The Role Of The Navajo In The Southwestern Drama

By Robert W. Young

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Dedicated to the memory of Narbona. His role in the drama was fleeting but the brief glimpse afforded by recorded history portrays him in all his greatness as a mid-19th Century war chief, statesman and devotee of peace.

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San Mateo (the northwest slopes of Mt. Taylor), the Cebolleta Mountains (northeast from Laguna Pueblo), the Chuska Mountains (north of Gallup), Bear Springs (Fort Wingate) and Canyon de Chelly.

The Cebolleta Navajos, perhaps because of their proximity to the settlements, found themselves in somewhat the same circumstances as the Puebloans in their relationship to the Spaniards. Willingly or unwillingly they often acted as intermediaries between the Spaniards and the Navajos living farther west and sometimes accompanied Spanish raiders. It was they who became the Dine Ana'i — the Enemy Navajos.

During the period 1753 - 1768 the first Spanish land grants were made in the area between the Puerco River (west of Albuquerque) and Mt. Taylor. Several of these grants embraced lands claimed and occupied by the Navajos. As a result, there was friction and, by 1774, the Navajos and Apaches drove the Spaniards out of these land grants (Reeve, 1960).

The last quarter of the 18th Century was turbulent and for a brief period the Navajos were allied with the Gila Apache. Raids were carried out against Abiquiu, Albuquerque and a number of pueblos.

In 1786 peace was made at a council called by Governor de Anza, and the Spaniards began to pay a "salary" to the Navajo chiefs with whom they were now allied in fighting the Apaches! At the same time, the Spanish urged the friendly Navajos to themselves take the initiative in subduing those who were unfriendly (Thomas: "Forgotten Frontiers").

Like his predecessors in centuries past, Anza subscribed to the "divide and conquer" approach in controlling hostile Indians. He managed to break up the Navajo-Gila Apache alliance temporarily and turn the Navajos against their former allies (Reeve), and now, as part of the 1786 peace pact, he wanted to turn one segment of the tribe against another. However, before the turn of the century, the Navajos and the Apaches were re-united and the de Anza scheme failed.

After the opening of the 19th Century, Navajo raids gained momentum with more than 200 warriors involved in an attack on Cebolleta on April 24, 1804 (Brugge).

It was in that year that the Spanish military refused to permit Navajos to settle near Cebolleta, taking the position that "they shall have no claim to Cebolleta. They shall not go beyond the Canon de Juan Tafoya, Rio del Oso and San Mateo" (Bancroft).

To halt Navajo raids, Lt. Narbona pursued the raiding parties and finally, in 1805, his troops defeated the Indians in Canyon de Chelly. It was on this occasion that a raiding party composed of Spaniards and Zunis, under a Lt. Chacon, massacred a group of some 70 Navajo women and children in a cave located in Canon del Muerto. According to the Navajo account, the able - bodied men were away on a hunting expedition in the Lukachukai Mountains at the time of the arrival of the Spanish troops. The women, children and old people took refuge in the cave and might well have survived had an old woman not made a fatal error.

Van Valkenburgh tells the story of the cave, now known as Massacre Cave, in his "Dine Bikeyah."

He said, "One party of Spaniards followed the west rim of the Canon del Muerto as far as the head of Trail the Mexican Came Down, while another party stayed up on the rim to cover their descent and march down the canyon. Upon reaching the base of the talus slide, the Spanish and Zunis attacked, but were driven back by Navajo stones and arrows. The party on top could not locate the Navajos until an old woman, not realizing that a party was on the rocks above, screamed curses at the attackers below.

"The Navajo position thus betrayed, the Spanish opened fire, their heavy musket balls striking directly or ricocheting into the huddled Navajos. The marks of these balls may still be seen on the sandstone walls of the cave and a confused jumble of human skeletal material lies at the base."

III.

THE OPENING OF THE 19th CENTURY

In a Spanish document, printed in 1849 in Mexico, there is a section on the Navajo depicting Navajo life at the opening of the 19th Century. The account is entitled "Historical and Statistical Information Regarding the Ancient Province of New Mexico (Noticias Hisotricas of Estadisticas de La Antigua Provincia del Nuevo Mexico) and was presented in Cadiz in 1812 by the court deputy, D. Pedro Bautista Pino.

