

Using Historic Photographs To Teach about Navajo History and Culture

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This chapter describes how historic photographs can be used in classrooms. The photographs used in this article were the property of Navajo Gospel Mission, which operated on the Navajo Reservation for years at Hardrock, Arizona, 14 miles north of Kykotsmovi/Oraibi. My father, the late Rev. Bruce Yazzie, was a Baptist minister of the gospel at Navajo Gospel Mission for nearly 50 years. My mother worked alongside my father at the mission as an interpreter, musician, mid-wife, nurse practitioner, and “social coordinator” for the Navajo people within the mission community.

The photographs used in this chapter are part of a collection accumulated over the 50 years the Navajo Gospel Mission (NGM) was in full operation at Hardrock, Arizona. The main office of the mission was moved to Flagstaff, Arizona in 1980, and a few years later was moved once again to Tucson, Arizona, where the process of archiving all documents and photographs began. A Navajo has to chuckle knowing the white missionaries had a small part in preserving our culture and lifestyle without even knowing it. It is possible that if the white missionaries only knew, they probably would have destroyed all evidence of the photographs they took. It was not their intention to have a part in preserving the Navajo culture, language, and lifestyle.

Navajo children who attended kindergarten through eighth grade school at the Navajo Gospel Mission were forbidden to speak Navajo. Harsh punishment followed a Navajo word that easily rolled off of a Navajo child’s tongue. Punishment could mean being forced to bite off a piece of soap, a spanking with a wooden board, or standing in the corner for a length of time. Ironically though, all the students in the school were required, however, to become proficient in Navajo literacy. The proficient reading of the Navajo Bible was a clearly stated goal of the curriculum.

The major objective of the missionaries was for the Navajo people to break all ties to their Navajo culture and lifestyle. Missionaries took it upon themselves to decide what the Navajo people were to leave behind upon conversion to the Protestant faith. This objective was not limited to Navajo Gospel Mission. In describing the national objective of missions and missionaries in general, Kraft states,

Missionaries across the country preached cultural change that made their converts more like themselves in outward form. The motivation being that, different cultures are viewed as inferior to that of the missionary... the aim was to get converts to think and act like the missionary and his people, since that way is regarded as superior and Christian. (1979, p. 288).

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A result of the missionaries' expectation and requirement of the complete separation from their culture left converts becoming alien to their own people, culture, and lifestyle (Winter; 2000). This requirement left many Navajo Christians isolated from their own people and isolated from the missionaries as well.

The missionaries who believed they were superior to the American Indians did not allow themselves to become knowledgeable of the culture of their convert. They were afraid their "new convert" would practice syncretism. Webster defines syncretism as a "union of principles irreconcilably at variance with each other, especially the doctrines of certain religions" (1937, p. 1690). The fear of syncretism by the missionary further caused him to draw the line between the culture and religion of their convert. According to Mastra, the contextualization of the gospel would have been a far less destructive approach, which is "based upon mutual respect in the relationship between races, religion and cultures (1979, p. 355). Osei-Mensah (1979) explains that allowing the Gospel to come into the culture of the convert is another example of contextualization and one that is far less destructive.

The missionaries at NGM did not know the beautiful culture of the Navajo people, nor were they interested in learning about it. The words, in a conversation my father had many years ago with a missionary still ring in my ears where my father said, "Let us Navajo pastors who know our culture decide where to draw the line between culture and religion. You are drawing the line out of the fear that you will lose your converts to their traditional ways because they practice their culture. There are many things that are good about being Navajo. The Navajo culture and being Navajo has sustained us for many years. It is who we are, and the culture has helped us survive all these years through many hardships" (Bruce Yazzie, personal communication, 1970).¹

Many photographs from the NGM collection were presented in the textbook I co-authored titled, *Rediscovering the Navajo Language* (Parsons Yazzie & Speas, 2008), which teaches students extensively about Navajo culture as they learn to speak, read and write Navajo. Only a few photographs have been selected here to demonstrate how they can be used to teach Navajo culture and history.

The Navajo language will not be addressed in this monograph owing to the difficulty of the use of the Navajo font. However, in an actual Navajo language classroom, the photographs are used to generate vocabulary lists, discussions, culture based essays, for illustration of Navajo lifestyles of old, and to illicit comparisons between the present Navajo culture and the culture of the people of old.

Comments repeatedly made by viewers of the photographs is how thin, how fit, and how tall the Navajo people are who appear in the photographs. A second observation is the presence of extended family members upon whom each Navajo person could rely and depend.

