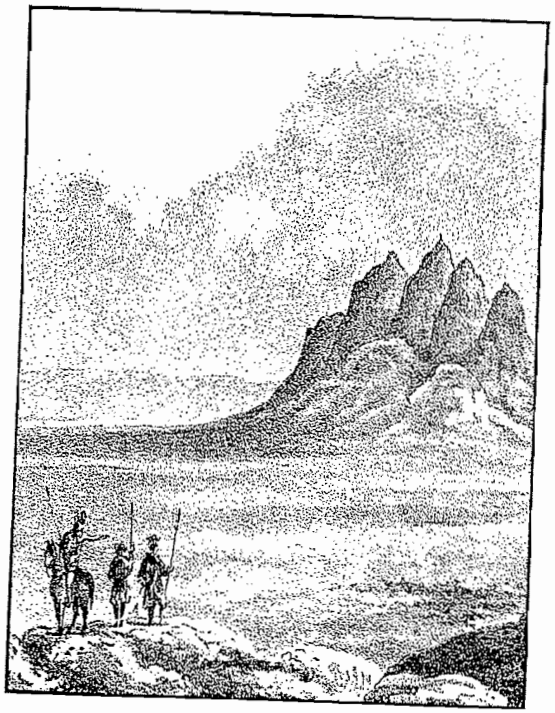

NAVAHO EXPEDITION

JOURNAL OF A
MILITARY RECONNAISSANCE
FROM SANTA FE, NEW MEXICO
TO THE NAVAHO COUNTRY
MADE IN 1849 BY
Lieutenant James H. Simpson

Edited and Annotated
by Frank McNitt

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BY FRANK MCNITT

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THIS BOOK
IN FRIENDSHIP, RESPECT,
AND GOOD MEMORIES,
IS FOR JUAN—

John Arrington

at the Henry E. Huntington Library for her assistance in making available copies of documents from the Fort Sutter Papers collection, and to Robert O. Dougan for granting permission to use these documents and other materials in the library's collection. These same materials previously were consulted by Robert V. Hine. I wish to acknowledge the pioneering use Mr. Hine has made of these documents and the guidance I have derived from his biography, *Edward Kern and American Expansion.*

Annie Heloise Abel's *The Official Correspondence of James S. Calhoun* has been a major source of information—as invaluable to me in this work as it has been in the past. In nearly the same measure I am indebted to the late Richard Van Valkenburgh, and to John Adair, whose writing in closely parallel fields I have drawn upon freely.

Captions accompanying the drawings by Richard Kern are those which he used.

Frank McNitt

NORTH WOODSTOCK, CONNECTICUT
FEBRUARY 24, 1964

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to revenge themselves for a recent defeat recieved from our troops in which they lost many lives [and] all of their horses and camp equipage—attacked the Ranchos of two rich Navijos living on the south side of the Rio San Juan, killing them both, capturing their children, and running off one hundred head of horses. This has produced a panick in all their farming operations for the present and caused the rich to flee to the mountains with their women, children, flocks & herds, where they have concentrated in a body for mutual protection.

"It is impossible to say what will be the result of this war. The Utahs have fine rifles, live by the chase, and are the most war like tribe in New Mexico. The Navijos have but few guns of inferior quality, live by the cultivation of the soil and the produce of their flocks and herds and are not war like, and if this war is persisted in without prompt and efficient aid is recieved by them from our Government, must fall an easy prey to the Utahs.

"A treaty will be made in the early part of next month with them by Gov. D. Meriwether at which Genl. Garland, the commanding officer of this military department has assured me he will be present, & that the Navijos shall have every assistance against their enemies that it is possible for him to give. That a friendly visit to the heart of their country by the Governor and the Genl. commanding the Military arm of our Government in this Territory will have a happy influence upon these people and secure a treaty of limits and friendship which will last for years, I have every reason to believe.

"A liberal and enlightened policy towards this tribe for a few years will fix their destiny as an agricultural, manufacturing, and stock raising community. That these results can be speedily attain by them no person will doubt who is acquainted with their habits of industry, temperance, and ingenuity. . . .

"P. S. I will make monthly reports in future as requested by the department."

