

■ Status Report on the Condition of the Navajos

Date: May 30, 1868

Author: Theodore H. Dodd

Genre: report

Summary Overview

After four years in exile from their homelands at the Bosque Redondo reservation at Fort Sumner, New Mexico, the Navajos signed a treaty with the United States that allowed them to return home and regain sovereignty over their reservation that spans northeast Arizona, northwest New Mexico, and southeast Utah. Four years earlier, the US Army had force-marched the Navajos over 300 miles across the desert, resulting in hundreds of deaths over the eighteen-day-long march. Life once they arrived was not much easier. Farming was next to impossible in the alkali soil. Food and water were in short supply, as many more people were held there than the government had planned. About 9,000 Navajos reached Bosque Redondo in 1864, and this report, prepared for General William T. Sherman and Colonel Samuel F. Tappan, who were negotiating the peace treaty, profiles what remained of the Navajos on the eve of the signing of the treaty.

Defining Moment

The nineteenth century was a time of considerable change for the Navajos. During the early part of the century, spanning much of the time between the Mexican Revolution in 1821 to the conquest of the region by the United States in 1846, the Navajos maintained a sporadic raiding war against the Mexican and Pueblo settlements in New Mexico. Much of this unrest was aided by the sale of arms from Anglo-American traders to the Indians, thus making what was only a tenuous hold over the region by Mexican officials much more problematic. The situation was much the same during the 1850s–1860s. The Navajos maintained their raiding and hit-and-run tactics, effectively staying out of outnumbered conflicts with American military forces.

However, the 1863 campaign led by Kit Carson, with considerable assistance from the Hopis, Zunis, and Utes, resulted in two changes to Navajo life that would have immense ramifications. First, the sustained

military pressure finally forced the Navajos to the negotiating table, after Carson and his troops destroyed all means the Navajos had to feed and house themselves. However, perhaps the most demoralizing aspect of their defeat was the fact that it resulted in their expulsion from their homelands, and relocation to the reservation—in reality, an internment camp—at Bosque Redondo, New Mexico.

Federal Indian policy at the time held that Indian peoples were to be forced to remain on the reservations set out for them by the government, and were subject to military action and extermination if they resisted. On the reservations, such as Bosque Redondo, the Indians would be forced to assimilate to the American way of life, including farming, living in villages, non-Indian education for children, and forced instruction in Christianity. For the Navajos and the Mescalero Apache with whom they shared the camp, life at Bosque Redondo was dismal. They tried to grow crops, only to have them destroyed by insects. The Army provided rations, but not enough to support all of the people. The alkaline water of the Pecos River caused intestinal problems and many people died of a smallpox epidemic that swept through the camp. If the Navajos left, not only would the US Army pursue them, any women and children could be taken by Comanches and New Mexicans for the slave trade.

After four years, it was apparent that the Navajos were not assimilating and the United States no longer wanted to pay all of the costs to support the Navajos when they were self-sufficient on their homelands. Though some federal officials wanted to send the Navajos to Indian Territory in present-day Oklahoma, Navajo leader Barboncito and others were able to convince the treaty negotiators to send them home.

Author Biography

Theodore H. Dodd was, as most soldiers in the West

during the late 1860s, a veteran of the Civil War, having fought for the Union as a lieutenant colonel in the Second Colorado Infantry. After the Civil War, Dodd was assigned to Fort Sumner, and had the unenviable task of overseeing the Navajos and Mescalero Apaches there. Throughout 1867 and 1868, Dodd wrote about the problems faced by the Navajos with simple survival and the raids by the Comanches, who stole both horses

and other Indians to be sold as slaves. Dodd noted in a June 1867 report to Congress that the Navajos were anxious to return to their homeland, and Dodd was a fervent supporter of the Navajos, seeing them as better behaved than other local tribes, such as the Comanches and the Apaches. With the negotiation of the 1868 treaty, Dodd's role as an advocate for the Navajo became even more vital.

HISTORICAL DOCUMENT

STATUS REPORT

Navajo Agency Fort Sumner N.M.
May 30th, 1868

Lieut. General W. T. Sherman
and Col. S. F. Tappan
Peace Commissioners

In pursuance to your request I have the honor to submit a report as to the condition of the Navajo Indians at the Bosque Redondo reservation under my charge and express my views in relation to their removal; their requirements and their present reservation.

On the 1st day of Nov. 1867, the Commanding Officer at Fort Sumner N. M. Maj. C. J. Whiting 3rd U. S. Cavalry transferred to my charge 7111 Navajo Indians, Viz.

- 2157 under 12 years of age
- 2693 Women
- 2060 Men
- 201 Age and Sex Unknown

During the month of November 193 who were absent of the day of the count came in making total number subsisted 7304. The cost of subsisting said Indians from the 1st of November 1867 to the 23rd day of May 1868 inclusive as per report herewith transmitted of Wm. Rosenthal Commissary for Navajos is Two Hundred and Eighty-Thousand Eight Hundred and Thirty 07/100 Dollars (280,830 07/100).