¹For a discussion of the attitudes of Christian Navajos towards teaching the Navajo language to their children see my chapter "Missionaries and American Indian Languages" in J. Reyhner, O. Trujillo, R. L. Carrasco & L. Lockard (Eds.), *Nurturing Native Languages* (Flagstaff, AZ: Northern Arizona University, 2003, pp. 165-178).

The photographs are placed in categories based upon the following topics: Navajo Hogans, Modes of Travel, Navajo Food Preparation, Navajo Teachings and Lifestyle, Navajo Traditional Clothing, Forced Education, and Navajo Elders.

Navajo hogans

The traditional Navajo home, the *hogan*, is to be built with the entrance facing the east, from which direction the rising sun brings with it bounties with which to bless the Navajo people. The hogans the Navajo men built have remained sturdy for years and protected Navajo families from the elements. The inside of a hogan is warm during the cold winter season and cool in the hot summer.



The photograph above was taken in the early 1950s. Notice the doorway of the hogan, which is not very high. A new fixture of a hogan during this time is the door. Previously, a thick rug or blanket hung in the doorway to provide privacy, protection, or to keep the hogan warm.



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The hogans in the picture on the previous page were built at Navajo Gospel Mission for Navajo families while the mother and the father attended the Bible School for adults and their children attended the kindergarten through eighth grade Christian school. The Christian families left their home area to attend the Bible School and the concept behind the cluster of hogans was to provide a sense of community. The families who lived in the hogans became an extended family to their neighbors.

Modes of travel

The Navajo people were used to walking. They walked long distances to herd their sheep and goats to the nearest spring. If longer distance traveling was required, they traveled by means of a horse. New to the Navajo family was a wagon in which the entire family traveled.



The picture above illustrates an important Navajo teaching, which is that a Navajo person is to be busy at all times. Navajo women were always planning or working on their next rug. Regardless of her destination, a Navajo woman took her weaving tools everywhere she went. If she was herding sheep, she took her wool and carding boards or her spindle. While the family is allowing the horses to rest for the next leg of the journey, the mother is spinning wool in preparation for weaving her next rug. The woman is a positive role model for her child. The men, in Navajo society, are the caretakers of cows and horses. The man in the photograph also rests when the horses rest.

One can imagine how alive the Navajo language was where the children heard the Navajo being spoken at all times. The children heard conversation, stories, and songs as the family traveled by means of a wagon and horses.

With the wagon and horse, as pictured below, the Navajos had a new mode of travel and had to make their own roads. It seems that mules were used to make the roads, possibly because of their strength.



Navajo food

The Navajo of old ate what was supplied by nature, what they grew in a cornfield, or the livestock they raised. Wild berries, seeds, and vegetables were sought after and at times became a meal in itself. Corn, squash, and melons were grown, harvested, and preserved to sustain the Navajo people throughout the long winter. The people hunted for small game throughout the year and hunted for larger game to see them through the long winter months. The meat was preserved as jerky for the family.

Fresh mutton was, and still is, a Navajo delicacy. The woman in the photograph at the top of page 145 is proud she is able to provide for her family by butchering a sheep. She will serve the meat in a stew, cooked over hot coals or preserve as jerky to be eaten in the cold winter months.

Sheep and goats belong to the Navajo women. Sheep unify a family and extended family. When a Navajo woman wants to bring her children and her relatives close, she will butcher a sheep and a “feast” will be held. During the gathering, stories, jokes, recent happenings are exchanged, providing each family member with pleasant memories. The sounds of life sustain a Navajo mother until the next family gathering.

The scene in the next page was not an unusual happening. Whether it was over a stove or hot coals near an outside fire, young girls were taught to cook at an early age. Many times, the young girls prepared the family meals while their mother was busy weaving a rug to sell at the trading post. There were many reasons to teach a young daughter how to prepare a complete meal for the family.





The photograph above is evidence of when a Navajo family of old traveled several miles from home, they packed fire wood, matches, a coffee pot with enough coffee to make one pot of coffee, water, fresh or boiled mutton or jerky, and possibly dough that had been mixed at home in anticipation of cooking biscuits or tortillas over the hot coals when they reached their destination. Navajo families were self-sufficient.

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During the meal, the children heard the Navajo language recited in stories, recent happenings, jokes, and prayers, which sustained the Navajo language for generations.

