



# SAGEBRUSH SURGEON



~ by ~  
*Florence Crannell Means*



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# SAGEBRUSH SURGEON

*The young doctor washed his hands over and over, stuck them into the sterilized gloves, and held them stiffly before him while the nurse tied the surgeon's gown across his broad back. The girl who lay waiting on the operating table was his first Navajo surgical patient. Her family, sitting on the hall floor, were pioneers in the unknown.*

When Dr. Clarence Salsbury, his wife, and their son move to the Navajo reservation as medical missionaries, they are faced with seemingly insurmountable challenges. The Salsburys quickly discover that they must not only work to construct a hospital, provide irrigation, and train Navajo nurses, but also other overcome obstacles such as isolation and cultural differences. Before they know it, what was intended to be a two-year mission turns into the work of a lifetime.

Faced with the daunting tasks ahead, the Salsbury family seeks the help of other missionaries, translators, and the Navajo People to realize their dream of bringing Christianity and modern medicine to the Navajo Nation.



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# INTRODUCTION

BY

HEATHER WISEMAN

AND SHANNEN YAUGER

Referring to both life and writing, Florence Crannell Means, author of *Sagebrush Surgeon*, concluded that “it’s a dangerous business to try to interpret other peoples.” She recognized the impossibility of entirely understanding another person’s identity, but she also believed it was important to try. The more one group of people learns about another, the less likely they are to develop prejudiced opinions. Understanding the reasons behind the actions and beliefs of others leads to greater respect and compassion. To that end, this introduction offers insights into the history, culture, and religious practices that influence the daily lives of the Navajo people.

## HISTORY OF THE NAVAJO

Some anthropologists believe that the Navajo people are descendants of the ancient Athabaskan tribe that lived in western Canada about a thousand years ago. The tribe slowly migrated south along the Pacific Coast. Some of its members eventually made their way across the American Southwest in the 14th century. They settled in an area that is now part of northwest New Mexico, with their main land being near three rivers—the San Juan, the Animas, and the La Plata—just east of present-day Farmington, New Mexico. They called their land *Dinétah*, which means “among the people.”

Around 1400 A.D., the Navajo made contact with the Pueblo tribes, who lived just north of them in present-day southern Colorado. The

Pueblo people taught the Navajo how to farm, and by the 1600s, the Navajo were producing all of their own food by planting corn, beans, and squash, and raising large herds of livestock (primarily sheep and goats). As the tribe grew, the Navajo people spread out across the region in search of adequate farming and ranching land. Soon they occupied northern Arizona, more of New Mexico, southern Colorado, and southeastern Utah. These lands were bounded by four mountains that were sacred to the Navajo. At the same time, the Spanish conquistadors



Navajo rock art

were marching northward from Mexico and colonizing the land around the Rio Grande River. When Santa Fe was founded in 1610, it became the most important town in the territory, and contact between the Navajo and the Spaniards grew daily. From the Spanish the Navajo learned how to be horsemen, and they soon surpassed the Spaniards in their skill. Horses became an integral part of the Navajo tribe, greatly increasing their capacity to traverse the treacherous lands and plant crops in larger areas.

Over the next 200 years, the Navajo would mostly be left alone. They fought occasionally with the Pueblo tribe, the Spaniards, and the Mexicans (mixed Spanish and indigenous people from present-day Mexico), but they were able to maintain their lands and way of life, even though Spain, and later Mexico, had laid claim to the whole territory. In 1848, however, the Mexican army was defeated by the United States, and the land comprising Arizona, California, Colorado, Nevada, New Mexico, and Utah was annexed as territory of the United States. As more settlers and American soldiers arrived in the area, tensions among the various groups increased.

## The Long Walk

The years between 1848 and 1864 were tumultuous; there were multiple conflicts among the Navajo, Hopi, Pueblo, Ute, New Mexicans, U.S. soldiers, and remaining Spanish settlers. Alliances among tribes and peoples changed frequently. Various peace treaties were signed by one group and then another, but there was no lasting peace for anyone.

The vast majority of the people in each group were peaceful, but small bands of raiders from the various groups and continual skirmishes between the bands, coupled with misunderstandings of each other, led the U.S. government to view the Native American tribes as a dangerous people. Colonel Canby wrote to his commanding officer, suggesting “their absolute extermination or their removal and colonization at points so remote . . . as to isolate them entirely from the inhabitants of the territory.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, beginning in 1862, militiamen and other hired mercenaries, such as Kit Carson and the Ute raiders, began ransacking Navajo land—burning crops and *hogans* (traditional Navajo huts)—in an effort to force the Navajo to surrender to the U.S. government and agree to move onto a “reservation” far away from settlers. The Navajo were promised they would be fed and protected. In early 1864, thousands of Navajo surrendered to the U.S. Army. Over the next two years, thousands more would surrender, and all would be made to march nearly 400 miles across the barren New Mexico landscape to an internment camp named Bosque Redondo near Fort Sumner. Many were unable to make the trek. The old, infirm, lame, or malnourished who fell behind the group were summarily executed on the spot by the soldiers.

Those who reached the camps at Fort Sumner (called *Hwéeldi* by the Navajo) faced deplorable conditions. The U.S. government had planned for 5,000 Navajo at the internment camp and were

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<sup>1</sup> McNitt, Frank (1990). *Navajo Wars: Military Campaigns, Slave Raids, and Reprisals*, University of New Mexico Press. pp. 428–429.



Navajo people on the Long Walk

completely unprepared for the nearly 10,000 who eventually arrived there. The meager food rations of white flour, sugar, and coffee beans were unfamiliar staples to the Navajo, who often did not know how to prepare them properly. They became sick trying to eat undercooked food, and many starved.

