



The Navajo Long Walk

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THE *DINÉ*, OR NAVAJO people, began filtering into the basins and canyons west of the Arizona-New Mexico Chuska Mountains in the mid-1700s, claiming an obdurate but lovely land that the Anasazi had deserted some 450 years earlier. The labyrinth of canyons between the Chuska Mountains and the present-day town of Chinle was particularly attractive, and not only for its astounding beauty. Thanks to the permanent streams in the upper reaches of the canyons, the Anasazi and their predecessors, the Basketmakers, had successfully farmed it for a thousand years. The Navajos could do the same.

Trouble, however, came with the territory. Navajos and Utes skirmished endlessly and raided each other's camps for women and children to press into slavery. In 1805 a Spanish detachment led by Lt. Antonio Narbona massacred 115 Navajos huddled in an alcove on a canyon wall with a ricochet rain of thousands of bullets. (The name *Canyon del Muerto*, Canyon of Death, commemorates the slaughter. *Canyon de Chelly* is the Spaniards' shot at spelling the Navajo word *tségi*, rock. Today it's commonly pronounced *d'shay*.) But not until U.S. Army general James Henry Carleton assumed command of New Mexico Territory in 1862 was the entire Navajo culture threatened with annihilation.

Navajos and Spanish settlers of New Mexico had engaged in a guerrilla war of tit-for-tat raid-and-reprisal for more than two centuries when the U.S. flag rose over the territory in 1846. The Navajo economy was based on sheep, cattle and slaves, a good many of whom they snatched from Spanish homesteaders. In the Navajo view these were hardly crimes; the Spanish were stealing their traditional grazing lands and hatching deadly alliances with the Navajos' traditional enemies, the Utes and Comanches.

The Americans moved to contain the Navajos with a series of tightening reservation boundaries and treaties that made the Navajos promise to cease hostilities and turn over their raiding "criminals" to the U.S. Army. Peace never survived long. The new U.S. Army presence at Fort Defiance, 25 miles south of Canyon de Chelly, was a tumor encroaching on traditional Navajo grazing lands. And the Navajo headmen who signed the treaties could never rein in all the freelance raiding and sniping. The story played out as it always did in the Indian wars, a reel of treachery and misjudgments on both sides, leading to a decisive punch with all the military muscle the U.S. could afford to throw into it.

Gen. Carleton was not a man troubled by indecision or self-doubt. In a photo portrait he sits with arms crossed and jaws clenched into a ferocious scowl. A sympathetic history published

in 1935 described him as “a very dynamo of energy, relentless as a chastizer, kindly as an adviser, unwavering in policy but yet comprehensive in the performance, with mind broad enough to see that he was building a state and not merely occupying one-to-be ...” A less complimentary appraisal in 1982 called him an “unscrupulous, ambitious, selfish man, whose bearing radiated an abrasive, tyrannical personality.” Add these appraisals together and you have him: dynamic, relentless, abrasive, tyrannical.