Transmission of Navajo teachings to the next generation

The Navajo people of old transmitted teachings of their culture, lifestyle, traditions, and their belief system through example. Navajo men prepared their sons and the young men for the future by example, while the women prepared their daughters through their teachings. Formal education interrupted the natural transmission of the Navajo culture, lifestyle, traditions, and belief system from one generation to the next.²



Navajo men had the responsibility of showing their sons and the young men how to build a hogan. My father led a team of young Navajo men in building traditional Navajo hogans at NGM and the surrounding community. He taught that in the traditional Navajo society, the hogan was to be built in one day, so he made sure all the materials needed to build a hogan had been gathered before they began assembling the hogan. My father then challenged the young men to complete the hogan on the same day they began assembling it.

It is interesting to note that the missionaries inspected the completed hogans and marveled at the fact that each hogan had been built without the use of one nail (Clarence Blackrock, Navajo Christian elder, personal communication, 2009). The hogans remained in use for years and provided Navajo families with shelter.

²Peterson Zah's autobiography *We Will Secure Our Future: Empowering The Navajo Nation* (University of Arizona Press, 2012) gives a good description of how he and other Navajo children were taught by their elders traditional values such as hard work and respect.

In the photograph below, the little children are learning the art of caring for their mother's herd of lambs, sheep, and goats by helping their mother. The young girls watched and learned the different aspects of the weaving process. Children became aware of the lengthy process of raising the herd, shearing the wool, carding and spinning it, setting up a loom, weaving a rug, and selling the rug.



Navajo clothing

Navajo elders have been heard to say, "If we dress Navajo, it will be as if we are reminding ourselves to speak the Navajo language" (Francis Alts'iisii, Navajo Christian and elder, personal communication, 1995). Necklaces made of shells or silver and turquoise jewelry adorned every Navajo woman and young



girl. “We Navajo women think of our jewelry as if they are our children. When you are not wearing your jewelry, it is as if you left your children behind” (Helen Yazzie, Weaver and Navajo elder, personal communication, 2005).

The photograph on the previous page illustrates the clothing worn every day by the Navajo people of old. Navajo women and young girls wore beautiful velvet blouses and gathered skirts while Navajo men and young boys dressed in western type clothing. Navajo women sewed traditional clothing for themselves and their daughters to ensure they were properly dressed. Mothers and fathers collected jewelry for their daughters.

Navajo women are beautiful and elegant. The photograph below preserved the beauty and elegance of this young group of Navajo women and girls.



Early formal education: A dark time in Navajo history

Navajo families and children, as all American Indian families and children, have suffered in the name of education. Navajo life, as the people knew it, began to change right before their eyes. Forced education imposed upon Navajo children, parents, and elders a sense of extreme loneliness.

Forced education brought about many changes to the Navajo family. It became a threat to the Navajo language and the lifestyle of the Navajo people. The photograph on the next page illustrates the changes brought about as Navajo children began to attend school. The building in the background served as the girl's dormitory at the boarding/day school at NGM. Absent is the security of the hogan and the presence of extended family members. In their place is the presence of the White teacher. Notice the change in the attire of some of the Navajo children.

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What an interesting photograph below! The photograph below makes a person very sad. One can only imagine the thoughts of the Navajo parents when their children came home from school dressed in different attire, speaking a different language, and asking different questions. It was during this time the Navajo children were ashamed to be seen in the “enemy’s” clothes. They were forced to bear a deep sense of disloyalty to their people when they wore the clothing of the “enemy.” After enduring years of forced education, Navajo children began to question their former existence.



Using Historic Photographs

It is possible the children in the photograph below shared the feelings of Joseph Suina. Like Suina, these children were taught to read using the Dick and Jane Reading Series. Suina from Cochiti Pueblo described the effect of how even reading a textbook could make a child question the love of their family:

The Dick and Jane reading series in the primary grades presented me with pictures of a home with a pitched roof, straight walls, and sidewalks. I could not identify with these from my Pueblo world. However, it was clear I didn't have these things and what I did have did not measure up.... I was ashamed of being who I was and I wanted to change right then and there. Somehow it became so important to have straight walls, clean hair and teeth, a spotted dog to chase after. I even became critical and hateful toward my bony, fleabag of a dog. I loved the familiar and cozy surroundings of my grandmother's house but now I imagined it could be a heck of a lot better if only I had a white man's house with a bed, a nice couch, and a clock. In school books, all the child characters ever did was run around chasing their dog or a kite. They were always happy. As for me, all I seemed to do at home was go back and forth with buckets of water and cut up sticks for a lousy fire. "Didn't the teacher say that drinking coffee would stunt my growth?" "Did my grandmother really care about my well-being?" (Suina, 1988, p. 298)



Traditionally, it was the Navajo parents and elders who were the children's teachers. The hogan and the environment outside the hogan was the "classroom" where the children were taught, not in a square room as in the photograph above. Oral history and stories were the way the children learned, whereas a book was a foreign object for teaching. The books contained stories of the life of a non-Navajo family, leading the children to be shameful of their own culture and people (Cummins, 1986).