He states that "This nation, very much like the previous one (the Comanche) in all respects, has given itself over to farming and manufacturing . . .Although they do not plow the soil, they cultivate it with hoes made of oak or from iron which they can get from the Spanish in trade for cloth. The war which they made against us with the greatest tenacity and without any benefit whatsoever, for a period of three years, has turned them also into peaceful people; it began along about 1803-04, during the governorship of D. Fernando Chacon. The latter campaigned in person, with Captain D. Francisco Pino, D. Antonio Vargas and D. Nicholas Tarin under his command.

"They were successful in the first actions (of war), but the Navajos did not surrender on this account. Mr. Chacon left his governorship and the cam-

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paign was continued by the veteran Lt. Narvona, who by order of Mr. Salcedo, the commanding general, came to the aid of the province to join with the captains of militia D. Lorenzo Gutierrez and D. Bartolome Baca, who were engaged in fighting. Finally, after many bloody actions (battles), and after the Navajos had lost even Chell (Canyon de Chelly), their capital (which they had trenched and provided with men and arms to an amazing extent), they sued for peace in 1805. At the time D. Joaquin del Real Lancaster was governor, and they renewed the alliance that they had maintained with us years before."

Navajos Located

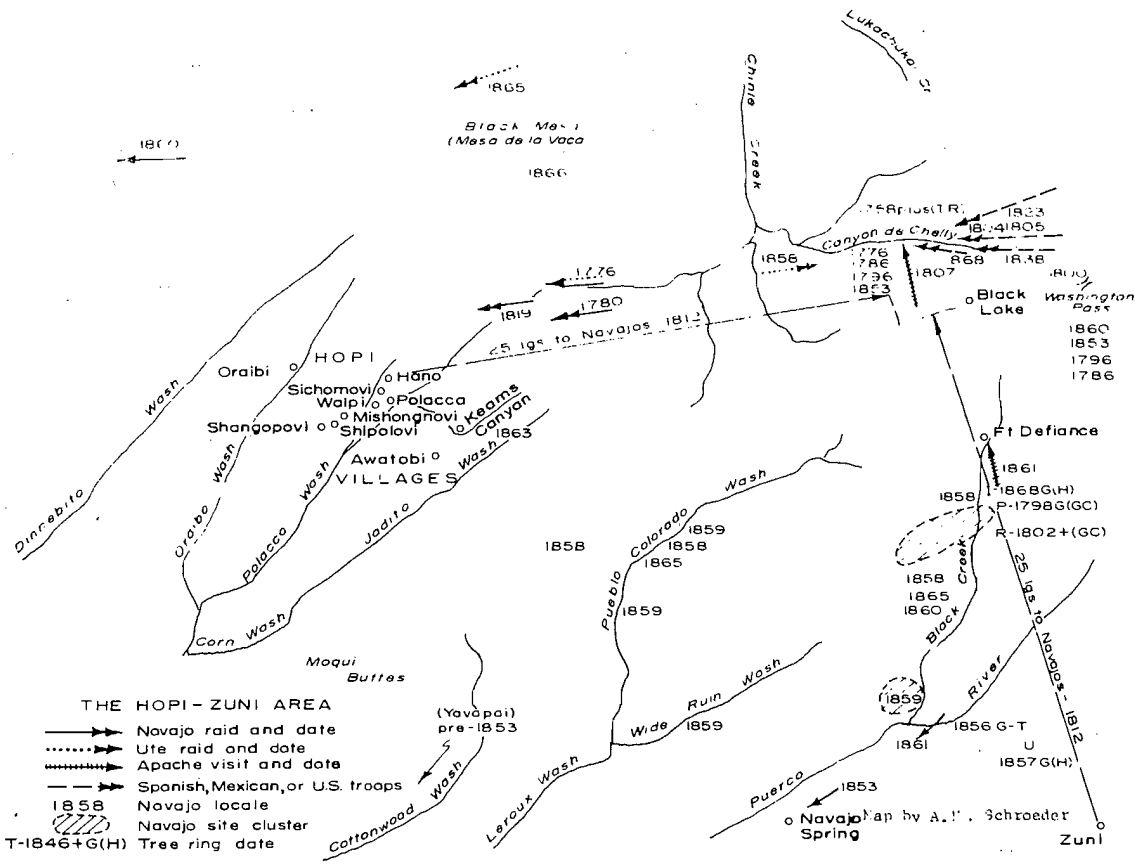
With respect to the location of the Navajo in 1805, Pino states that "this nation is 25 leagues (about 60 miles) from our borders, between the pueblos of Moqui (Hopi), Zuni and the Capital (Santa Fe). It is endowed with extremely fertile lands and rich minerals, according to those who know.