The number of acres of land cultivated at the Bosque Redondo reservation in the years 1865 & 1866 was about 3800 acres, 2800 of which was cultivated as a government farm & the balance 1000 acres was cultivated and

worked in patches exclusively by the Indians.

The amount of produce raised on the Government farm during said years according to the books of the Indian Commissary Department at Fort Sumner N. M. is as follows,

1865

Corn	423682	pounds
Wheat	34113	"
Beans	2942	"
Pumpkins	30403	"

1866

Corn	201420	pounds
Beans	2942	"
Pumpkins	29152	"

In the year 1867 this crop proved a total failure.

The number of animals owned by the Navajos as counted by myself June 30th 1867 was as follows:

Horses	550
Mules	21
Sheep	940
Goats	1025

I estimate that since June 30th 1867 the Navajos

have captured from the Comanche Indians about 1000 horses making total number of horses in the possession of Navajos about 1500.

The number of families on the reservation is about 1850. Since I have been Agent (nearly three years) I have found that a majority of them living on the reservation are peaceable and well disposed. Some thieving ones have occasionally committed depredations by stealing stock from citizens. In many cases however the stock has been recovered and delivered to owners.

Their ideas upon agriculture are few and simple but in their way they manage to raise very fair crops.

They are acquainted with the principles of irrigation and are quite skillful in making acequias, adobes, blankets, bridles, bits and baskets and many other articles. Until this year they have always worked well on the government farm in plowing, hoeing corn, digging acequias, etc. Large numbers of them have been employed by the Military Dept., sutlers and ranchmen in making and laying adobes and other work. They usually get from 30 to 50 cents per day for their labor and also rations.

Nearly every family living in the Reservation have attempted to cultivate patches of their own, planting corn, pumpkins, melons, etc. but have never succeeded in raising very good crops. The Indians attribute their failure to the unproductiveness of the soil. I am of the opinion that about half of the land cultivated at the Bosque Redondo is productive with proper management and irrigation; the other half I consider unproductive in consequence of containing a large amount of alkaline matter. The most serious objection to the Bosque Redondo reservation is the scarcity of timber & fuel. Timber for building purposes is hauled a distance of about 100 miles from Fort Sumner and wood for the use of the Garrison is hauled from 25 to 35 miles. Mesquite roots is the principal wood used by the Indians which they dig and carry on their backs from 6 to 12 miles and it is not very abundant at that distance. There was much suffering among the Indians last winter for want of fuel.

For nearly two years the Navajos have been very much dissatisfied with their reservation at the Bosque Redondo, and they state that their discontent is in consequence of frequent raids being made upon them by Comanche and other Indians. The scarcity of fuel, unproductiveness of

the soil, bad water and unhealthiness. During the past year they have been constantly begging me to endeavor to have them removed to their old country where they say the soil is more productive, where there is an abundance of timber, where mescal, mesquite, beans, wild potatoes & fruits are found in abundance and where they would be far removed from their old enemies The Comanches, Kiowa and other Indians.

I am satisfied that the Navajos will never be contented to remain on this or any other reservation except one located west of the Rio Grande and I am also of the opinion that if they are not permitted to return to their old country that many will stealthily return and in doing so commit depredations upon the people of N.M. and thus keep up a state of insecurity.

I therefore believe that it would be better for the Indians and the people of N.M. and a saving to the Government & in the end more likely to succeed in civilizing and making them self-sustaining to locate them upon a good reservation west of the Rio Grande. With regard to the precise location proper for these Indians, I am not prepared to give an opinion but would respectfully suggest the appointment of a joint commission for that purpose to examine carefully the country and make the selection so as to include lands suitable with water, wood and other resources to insure a permanent reservation.

Not being acquainted with Southern N.M. and northern Arizona in the vicinity of Canon de Chelly & Tuni Cha mountains, I am not prepared to say whether a suitable reservation can be selected in that portion of the Country or not, but I am acquainted with a portion of the valley of the Rio San Juan and its northern tributaries and am satisfied that a good reservation can be selected in that locality with good lands and abundant timber, water and other resources.

In my judgement a reservation should be selected for these people where there is a sufficient arable land and other resources to enable them to settle as near each other as possible in order that their agent can keep an eye upon them and their acts and provide for their necessities. If they are scattered over a large tract of country it would be almost impossible to punish the thieves. In my judgement a military post and agency should be established near their settlement. It must be borne in mind that about one third of the Navajos are a lazy, indolent &

thieving people who will have to be watched constantly and if they commit depredations, punished.

Wherever these people are located it will be necessary for the Government to subsist them until they can plant and gather their crops, otherwise they will depredate upon the flocks of the Inhabitants of the Rio Grande and other localities. It cannot be expected that 7000 Indians who have been comparatively nothing and have been fed by the Government for four years and who have subsisted partly by agriculture for several centuries can live without extreme suffering, when their only subsistence will be game and the wild fruit of the country.

It is now so late in the season that they will not be able to reach their country in time to plant this year. Therefore in my judgement the Government ought to feed them until they can gather their crops next year, say until Sept. 1869.