On the same day that Dodge steeled himself to the task of penning this letter, Meriwether wrote to the commissioner that "The Navajos are quiet and I expect to start on a visit to their

country in a few days, for the purpose of negotiating a treaty with them." If solely on the basis of these two letters and Dodge's evident enthusiasm for the projected treaty and Meriwether's apparent lack of it, we have reason to suspect that it was the agent, not the Governor, who initiated the council. Also it should be mentioned here that until now the Navaho treaty of July, 1855, has remained in obscurity, forgotten or overlooked in written accounts or records of the territory. The treaty, nevertheless, though never ratified by Congress, was of far greater importance to the Navahos and their white neighbors than the treaties of Colonel Washington and Colonel Doniphan—more important because, for the first time, tribal boundaries were proposed and agreed to; because, through Henry Dodge's insistence, specific promises were made by the government to reward the Navahos with needed tools; and because this was the first Navaho treaty signed by truly representative leaders of the tribe in an atmosphere entirely clear of military coercion.

It is a lasting misfortune that Richard Kern or another artist of his talent could not have been present to record the scene in pencil sketches and water color. For the council at Laguna Negra—in the swarm of Indians present, the flash and movement of weapons and people and animals, of camp equipage and of bright-hued costumes—all of this, in a setting of great natural beauty, was one of the overwhelming pictorial moments of the old West in its supreme, barbaric splendor.

Two thousand Navahos, by Dodge's estimate, riding from all directions, gathered at Laguna Negra and went into camp for three days. By day, there was ceaseless motion, a tumult of sound, a pungent odor everywhere of wood smoke and of mutton and corn cakes frying on coals or baking under white-hot ashes; by night, a blackness, a yelping dog, a chanting voice trailing off in distance, a settling stillness. The valley where this great gathering was held stands high in clear mountain air, some twenty-five miles north of Fort Defiance and four miles west of present Crystal, on the western approach to Washington Pass. Black Lake—Laguna Negra—is a sky-mirroring pool fed by springs and

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flood run-off of Crystal Wash, a jewel centered in lush grasslands that reach out in all directions but south to encircling mountains. Here, in the fall of 1863, Kit Carson sent Captain John Thompson to establish a grazing camp that would subsist the horses of his command during the final roundup and subjugation of the Navaho tribe.

On the first day of the assemblage the council was nearly disrupted before it started when Delgadito (*Chách'osh nez*—Tall Syphilis), who five years before as a renegade had joined in a Mexican attack against the *Diné,* started a blustering demonstration against Governor Meriwether and his escort. Delgadito and his small band of followers were surrounded and jostled aside by cooler heads, among them the young Manuelito, before anyone in the Governor's party was harmed. For a few moments it had seemed that the emotions stirred by Delgadito's actions could have ended in disaster; instead, the swiftness with which the dissident chief was overwhelmed showed the strong desire of most of the Navahos for peace.

When quiet had been restored, Zarcillas Largo, Armijo, and the other principal chiefs gathered in front of Governor Meriwether's tent, a great crowd of warriors pressing in as closely as they could to hear what was said. The Governor observed that of all the tribe's headmen, only Sandoval, now head of a band of about a hundred of the *Diné Ana'aii,* was absent. He noticed, too, that only a few women and children had come with the men to the council ground, and these now remained out of hearing and tending to the horses and camp fires.

"I have come here," Meriwether began, "to meet the Navajos and am glad to see as many present. I am glad the Navajos and the whites have been at peace so long a time, and hope they will remain at peace. I have come to see you to agree upon a country the Navajos and whites may each have, that they may not pasture their flocks on each others' lands. If we have a dividing line so that we know what each others' country is, it will keep us at peace. I will explain the kind of a treaty I desire to make with you; and when I am through I want you to council with each

other whether you will agree to such a treaty, and want an answer in the morning."

Meriwether spoke now, as on the two ensuing days, with the aid of two interpreters. Through them, he outlined the treaty proposals, concluding: "These are the propositions I have to make to you, and want you to talk them over, and let me know whether you agree to them, when we meet again in the morning."[31]

Morning brought with it a dramatic surprise. Dodge and Meriwether were notified by the agency interpreter, Juan Anaya, that Zarcillas Largo intended to resign as the tribe's war chief. (Zarcillas Largo was presumably sincere enough at the time and meant to abdicate. The fact is, the Navahos continued to regard him as their principal chief, and did so until his death. This occurred in the spring of 1862, when, according to Van Valkenburgh and McPhee, he "was killed by the Zunis when he walked into an ambush between Klagetoh and Wide Ruins.") The immediate concern was the effect his withdrawal at this critical moment might have upon the council. His successor, if hotheaded, might lead the Navahos back to war.