"It is already so civilized that it can do no less than join the Spanish government provided that the province grows in population—under present day circumstances they themselves (the Navajos) take note of our bonds and orphanages. . .Many of them speak Spanish and whole families of them are wont to come to live among us and embrace the Catholic religion... Their woolen textiles are the finest in our whole province and in those of Sonora and Chihuahua."

In 1805 Mexican independence from Spanish rule was just over the horizon. On Sept. 16, 1810, Fr. Miguel Hidalgo called on his Indian followers to rise in revolt against their rulers. During the remainder of the long period of Spanish rule, the Navajos were not a major concern to the Spanish government in New Mexico.

The Mexican Indians had rebelled against Spanish rule in the hope of bettering their lot but the immediate result of the effort was merely a shifting in the power of government from Spain to the non-Indian class born in Mexico. The inequalities and oppression continued unabated. Nor did the situation improve on the far New Mexican frontier. It was again an age of political adventurers and, on the frontier, one that sometimes verged on mob rule.

As an aspect of his attempts to maintain peace with the Navajos just before the turn of the century, Governor de Anza



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hit on the happy plan of having Navajo headmen as "captains" or "generals" in the Spanish army.

One such general was a prominent Navajo by the name of Antonio El Pinto, who received regular gifts from the Spanish in exchange for helping keep the peace — at least with those bands over which he had influence —until his death in 1793 at the hands of the Gila Apaches (Reeves). This practice was continued after the reins of power passed to the Mexican Republic. It was a type of bribery aimed at "buying peace," and one of its by-products was that it provided an avenue for the introduction of commodities of Spanish manufarture into Navajo culture.

Warfare Continues

During the period 1820 - 1846, Navajo raiding activity was at a high level, directed against both the Spanish settlements and the pueblos. Livestock and captives were the primary objectives. The New Mexicans, in turn, pursued the raiders to recover the stolen livestock, or undertook raids of their own against the Navajo to take livestock and captives.

Shortly after the Anglo-Americans entered the scene in 1846, estimates of the number of Ute and Navajo slaves held by the New Mexicans ranged from 1,500 to 5,000 or 6,000.

In a deposition made sometime later on July 4, 1865, chief Justice Kirby Benedict reflected the more prevalent opinion to be in excess of 2,000.

For many years, since the early times of the Conquest, Indian slaves had been bought and sold in New Mexico as well as in Old Mexico. In 1865, Justice Benedict indicated that "a likely girl no more than eight years old, healthy and intelligent, would be held at a value of $400 or more."

The Navajos apparently acquired the custom of treating captives as slaves from the Spanish. On both sides they were apparently well treated and their offspring were not in turn born into slavery —they were free men, and were absorbed into the population. In fact, after becoming accustomed to their circumstances of life, many slaves on both sides preferred to remain where they were rather than return to their own people.

The Rich and the Poor

In the course of time there had grown up in the Navajo Country an economic class system composed of "ricos" (the wealthy) on the upper rung of the ladder and the "pobres" (the poor) at the base. Many of the raiders came from the lower economic classes and indulged in war as an avenue through which to become wealthy.

The headmen were often themselves "ricos," so in the matter of peace and war, the wealthy members of the tribe were most often inclined to attempt to maintain peace on the premise that they were least likely to be reduced to poverty through reprisals when there was no war. The poor, on the other hand, were the class most likely to favor war because it offered them an opportunity to acquire property.

Over the course of time, many treaties and agreements had been made between the Navajo headmen and the Spanish, but usually they were merely promises to keep the peace. At no time was there a tribe in a political sense and, as a result, there was no one person or even a governing body which had the power to bind the entire group.

The first treaty that defined a boundary between the Spanish and the Navajos was one into which certain headmen entered in 1819. Under the terms of this agreemennt "A native general was to be appointed and live as near Jemez as possible, being responsible for the nation. The Navajo were guaranteed all their old territory to Canon Largo, the mouth of the Canon de Chaca and Agua Azue" (Bancroft).

Monument Destroyed

Monuments of stone were laid out marking this eastern boundary of the Navajo country, according to Van Valkenburgh, who states that "careful search has not located them. The Torreon Navajos state that the monument near Cabezon, N.M., was destroyed many years ago by New Mexicans. Oddly, this treaty line runs along the same eastern line asked by the Indian Department in the Navajo-New Mexico Boundary Bill of 1936."

Van Valkenburgh writes, with respect to the period 1818-1846 that "the Navajos and New Mexicans waged a relentless guerrilla warfare. The Dine Ana'i (Cebolleta Navajo) acted as spies and guides against their tribesmen. The population center was the Canyon de Chelly and westward tentacles were spreading into the lower Chinle Valley, Black Mesa, Klageto and Steamboat Canyon.

