

Social Studies
Biography

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The Navajo

TRADITION AND CHANGE

by Josie Black

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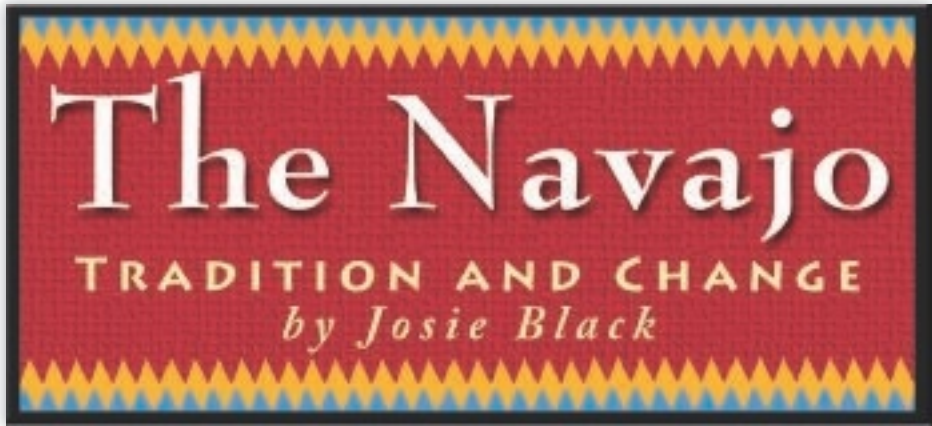
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AN INTRODUCTION TO THE NAVAJO

Today the Navajo, or Diné, have a population of more than 250,000 people. They make up one of the largest and most powerful Native American nations in North America. These people live in Diné Bikéyah, “Navajoland,” which is an area of about 27,000 square miles in Arizona and parts of Utah and New Mexico.

Over the years the Navajo have seen many changes, mostly as a result of their contact with other peoples. Even so, many Navajo continue to speak the Navajo language and follow Navajo traditions. The Navajo’s ability to blend the old ways with the new has helped them to **thrive**.

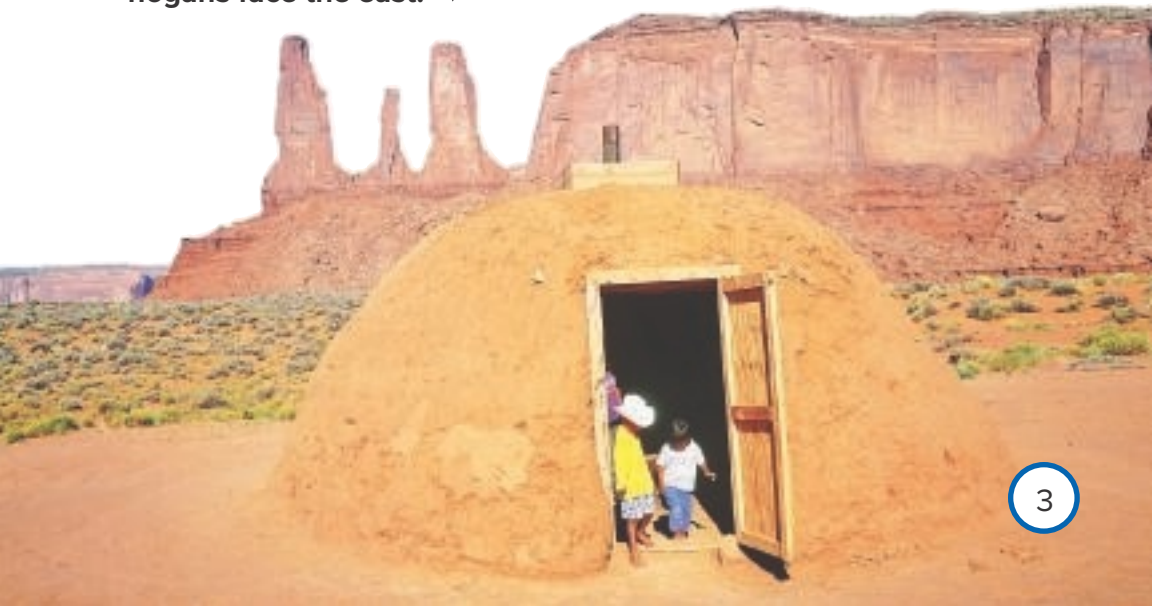


THOUSANDS OF YEARS AGO

Thousands of years ago, the Navajo lived in small groups as **hunter-gatherers** in what is now Canada. Around A.D. 1000, though, scientists say they **migrated** to the Southwest. The land there was hot and dry, and there were not many animals to hunt. Their Pueblo neighbors taught them how to farm, and the Navajo soon learned how to plant and care for corn, their most important crop.