Zarcillas Largo made his decision known in this way: he sent, Meriwether reported, "a staff of office and medal presented to him by Governor Calhoun with a message, to the effect that he was too old to govern his people, and that he desired to resign his office." Having no alternative, Meriwether agreed to this. He asked that the other head men meet promptly in council and choose one of their number as Largo's successor. Manuelito, then about thirty-seven years old and yet untouched by the thirst for *todiłhił*—whisky—which in time ruined him, was the man chosen.

[31] "Notes of a talk between Governor Meriwether and the Chiefs, Head Men, and Captains of the Navajo Indians, held at Laguna Negra, July 16–18, 1855." This and related documents were enclosed by Meriwether in a letter to Commissioner Manypenny on July 27. The actual treaty draft is missing from the file. National Archives, Indian Records. New Mexico Superintendency, 1854–55, Letters Received, Micro. Roll 547.

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Any fears that Manuelito might disrupt the peace council were settled in the afternoon, when the chiefs again met with the Governor. The discussion opened harmoniously:

"GOVERNOR: Yesterday I made known the terms of the proposed treaty and I now want to know whether you all agree to [the] terms.

"MANUELITO: We are content with what you have proposed, and will agree to the terms you have mentioned.

"GOVERNOR: I will now have the terms of the treaty reduced to writing, so that we cannot forget what it contains.

"MANUELITO: It is all good."

Gifts of tobacco were distributed. The chiefs sat smoking, as Meriwether's secretary, W. W. H. Davis, transcribed the treaty terms. Manuelito broke the silence, asking one of the interpreters to tell the Governor that the Navahos regretted Delgadito's actions the day before, that "We are sorry our people treated you badly. . . . I was ashamed to show myself." He said this, he explained, as the man chosen to replace Zarcillas Largo—as the new chief of all of the Navahos. Meriwether replied that the previous day's threats were forgotten, that only a few of the younger men had acted badly. Then to an interpreter he said: "Ask those assembled if they are willing that Manuelito shall have the staff of office and medal that Largas delivered to me. Those in favor will hold up their hands." When this was translated, all in the listening circle lifted their hands.

Twice, as Meriwether proceeded to read the treaty terms to them, Manuelito raised objections. He objected first as the interpreter explained the new boundaries of the Navaho country. The *Diné*, he said, "claimed a much larger country . . . that they were in the habit of going to Mount Palonia [the Carrizo Mountains: shown on the Parke-Kern map as *Cerro de la Paloma*] and another mountain, the name of which is forgotten, to worship the spirits of their fathers, and some were loth to give those mountains up." Also, Manuelito said, the proposed southern boundary would prevent his people from continuing to get salt, as they had always done in the past, from the dry salt lake south of Zuñi.

An air of uncertainty moved through the council as Manuelito spoke and became even more noticeable when Meriwether showed the chiefs a copy of the Parke-Kern map, which he and Henry Dodge had used in planning the reservation limits. Markings on the map to the Navahos were merely white man's witchcraft—meaningless. The Governor put the map down. Manuelito was mistaken, he said. The Carrizo Mountains were "within the proposed reservation and [he] said he hoped that this one sacred mountain would be sufficient." Further, while the salt lake below Zuñi was not within the reservation "he would grant them the privilege of gathering salt as they desired" and would pay the tribe in tools and goods for all of the country they relinquished.

The tribe's eastern boundary—and this was of greatest importance— approximated the line of the Continental Divide. On the Parke-Kern map the line was drawn diagonally from the *Cañada del O Amarillo* (Largo Canyon in northwestern New Mexico) to the headwaters of the Zuñi River (below present Gallup, New Mexico).[32] From the standpoint of natural geography the boundary made sense; in terms of the Navaho people it was totally unrealistic. The new diagonal proposed to abolish a large wedge of country held for generations by the Diné, including Lieutenant Simpson's newly-named Mount Taylor, which probably was the second of Manuelito's two sacred mountains. Meriwether later estimated that the proposed reservation contained about seven thousand square miles—no bargain for the Navahos, he admitted to Commissioner Manypenny, as "the entire reservation does not contain over one hundred and twenty five or thirty square miles susceptible of cultivation, and this in small detached portions."