With this assistance and an annual appropriation of 100,000 dollars for a few years properly managed they will be able in my opinion to maintain themselves.

The Navajos is no doubt the best material in the country for rapid progress in agriculture as history proves that for several centuries they have been engaged in planting and they are far in advance of other tribes in manufactur-

ing blankets, bridles, saddles and other articles, yet they are Savages and extremely superstitious.

The Utah Indians have been enemies of the Navajos for many years. It is very important that a treaty of peace be made between these tribes, otherwise the Utah Indians will constantly be making raids upon the settlements of the Navajos, stealing their children and stock.

At a Council I recently held with the head men of the Navajo tribe they stated they are willing and anxious to make peace with them. I would suggest that some of the principal men of the Navajos and Utahs meet at Santa Fe or some other point and arrange a treaty of peace at an early date.

I would recommend that the Navajos be furnished at least with 40,000 head of sheep and goats. I would also recommend that one physician, one blacksmith and one carpenter be employed at an early day and shops erected and provided with new tools, timbers, etc. All of which is respectfully submitted.

Very Respectfully
Your Obdt. Servant
(signed) *Theo. H. Dodd*
U. S. Indian Agent for Navajo Inds.

GLOSSARY

acequia: an irrigation channel or ditch

adobe: a brick of clay and straw; also, a structure built from these

mescal: a plant from which a liquor is made

mesquite: a small hardwood tree or shrub

sutler: a peddler or seller of wares to military field units

Document Analysis

Written on the eve of the 1868 treaty that would end the exile of the Navajos at Bosque Redondo, Theodore H. Dodd's report to Peace Commissioners General William T. Sherman and Colonel Samuel F. Tappan demonstrates both the fact that the Navajos had worked hard to survive in an inhospitable environment and their desire to return to their homelands. Dodd's text mixes facts and figures relating to the activities of the Navajos at the camp, along with his evaluations of the Navajos'

state of mind.

Dodd begins by demonstrating that, although the soil is very poor and the water alkaline, the Navajos grew significant crops of corn, wheat, pumpkins, and beans during 1865 and 1866, though the 1867 crop failed due to an insect infestation. He then switches to talking about Navajo families, stating that "[s]ince I have been Agent (nearly three years) I have found that a majority of them living on the reservation are peaceable and well disposed." He notes that the Navajos do work hard, both

as day laborers, and as cultivators of their own plots, though Dodd is clear that much of the land at Bosque Redondo is not very productive.

The second half of the report consists of Dodd's reflections on the Navajos' dissatisfaction with life at Bosque Redondo, and his thoughts on more suitable locations for the people. He notes that the Navajos, displeased with the scarcity of wood for fuel, the poor soil and water, and the bad weather, want more than anything to go back to their homelands, where they know where to obtain everything they need, and food and water are in abundance. He is so convinced of their desire to return home that he notes that "if they are not permitted to return to their old country that many will stealthily return and in doing so commit depredations upon the people of N.M. and thus keep up a state of insecurity."

Dodd recommends that the Navajos be placed on a reservation close to a fort, so that those Navajos who are idle (Dodd estimates this at one-third of the population) can be watched. He notes that they will need federal support to feed themselves until they can produce a crop, and importantly recommends that they be given at least 40,000 head of sheep and goats. Though he does not state this explicitly, sheep and goats were the basis of the Navajo economy and much of their identity, and any effort to resettle them—on their homelands or elsewhere—was likely to be easier with the provision of the animals that the Navajos traditionally kept.

Essential Themes

In 1868, Sherman and Tappan negotiated a new treaty with the Navajos and decided on their next move, as it was obvious that the Bosque Redondo experiment had failed. Sherman had hoped to move the Navajos to Indian Territory while Tappan wanted to move them back to their homeland. Once the Navajo delegates had expressed their trepidation at the prospect of going to Indian Territory, the tide turned toward Tappan's position. Once Sherman and Tappan had agreed to return the Navajo to their homelands, it was clear that the government was going to consider farming to be their main occupation, despite the fact that agriculture had largely failed at Bosque Redondo. On June 18, 1868, the Navajo began a second Long Walk—this time back home. They marched in an over ten-mile-long column. Once they arrived, many families were able to return to their former homes and live much as they had before the forced trip east.

As the Navajos already had a background in agri-

culture and federal policy was already leaning toward forcing Indians into farming as a means of civilizing them, this appeared to be the most practical solution. At the possibility of returning to their homelands, Navajo leader Barboncito expressed the hope that there the Navajos would be able to undertake a stable, agricultural existence. However, after their return from Bosque Redondo, the Navajos rebuilt their communities and economy around sheep and herding. Once settled on their homelands, both the number of Navajos and size of their herds grew steadily. The government even enlarged the Navajo reservation to accommodate the increase of human and animal population. By 1933, the Navajos numbered more than 40,000 and were self-sufficient sheepherders. Issued 14,000 sheep (far less than Dodd's recommendation of 40,000) with which to rebuild their herds in 1868, the Navajos had increased their stock to about 800,000 sheep and goats (21 per capita) by the eve of the Great Depression.

—Steven L. Danver, PhD

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