"During the 1830s, the ancestors of the Puertocito (Alamo) Navajos escaped from New Mexico slavery and settled by a large spring near present Field, N.M. Chiricahua Apaches came to join them and from these people descended the present small colony of 220 Navajos.

"Navajo shifts westward continued during the 1830 - 1840s. From the Klageto nucleus families shifted into the Steamboat Canyon region. Other groups shifted west from Black Mesa into the Shonto and Navajo Mountain country.

"Prior to this time the Strip Piutes held this region. Other groups were settling along the Little Colorado River and on Gray Mountain, which had previously been Havasupai territory. A large number of Strip

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Piutes under Chief Padawa (Bodaway) moved into the present Bodaway region and allied with the Navajos" (unpublished ms., 1941).

Recent research in connection with the land claim would appear to indicate that the far westward extension of the Navajo came somewhat later than the period 1818-1884. The period involved seems to be largely that between 1846 - 1868.

Eye Witness

One interesting eye witness account of the period of Mexican control following independence from Spain, 1821-1884, is contained in Josiah Gregg's "Commerce of the Prairies."

Gregg's first trip to the Southwest came in 1831 at which time he accompanied a party of traders from Independence, Mo., over the Santa Fe Trail to Santa Fe, N.M.

An intelligent observer, his comments give valuable insight into the turbulent Mexican period in New Mexican history. In his journal he states that "after the establishment of the national independence (of Mexico), the government of New Mexico greatly embittered the disposition of the neighboring savages, especially the Navajos, by repeated acts of cruelty and ill-faith well calculated to provoke hostilities.

"On one occasion,a party consisting of several chiefs and warriors of the Navajos assembled at the Pueblo of Cochiti by invitation of the government to celebrate a treaty of peace. When the New Mexicans, exasperated no doubt by the remembrance of former outrages, fell upon them unawares and put them all to death.

Prisoners Butchered

"It is also related that about the same period three Indians from the northern mountains having been brought as prisoners into Taos, were peremptorily demanded by the Jicarillas, who were their bitterest enemies. When the Mexican authorities, dreading the resentment of this tribe, quietly complied with the barbarous request, suffering the prisoners to be butchered in cold blood before their very eyes! No wonder, then, that the New Mexicans are so generally warred upon by their savage neighbors.

"About 15 years ago the Navajos were subjected by the energy of Col. Vizcarra, who succeeded in keeping them in submission for some time; but since that officer's departure from New Mexico, no man has been found of sufficient capacity to inspire this daring tribe either with respect or fear; so that for the last 10 years they have ravaged the country with impunity, murdering and destroying just as the humor happened to prompt them.

"When the spring of the year approaches, terms of peace are generally proposed to the government at Santa Fe, which the latter never fails to accept. This amicable arrangement enables the wily Indians to sow their crops at leisure, and to dispose of the property stolen from the Mexicans during their marauding incursions to advantage; but the close of their agricultural labors is generally followed by a renewal of hostilities, and the game of rapine and destruction is played over again.

"Toward the close of 1835, a volunteer corps, which most of the leading men in New Mexico joined, was raised for the purpose of carrying war into the territory of the Navajos.

"The latter, hearing of their approach, and anxious no doubt to save them the trouble of so long a journey, mustered a select band of their warriors, who went forth to intercept the invaders in a mountain pass where they lay concealed in an ambuscade. The valiant corps, utterly unconscious of the reception that awaited them, soon came jogging along in scattered groups indulging in every kind of boisterous mirth; when the war whoop, loud and shrill, followed by several shots, threw them all into a state of speechless consternation.

"Some tumbled off their horses with fright; others fired their muskets at random; a terrific panic had seized everybody, and some minutes elapsed before they could recover their senses sufficiently to betake themselves to their heels. Two or three persons were killed in this ridiculous engagement, the most conspicuous of whom was a Captain Hinofos, who commanded the regular troops.