[32] *Ibid.* In his July 27 letter to Manypenny, Meriwether said: "To enable you to understand the eastern boundary of their reservation, refer to Parke's map of New Mexico which I enclosed to you during the last winter, then draw a line from the head of the Armarillo to the head of Zuñi river or creek, which will give you the true position of the ridge which divides the waters of the Rio Grande from those of the the San Juan, which is a well defined boundary, well understood by the Indians."

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How clearly the Navahos understood these things at the moment is impossible to say, but after some consultation among themselves Manuelito and the other chiefs said they would accept the boundaries. Not long afterward they disavowed this agreement, and Navahos whose hogans were on the Río Grande side of the eastern limit paid no attention to it.

Manuelito objected a second time as Meriwether finished reading the ninth and final article of the treaty. His objection was to the proposal that the Navahos should be responsible for capturing and surrendering any of their number who committed depredations. Manuelito spoke sombrely of the Navaho recently captured and hanged for killing the Fort Defiance soldier. This incident had been very unpleasant to his people, he said. Navahos "attempting such a thing did so at the risk of their lives, and [they] would rather that the Americans would come and take such men themselves."

Meriwether pressed the point. If Americans went into Navaho country to arrest wrong-doers, he said, "they would not know the guilty or bad men from the innocent and good, and . . . the latter would probably suffer for the bad deeds of the former, and he must insist on this provision."

Once more the chiefs grudgingly gave their assent—and again, in short time the treaty provision proved entirely unworkable. This "policing" proposal was an extension of Articles IV and V of Colonel Washington's treaty with the Navahos, and visionary still by some twenty years.

The treaty of Laguna Negra was signed the following day, July 18. What misgivings or hopes for it were entertained by Henry Dodge we may only conjecture. He apparently believed that the Navahos were satisfied with the boundary limits.[33] Perhaps he put more store than he should have in the relatively

[33] "The country included in the boundary assigned them by the commissioner is amply sufficient for their purposes of stock raising and farming and is larger than they anticipated, which caused them to returne to their homes very much delighted with the liberal treatment." *Ibid.*, Dodge to Manypenny, August 2, 1855.

generous and specific promises of goods to be paid to the tribe—promises fulfilled in part before the council broke up by a lavish distribution of knives, tools, trinkets, and bright bolts of cloth. The treaty otherwise, except for one undetected thorn, contained the usual solemn protestations of the White Father's provisional good will and protection and mutual assurances of everlasting amity and brotherhood.

The thorn in this uneasy bower was lance-sharp. Henry Dodge was soon to feel its point when Manuelito belatedly decided that grazing land ceded for Fort Defiance horses would, after all, continue to be used by Navaho horses and sheep. But for a few months more the issue was not raised.

Through the remainder of the summer Henry Dodge traveled through the Navaho country, visiting "all of their principal planting grounds," reporting that a bountiful harvest was in prospect, and that the Navahos, although skirmishing with Paiutes and Apaches, were still at peace with the whites.

In early August he appealed to Commissioner Manypenny for funds or equipment to provide flour mills for the tribe. "The Navijos are greatly in want of a few or at least two mills," he wrote, "built after the Mexican fashion, which would not cost, including the transportation of the stones from the Riograndy to this point, more than one hundred and fifty dollars each. This would enable them to have flour and meal instead of useing the grain in its entire state."[34] There is nothing to indicate that the mills were supplied.

Among a few of the Navaho men, Dodge noticed, there was a developing talent for a new craft—blacksmithing. With crude tools they made for themselves from scrap metal or obtained in trade from Mexican settlements, these Navahos were producing remarkable results. Again Dodge appealed to the commissioner. "If the treaty [of Laguna Negra] is confirmed," he wrote, "I respectfully suggest . . . that the Navijos may be furnished with four sets of blacksmith tools and one thousand pounds of iron. They have eighteen native blacksmiths who work with the hand

[34] *Ibid.*

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