In May of 1868, Navajo leaders met with Tecumseh Sherman, a Civil War general, and other government officials to negotiate a treaty that would return some of their freedoms and territory to them. The now-famous Treaty of Bosque Redondo (also called the Treaty of Fort Sumner) was signed on June 1, 1868, and shortly afterward the Navajo made the long walk back to their homeland. Some estimates suggest that of the nearly 10,000 Navajo who were forced into the internment camp, only 2,000 returned home.

The injustices suffered by the Navajo people during the years of their internment and throughout the Long Walk have shaped their identity and interactions with outsiders in the years since. Even generations later, many of the Navajo tribe still feel deeply betrayed. They believe their people were wrongfully punished for the actions of a few. One Navajo man explained, “As I have said, our ancestors were taken captive and driven to *Hwéeldi* for no reason at all. They were harmless people, and, even to date, we are the same, holding no harm for anybody . . . Many Navajos who know our history and the story of *Hwéeldi* say the same.”<sup>2</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Gorman, Howard (1973). “1864: The Navajo begin ‘Long Walk’ to Imprisonment.” *Native Voices*. U.S. National Library of Medicine.

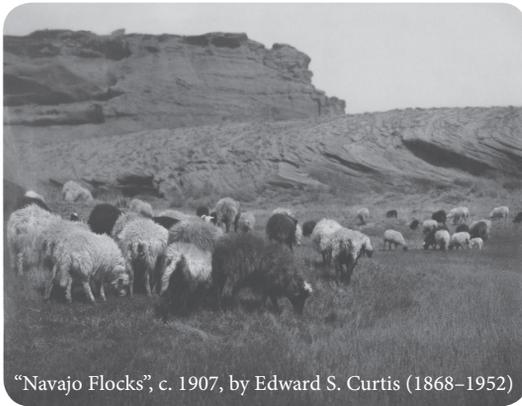
## *Adapting to Changes*

After the treaty of 1868, the Navajo were forced to adopt a Western European style of democratic government with elected officials. Acceptance of this new form of government was slow and disruptive to daily life. Traditionally, the Navajo people were governed as clans based upon matrilineal kinship groups. The women were the heads of the households and clans, and children gained social status from their mother's line. Without an understanding of the matrilineal clans and their traditional role in governing the Navajo, U.S. government officials and employees of the Bureau of Indian Affairs were met with many frustrations as they tried to implement a representative, patriarchal form of government among the people.

The new treaty also imposed compulsory education on the Navajo children at government schools. The U.S. government committed to build schools and provide teachers for every 30 students, but various factors, including the impassible terrain, made these promises nearly impossible to fulfill, leaving the existing schools overcrowded. Some Navajo families did not trust the government and would hide their children to keep them from being taken by force. Home- and clan-centered education had been the standard for hundreds of years, and removing children from the home to live at school went against long-held traditions. Those who did attend the schools lived in harsh conditions: there were never enough beds, food was scarce, the children were forced to do manual labor in the kitchens and around the school grounds, and they were required to wear military-like uniforms and haircuts. Traditional Navajo clothing and cultural practices were forbidden, including speaking their native language. The one school that was the exception to these restrictive educational practices was the Evangelical Missionary School, where children were generally well-treated, and their cultural practices were respected.

## *The Livestock Reduction*

In the years after the treaty was signed, there was greater peace for the Navajo people, and they were able to plant their crops and raise their livestock without fear of raids. They also reclaimed more of their ancestral lands—increasing from 3.5 million acres in 1868 to nearly 16 million acres today. Slowly they reestablished economic stability, and the population of the tribe grew rapidly. Then the livestock reduction orders of the 1930s decimated the tribe in a way that well-meaning officials could never fully understand. The Navajo had more than one million sheep that grazed on their lands in 1930. During the Great Depression and the time of the Dust Bowl, government officials were concerned about overgrazing and land erosion on the reservation. They believed the only solution was to



“Navajo Flocks”, c. 1907, by Edward S. Curtis (1868–1952)

reduce the number of livestock in the area. Florence Crannell Means explains in *Sagebrush Surgeon*, “The late Flora Warren Seymour, Chicago attorney and writer, who worked for Indian progress most of her life, wrote at this time:

“To be set upon by swarms of researchers and experimenters was bad enough. To have the children’s schooling reduced to a minimum was bad enough. But when the blight of reduction fell upon his sheep, the Navajo felt that the very core and center of his life had been destroyed.” The Navajo did not just lose a few animals—they were robbed of their main source of subsistence. Had the government understood the Navajo people’s reliance on their herds, they may have been able to find another solution to the erosion problem that would have respected both the Navajo and their land.

Throughout history, governments, institutions, and the vocal majority have mistreated, misunderstood, and marginalized minority groups of people. In the midst of these discriminations, one can usually find a few individuals or institutions who have fought to protect the oppressed from their oppressors. There have been many such individuals who supported the Navajo people.

In *Sagebrush Surgeon*, Means tells the heartbreaking stories of the struggles and unjust treatment of the Navajo people through the eyes of the evangelical missionaries Clarence and Cora Salsbury, who devoted their lives to serving the Navajo people. Means does not attempt to “insert her own consciousness” into that of the Navajo people but, rather, tells the story from the perspective of the Salsburys and how they gradually came to understand and better serve the Navajo people through years of learning about their customs and traditions. The Salsburys would eventually even learn to speak the Navajo language. Through the years they made mistakes and had misunderstandings, but as will be shown in this account, they tried their best to improve the quality of life for those they served. Their story highlights the daily trials and struggles of living on the reservation for the Navajo people and also for the missionaries who served there. This vivid picture of Navajo life offered by Florence Crannell Means is one small step toward a greater understanding and deeper appreciation for the Navajo people.



Dr. Clarence Salsbury  
(Arizona State Library APR #90-0905)