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NAVAJO NOMADISM

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THE Navajos are by far the most numerous full-blooded tribe of the Indian population of the United States and they occupy the largest continuous area of land reserved in it for Indians. An area of 22,400 square miles is included in the combined reservations for the Navajo and Hopi Indians, a territory larger than that of Holland and Belgium combined. This great block of country, particularly the part in Arizona, is difficult of access, and, in spite of a wealth of scenic marvels, most of it is scarcely touched by tourist travel which surges around it. Considerable areas are still reached only by trail. Within the area is the post office most remote from railway communication in the United States—Kayenta, 160 miles from Flagstaff, Ariz., which receives mail twice a week. The reservations are untouched by railway; roads are few and almost entirely self-made. Only one road worthy of the name traverses the country north and south; that from Gallup to Ship Rock on the San Juan River, a distance of 90 miles—the only gravel surfaced road in the Navajo country. From Ship Rock, fairly good roads extend northward and eastward up the San Juan into Colorado. Other roads lead to the agency centers at Crown Point, N. Mex., Fort Defiance, Keams Canyon, and Tuba, Ariz. These are worked on and are usually passable or even good. The Navajos, women and children as well as men, are much in the saddle, and travel is largely on horseback. The Navajos have few wagons as compared with other Indian tribes; but a few of the wealthiest have cars, especially around Ship Rock, where road connections offer the inducement and a few oil wells afford the means.

THE NAVAJO COUNTRY

The Navajo country is a land striking in color, with grandeur of scale and form; but, for all its scenic interest, it is a poor country, and its chief resource is natural forage. Even that, judged by the standards of more humid lands, is poor enough. In spite of diversity in physical features, climate, and grazing conditions, all the reservation areas in a broad sense show common features resultant of an arid or semiarid climate controlling the denudation of an area of great relief, with also a dominance of resistant sedimentary strata,

Black Mesa. The Navajos who live there do not move off the mesa but make a circuit in summer, returning always to their winter hogan. Each clan has its definite grazing grounds and water holes which are respected by the others. The high, steep escarpment that borders the northern sides of the mesa prevents free movement from it in that direction.

The Indians of the Chinle Valley remain there until the corn harvest in October, then they move off to the margins of Defiance Plateau or of the Black Mesa. Some seventy-five or eighty Indians go for the summer into the Canyon De Chelly, which opens into the valley at Chinle. The canyon is famed for its towering walls of red sandstone. Its bottom is flat, of deep sand, and, except after heavy rains, dry; but water may invariably be found a short distance below the surface. In places the bottom is high and stable enough to support corn patches upon which the Indians depend.

Little patches of peach trees are also found in Canyon De Chelly, about the only place where they are cared for by the Navajos. The seedlings were originally brought in by the Spanish padres. The fruit is fine and of unique flavor; it does not ripen until late in September or early in October, when the Navajos go to the canyon in numbers.

During the peach season at the Hopi Mesas the Navajos come from twenty-five or thirty miles around to trade mutton or goat's meat for peaches. The Hopi women watch for their coming from the mesa heights, as eager to secure the meat as the Navajos are to secure the peaches. The Navajos stay around the mesas for some time eating as many peaches as they can. They also trade for the dried fruit, and the medicine men take a large quantity away to use for purgatives.

In the country of the washes, between the Black Mesa and the Little Colorado River, fuel is distant; and many of the Indians who farm along the Polacco Wash remain through the winter. Hopi Indians will spend three days in getting a load of fuel, but the Navajos have less patience. They are therefore dependent upon the light greasewood brush as the only available fuel, and in the severe weather their suffering is sometimes acute. At such times the children can be seen dragging in greasewood all day long. It is burned outside the hogans to get rid of the smoke, and the hot coals are taken indoors. In the distressing winter of 1918 these people died like flies, victims of influenza and the severe cold.

Some of the people of the washes go east to the Hopi Butte country in the winter. Although the grazing here is not so good as along the lower washes, some juniper grows on top of the buttes and mesas, and springs emerge from underneath the basalt that caps them. Most of the Indians living here move about within the area.