of a goat's liver if you wish to keep your friends. Never eat the tip of a goat's heart; it shows disrespect for the herd and weakens its strength."

It is said by the old Navajos that what one eats before noon is what makes him fat. Tough meat is better for one because it stays with a person longer.

Old-time Navajos practice fasting; even when a family has no food for several days it does not seem to cause them any hardship or worry.

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men. Those who own livestock have a summer and a winter range and use the same location each year. Very few have barns or sheds for their livestock.

Although the tribe own many cattle they have no milk cows; however, many keep milk goats. Hogs are almost unknown on the Reservation. There are a few chickens but one trader says they keep them as the roosters serve as an alarm clock.

Livestock is not owned collectively by a Navajo family. Each sheep in the flock has an individual owner; often some of the owners are small children or children away from home attending school.

A Navajo woman knows each sheep in her flock even when there are as many as one hundred. She seldom counts them but if one is missing it is immediately noticed. If two flocks get mixed, and they sometimes do at watering places, the women have little trouble in separating them.

The old Navajo sheep is the only breed of its kind in the United States. They were brought to this country by the early Spanish. Many of them have four horns. Most of them are white, but some are black and others are various shades of brown and gray.

Weavers of Navajo rugs prefer the wool of this sheep, for it is easily prepared and makes better rugs. Instead of washing this wool weavers often clean and bleach it with a white clay.

In 1930 a U. S. census taker reported that a Navajo had a herd of about a dozen antelope confined in an isolated canyon near Navajo Mountain and was treating them the same as domesticated animals.

Navajo women own most of the flocks; the men most of the horses and cattle.

A Navajo's wealth is rated in sheep, cattle, horses, silver jewelry, and turquoise.

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the form of silver jewelry which the Navajo loves so dearly. Concho belts, bracelets, buttons, beads, rings, and silver mountings for bridles were the articles mostly made.

Navajos could pawn their jewelry for as much as its silver contents. A concho belt that contained twenty silver dollars could be pawned for twenty dollars. Buttons made from dimes and quarters were accepted at face value. Later, Mexican pesos were imported and sold to the Navajos for making jewelry. They were cheaper and traders could sell them for a profit. Since 1930 traders have been getting their silver from smelters and refiners and supplying the Navajo's needs. This silver comes in one ounce slugs and other forms and has the same silver contents as U. S. coins.

A Navajo silversmith can tell the purity of the silver he works almost as well as an assayer. Navajos are as well known for their silver jewelry, as they are for their rugs.

Before the turn of the century there were many Navajos on the Reservation who were skilled workers in iron. Today there are none known who follow this trade; however, silversmiths still make some of their tools and all the dies they use in stamping their silver.

The first wagons given to the Navajos by the Government were dismantled and the iron and wood salvaged. The iron and wood in a wagon had a greater value to them than a means of transportation.

The secrets of the Navajos' success as silversmiths are industry, patience, good eyesight, steady nerves, and creative artistic ability.

When casting silver Navajos use a white porous rock for a mold. The design of the article wanted is carved in the rock and the molten metal is poured into the mold.

Navajos value turquoise more than any other precious stone. Turquoise has a religious significance to them as well as being worn for jewelry. A diamond is just a white rock



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Navajos have a legend that they learned the art of weaving from the Spider Woman, legendary goddess, but the art was undoubtedly borrowed from Pueblo neighbors who were excellent weavers.

Practically all Navajo women who live on the Reservation can weave. Girls and boys are given little oral instructions in weaving and silversmithing; they learn by watching.

Without help most Navajo women shear, wash, card, spin, and weave the wool from their own sheep into Navajo rugs. Preparing the yarn for a Navajo rug requires as much time and skill as weaving. Wool is often spun and respun several times before it becomes the proper size and texture for weaving.

Many Navajo families depend on the proceeds received from rug weaving to buy most of their necessities. If a Navajo man has a job he shares his earnings with his wife quite as willingly as she shares her earnings with him. When work is plentiful and close by the Reservation there is a noticeable slump in the rug production.

Although the Navajos know about the spinning wheel and could buy them, they prefer to use their fingers and a slender stick when spinning their yarn—a method of spinning and weaving used by the prehistoric cliff dwellers a thousand years ago.

There is nothing complicated about the weaving of an ordinary Navajo rug but it takes years of training and much skill and patience before a woman becomes a first class weaver.

The most remarkable thing about a Navajo rug is that the weaver has no drawn pattern or design. After forming a picture of the pattern in her mind she weaves it into a rug.

A weaver's yardstick is so many spans plus so many widths of her fingers.

The weave and design of many Navajo rugs identifies them as coming from certain districts. Even some families

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was to run them in relays until the deer was exhausted. It was then either strangled or smothered.

Buckskins which have been pierced by bullets or arrows are not used for ceremonial purposes. The skins used are those that have been obtained from a deer killed by a lion, bear, or wolf, or one that has been caught in a chase.

When tanning buckskin, Navajos leave the hair on the ears, tails, and hocks. They have a special pit in which they deposit the hair from the deer hides which they tan.

Navajos prize the buffalo above all other animals, sometimes paying as much as one hundred dollars for a single hide. Every part of the buffalo is considered strong medicine.

Feathers from the bluebird and yellow warbler are prized by medicine men. These feathers should be obtained without shedding blood.

Navajos prefer the feathers of the bald eagle to those of the golden eagle.

The eagle trap used by the old Navajos was a pit dug in the ground and covered over. A live rabbit was used as a decoy. The Navajo concealed himself in the pit and when the eagle swooped down to grasp its prey the Navajo would catch the eagle by the feet with his bare hands.