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Absent in the photograph above is the traditional attire of the Navajo children and the long hair that was tied back. A strict teaching of the Navajo people is that Navajo girls and women are not to cut their hair. Wisdom, knowledge, and language are stored in the ends of a Navajo person's hair. Cutting one's hair short would be sending a message to the Creator stating that the person does not want wisdom, knowledge, or language. "When they started cutting our children's hair real short at school is when our language started going away. That is when we started losing our language," (Jennie Manybeads, Navajo Hopi relocation resister and elder, personal communication, 1994).

Navajo elders

The strong faith and hope in the Navajo elder's face in the photograph on the next page is evident as she looks forward. She is devoted to her language, her culture, her children and her grandchildren. Sadly though, her role as teacher, one to transmit the Navajo language to the next generation, and one to convey Navajo traditions and lifestyle to her grandchildren have been denied of her. Because of her love for her grandchildren, she and many more Navajo elders have remained hopeful.

Many Navajo youth insist their Navajo grandparents remain close to them to teach them valuable life lessons to help them remain Navajo. Navajo elders are hopeful the youth will commit themselves to become the caretakers of their Navajo elders to ensure the elders continue to transmit the Navajo language to their children and grandchildren. The health of Navajo elders is essential because Navajo parents and elders are needed to convey the Navajo traditions and lifestyle to the next generation so the entire Navajo Nation can begin to heal itself.

Using historical photographs that students can share with their family members may be a way to encourage Navajo elders to begin to discuss Navajo



life of old, how it has changed, and how Navajo life as the elders know it can be maintained and preserved. The photographs can also be a valuable way to make education relevant and more interesting for Indigenous students.

Note

A question I am often asked is, “How did you get a hold of all these beautiful pictures?” A few years ago, I received a call from a woman at Ameritribes, formerly NGM, who wanted to know if I was interested in obtaining photographs of my mother and father. She stated their archiving of the photographs and documents was complete and they were contacting individuals who they thought would be interested in copies of them.

Needless to state, I was very grateful for the offer and agreed to meet with the archivist in Tucson. She ushered me into a room with a long table in the center. On the table were three boxes of photographs. I was expecting to be given an envelope containing photographs of my parents, instead I was invited to look through the boxes to select the photographs I wanted. At first, I began the process of carefully picking through the photographs in the three boxes. Before I knew it, the time had passed so quickly. I asked the archivist what they were planning to do with the photographs and she said they were giving the photographs away since they had completed the archiving process. I boldly asked if I could have all the contents of the three boxes and she agreed. I assured her I would use the photographs for educational purposes. My ears were ringing! I was delighted! I was delighted that my people of old were coming home with me.

The questions people ask are, What was the intention of the missionaries when they took pictures of Navajo life, culture, and lifestyle? Were they curious?

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Were they wanting to study the Navajo people for their own learning purposes? Did they think Navajo life, Navajo culture and Navajo lifestyle were beautiful? Were they really interested in the Navajo people?

Personally, I knew the missionaries published a brochure for the churches who supported the efforts of NGM. What was unclear was the reason the missionaries took photographs of Navajo life, culture and lifestyle. After speaking to several missionaries, I learned they were used in their efforts to raise money for their salary. When they traveled to their home churches and to other churches that supported them, they made presentations using the photographs to illustrate their work among the Navajo people. As Linda Wisdom, a missionary and former employee of NGM and Ameritribes, put it, “We showed the pictures to demonstrate the need of the Navajo people for missionaries and Jesus in their midst” (personal communication, 2005). The missionaries showed the photographs to ask the church members to support them with prayers and monetarily as they worked among the Navajo people as teachers, dorm parents, cooks, nurses, health workers, administrators of the mission and the school, witnesses of the gospel, mechanics, and secretaries, just to name a few of the occupations in which the missionaries served. Some missionaries worked at the mission for many years and others for less than a year.

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