"A very curious but fully authentic anecdote may not be inappropriately inserted here, in which this individual was concerned. On one occasion, being about to start on a belligerent expedition, he directed his orderly-sergeant to fill a powder flask from an unbroached keg of 25 pounds. The sergeant, having bored a hole with a gimlet and finding that the powder issued too slowly, began to look about for something to enlarge the aperture, when his eyes happily fell upon an iron poker which lay in a corner of the fireplace. To heat the poker and apply it to a hole in the keg was the work of but a few moments; when an explosion took place which blew the upper part of the building into the street, tearing and shattering everything else to atoms. Miraculous as their escape may appear, the sergeant, as well as the captain who witnessed the whole operation, remained more frightened than hurt, although they were both very severly scorched and bruised. This ingenious sergeant was afterwards Secretary of State to Governor Gonzales, of revolutionary memory, and has nearly ever since held a clerkship in some of the offices of the state, but is now captain in the regular army."

The newly born Mexican Republic had no experience in the area of democratic self-government following the successful revolution in which the new nation won its independence from

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Spain and for many years it was the scene of intense political strife as a succession of ambitious individuals struggled for the top positions in the country's government.

Last Pueblo Revolt

The disordered state of affairs reached to the frontiers and dominated the life of New Mexico in the 1830s. Josiah Gregg, in Santa Fe during the period, provides an excellent account of the last attempt of the Pueblo Indians to rebel, this time against the Mexican successors to the Spanish crown which had oppressed them for so many years.

"Since this last effort (the Pueblo Rebellion of 1681)," Gregg wrote, "the Indians have been treated with more humanity, each Pueblo being allowed a league or two of land and permitted to govern themselves. Their rancorous hatred for their conquerors, however, has never entirely subsided, yet no further outbreak took place till 1837, when they joined the Mexican insurgents in another bloody conspiracy. Sometime before these tragic events took place, it was prophesied among them that a new race was about to appear from the east to redeem them from the Spanish yoke . . .

"The truth is, the Pueblos, in every part of Mexico have always been ripe for insurrection. It is well known that the mass of the revolutionary chief Hidalgo's army was made up of this class of people. The immediate cause of the outbreak in the north, however, had its origin among the Hispano-American population. This grew chiefly out of the change of the federal government to that of Centralismo in 1835. A new governor, Col. Albino Perez, was then sent from the City of Mexico to take charge of this isolated department; which was not very agreeable to the "sovereign" people as they had previously been ruled chiefly by native governors.

"Yet while the new form of government was a novelty and did not affect the pecuniary interests of the people, it was acquiesced in; but it was now found necessary for the support of the new organization to introduce a system of direct taxation."

"These new movements took place about the beginning of August, 1837, and an immense rabble was soon gathered at La Canada (a town some 25 miles to the north of Santa Fe), among whom were to be found the principal warriors of all the northern Pueblos. Governor Perez issued orders to the alcaldes for the assembling of the militia but all that could be collected together was about 150 men, including the warriors of the pueblo of Santo Domingo.

"With this inadequate force, the governor made an attempt to march from the capital but was soon surprised by the insurgents who lay in ambush near La Canada; when his own men fled to the enemy, leaving him about 25 trusty friends to make their escape in the best way they could. Knowing that they would not be safe in Santa Fe, the refugees pursued their flight southward, but were soon overtaken by the exasperated Pueblos; when the governor was chased back to the suburbs of the city and savagely put to death . . .

"I saw them surround a house and drag from it the secretary of state, Jesus Maria Alarid, generally known by the sobriquet of El Chico. He and some other principal characters who had also taken refuge among the ranchos were soon afterward stripped and scourged, and finally pierced through and through with lances.

"On the 9th of August, about 2,000 of the insurgent mob, including the Pueblo Indians pitched their camp in the suburbs of the capital . . . A great portion of the insurgents remained in the city for about two days, during which one of their oldest leaders, Jose Gonzales of Taos, a good honest hunter but a very ignorant man, was elected for governor . . .

"As I have observed before, the most active agents in this desperate affair were the Pueblo Indians, although the insurgent party was composed of all the heterogeneous ingredients that a Mexican population teems with."

Reign Shortlived

The reign of Gov. Gonzalez was short-lived, however, for his successor, Gov. Armijo, collected an army in the Rio Abajo (lower Rio Grande) country and drove Gonzalez out. At the same time an army of Mexican troops arrived to reinforce Armijo and the rebels were defeated at La Canada. So ended the last Pueblo Rebellion; this time without Apachean allies. The Pueblos had long since identified, in the mind of the Apacheans, with the enemy.

The Navajo and other Apacheans in New Mexico were not directly involved in the internal disorders around Santa Fe, but neither did the Mexican government have time to bother itself about them. The unconquered Indians merely added to the tumult by carrying on their own private forays against Spanish (Mexican) and Pueblo alike. The population of New Mexico at the time included only about 60,000 persons of Spanish and mixed Spanish descent; about 10,000 Pueblos; and an estimated 10,000 Navajos (according to Gregg).