It is estimated that every tenth Navajo man is either a medicine man or is studying to be one. Innumerable chants must be memorized (they must be letter perfect) and many other things must be learned before his services are in demand.

Ancient myths of the Navajos emphasize the fact that medicine men must be paid for their efforts.

Medicine men are not general practitioners but specialize in certain ailments and make medicine for them only. Some have a hand-trembling rite to diagnose certain diseases and



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Navajos hold a ceremony for the entire family to prevent lightning from striking any one of them.

A Navajo who has survived after being struck by lightning is immune to most of their taboos. Being killed by lightning is a death feared most by Navajos.

Oldtime Navajos wear a turquoise bead in their hair to avoid being struck by lightning. If lightning strikes close to a group of Navajos, it is ignored and the occurrence is not mentioned.

Hogans and corrals that have been struck by lightning are not to be used until a ceremony is held to banish evil spirits.

Navajos have six cardinal points to remember in all their ceremonies: east, south, west, north, up, and down. All points are represented by different colors.

In certain healing ceremonies Navajo medicine men and their assistants work all day making a beautiful symbolic picture with colored sands on the floor of a hogan. Every detail of this picture must be perfect and done from memory. The picture must be erased and the sands scattered before sundown.

One of the legendary gods of the Navajos, a hunchback, is pictured in many of their sandpaintings. The sun, the earth, and the rainbow are shown in some. The sun is pictured as a male, the earth as a female, and the rainbow bisexual. Women never witness a sandpainting while it is being made.

Any unpleasant occurrence or serious accident during one of the nine-day ceremonies ends the ritual and all the previous good accomplished is undone.

If there is an eclipse of the sun or moon during a ceremony, the ceremony is stopped until the eclipse is over. They say that the planets are dead and that the sun and moon are



Navajos are not afraid to die but they have a great fear of dead people. If possible they will get a trader or a missionary to bury their dead and both day and night will avoid a place where a person has died.

Illness is much feared by the Navajos. Many of the older ones are liberal contributors to medicine men for ceremonies they perform to ward off sickness.

Many people who have lived with the Navajos for a long time believe they have the power to die at will. It is not unusual for some old Navajo to predict the exact date of his death.

When a Navajo dies his clothes are put on backwards and his moccasins are placed on opposite feet. This is done to confuse evil spirits that might want to follow him.

Navajos bury all sorts of valuables with their dead, but never weapons. Clothes owned by a dead Navajo are burned but other valuables can be retained.

For an ordinary burial four members of the same clan are necessary. For a very important person twelve mourners are required.

Attendants must strip to the breech-cloth and bathe thoroughly before touching the body or "shell" of the departed. They paint their faces with red ochre mixed with mutton tallow.

Holes are cut in the blankets used in burying; the saddle is cut and mutilated, and the shovel used in digging the grave is left at the burial site with the handle broken. These articles have been "killed" so that no one would dare use them.

When returning from burying the dead they walk backwards and brush out their tracks so that no evil spirits can follow. No one must spit, talk, or turn a stone while a body



His principal food is bad Navajos.

Navajos believe the mentally afflicted or those seriously injured have been bewitched.

The hourglass symbol when left open at one corner is the sign of a witch. If drawn on a flat rock it is a sign that the region surrounding has a curse on it.

Navajos believe that whirlwinds are caused by devils and will sing at the top of their voices if one crosses their path.

On top of Spider Rock in Canyon de Chelly a monster spider is suppose to live. His principal food is bad Navajos. Navajos with an uneasy conscience give this place a wide berth.

Navajos keep several dogs around their hogan to frighten away evil spirits.

The owl has a bad reputation. He gives false warnings and frequents the vicinity of burials.

The bear is a symbol of fear among the Navajos. In the central part of the Navajo Reservation there are two ranges of mountains, Chuska (Bear) Mountain and Black Mountain. The two are separated by a narrow valley. Chuska Mountain has many bears; on Black Mountain there are

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On his nightly prowls he often rides a coyote.

is making an important journey and a coyote crosses his path
he returns home and waits three days before starting again.

It is unlucky to throw away a grain of corn or throw
watermelon rinds in the water.

Playing with frogs is forbidden children as their legs
might become crooked.

One never steps over a sleeping person or combs his hair
at night.

A bluebird flying around a hogan sunwise is good luck.
A woodpecker rapping on the logs of a hogan is an ill omen.

Navajos believe in doing everything clockwise—they call
it sunwise—like planting corn, drawing a circle, or stirring
anything.

Navajos are very seldom left-handed. During their infancy,
when they are almost continually carried on a cradle-board,
the squaws will deliberately take them by the right hand in
lifting or assisting them onto or off their cradle-board.

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THE STORY OF TURQUOISE

Turquoise has been mined throughout the Southwest since prehistoric times and has always been a sacred stone to the Indians.

The origin of the use of turquoise is veiled in the mists of antiquity. It has always played an important role in the ceremonial dances of the Navajo and Zuni Indians. Since ancient time, unusual powers have been attributed to the turquoise. It is supposed to endow the possessor with universal esteem, and to aid him in prevailing over enemies. A successful day follows him who views the stone in the early morning. It strengthens the sight of all who behold it. Even our present day Indians are firm in their belief that turquoise is a symbol of purity, faith and happiness.

NAVAJO RUG WEAVER



From Navajo land comes the most interesting and the most famous of all native weaving — The Navajo Rug. For quality of workmanship and originality of design the Navajo excel all other aboriginal weavers. Not only is the Navajo weaver the best but she has preserved her art freest from white man's influence. Navajo rugs wear for years, are easy to care for and popular in city homes, trophy rooms, dens and in mountain cabins.