The Oraibi Massacre

It was about this time—about 1832—that a Navajo war party attacked the Hopi Pueblo of Oraibi, massacreing most of its inhabitants, according to an account handed down from generation to generation and told by Scott Preston, a medicine man, authority on Navajo folk history former vice chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council and tribal patriarch.

According to the story, there

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was a highly respected Navajo peace chief from the Chinle area who was accustomed to go for seeds every year to the Hopi village of Shimopavi, where he had a Hopi friend.

He went there on the fateful year of the massacre, as per usual, and was warmly greeted by his friend who invited him to help in the spring planting. The Navajo did so willingly but, in the course of events, an altercation arose and he was killed by a Hopi boy who wielded a digging stick. The Navajo's name was Naach'i' Nditahi (Darts at the Enemy).

The victim had a sister known as Asdzaan Cho'o (Ugly Woman), and to her his Hopi friends, deeply perturbed, sent news of her brother's murder. She promptly contacted her brother's relatives and gathered together a war party. Proper ceremonies were conducted and the party moved against the enemy.

However, due to the inaccessibility of Shimopavi, the village in which the killing took place, the party decided to attack a more vulnerable village — Old Oraibi. With the help of a disgruntled resident of that town, they attacked it and overwhelmed its residents, killing nearly all of them. Thus was Darts at the Enemy avenged — even though by proxy, as it were.

IV

THE COMING OF THE NEW MEN

For nearly 350 years, from 1540 to 1846, the stage on which the Southwestern Drama was being played had been dominated by violence and strife. The comparative peace and balance of the preceding era had been so thoroughly disrupted by the invading forces of Coronado and his successors that the scene, in 1840, was seriously out of focus and perspective. The Pueblos smoldered impotently under the yoke, and so long had the proud Apacheans declined to conform to the new order, that they now appeared to be the villains in the play.

Such was the image of the free tribes as depicted to the "New Men" following their appearance on the scene at 6 p.m. on the evening of Aug. 18, 1846. That was the date and hour upon which Gen. Stephen Watts Kearney and his army made their triumphant entry into Santa Fe.

A new force had entered the drama, one that was to produce a rapid change in the scenery and usher in a new act — one in which the Indian people, including the Navajo, would ultimately find themselves playing a new role, one quite different from the role they had played for so many centuries.

William Keleher ("Turmoil in New Mexico") paints the picture of the opening scene in great historical detail.

Kearney's coming had been awaited by the populace with mixed emotions — some fearful; some hopeful. He wasted no time and on the following day he called together the townspeople and spoke to them—reassuring them, explaining the fact that the government of the United States had extended its authority and jurisdiction over New Mexico and its people, and setting forth the policies of the new government.

There were many differences of opinion in almost every subject area on the part of the people of Santa Fe — with one notable exception: Indians, and especially Navajos and Apaches.

On this subject there was general agreement and Kearney was promptly advised of their villainy. He was told how the Mexicans and the Spanish before them had struggled with these "barbarians" on the frontiers; how they had defied authority; raided the settlements; stolen livestock and agricultural produce from ranches and pueblos; carried people off into slavery and committed all manner of murder.

Makes Promise

Kearney was shown only one side of the coin, of course — and not the Indian side. Further, a few days previously in Las Vegas, he had promised the people that he would protect them. The obvious course of action was not to question the matter or explore its history. Rather it was to impress the newly acquired American subjects by demonstrating to them that his promises of protection were not idle ones.

He promptly sent word to the Navajos and other tribes that he wished to talk to their leaders in Santa Fe.

Not many came in response to his invitation but those few who did come were told that fighting between Indians and Mexicans would no longer be tolerated by the new government. If word of Kearney's warning reached Navajo raiders, they paid little attention to it—they merely continued business as usual.

And, even to Kearney, it soon became clear that the people who were loudest in their denunciation of Navajo depredations were not, in fact, as interested in establishing peace with the Navajo, Apaches and other "wild" tribes as they were in soliciting American support for a war of plunder against them.

Kearney, however, was interested in peace because his military mission in the Southwest was much broader in scope than the subjugation of the New Mexicans. Before he could proceed he needed to establish order.

Summons Ignored

The Navajos had not responded to his summons to hold a council in Santa Fe so he decided to carry his summons to them on their own ground. To accomplish this he dispatched two contingents of troops to the Navajo country, one under Maj. Gilpin, and the other under Col.

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