Because the land was hot and dry, the Navajo built one-room houses of wood and mud called hogans. The mud dried quickly and stayed hard in the hot sun. The doorway of the hogan always faced east. The Navajo believed the morning sun would bless the family with its rays.

Hogans can be cone-shaped or round like this one, but the doorways of all hogans face the east. ▼



SPANISH EXPLORERS ARRIVE

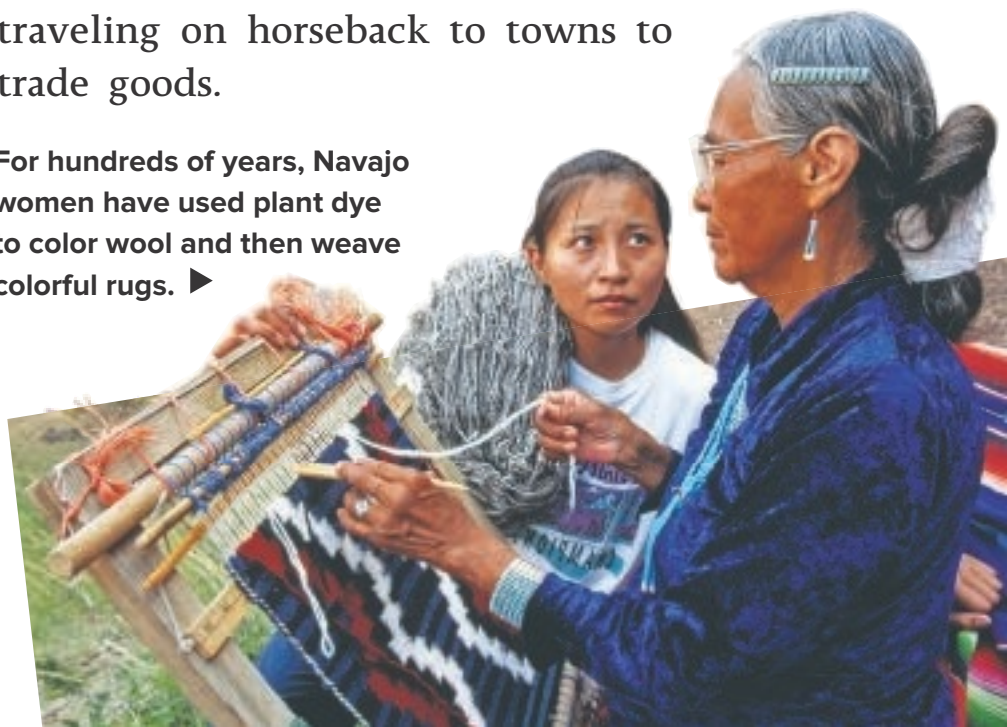
Early in the 1600s, Spanish explorers traveled through the Southwest. Many explorers did not treat the Navajo well, and the Navajo fought with the explorers.

However, the Spanish explorers also brought animals with them that the Navajo had never seen, such as sheep, goats, and horses. It was not long before the Navajo began raising animals and riding horses, too.

The milk from goats and the meat from sheep became an important part of the Navajo's diet. The Navajo also spun the sheep wool into yarn, which they wove into colorful cloth and rugs.

Riding horses meant that the Navajo could travel farther and faster. They were soon exploring larger areas of land and easily traveling on horseback to towns to trade goods.

For hundreds of years, Navajo women have used plant dye to color wool and then weave colorful rugs. ►



THE 1864 JOURNEY



A TIME OF STRUGGLE

In the 1800s the Navajo found themselves in a war with settlers over land. As the fighting grew worse, the United States government took action. In 1864 the military forced thousands of Navajo to march about 300 miles to Fort Sumner in New Mexico.

The Navajo who survived the journey suffered from a lack of food. Four years later the Navajo were allowed to return home, but they were given back only a small part of their land.

Then in the middle 1900s the government destroyed many of the Navajo's animals because their livestock was **eroding** the land. Without their livestock, it was hard for the Navajo to earn money.

AN IMPORTANT DISCOVERY

In the 1920s oil was discovered on Navajo land. This discovery changed Navajo life. The oil companies paid the Navajo to drill on their land. Some Navajo worked for the companies, too. The money from the oil companies provided **scholarships** for some Navajo to go to college, too.

When the oil was first discovered, the Navajo had to speak with one voice in order to **negotiate** with companies that wanted the oil. So in 1923 they organized a tribal government. Local groups were represented by **delegates**. The Navajo Nation was later reorganized to make a three-branch system similar to the United States government.

Delegates of the Navajo Nation still meet today in Window Rock, Arizona. ▼

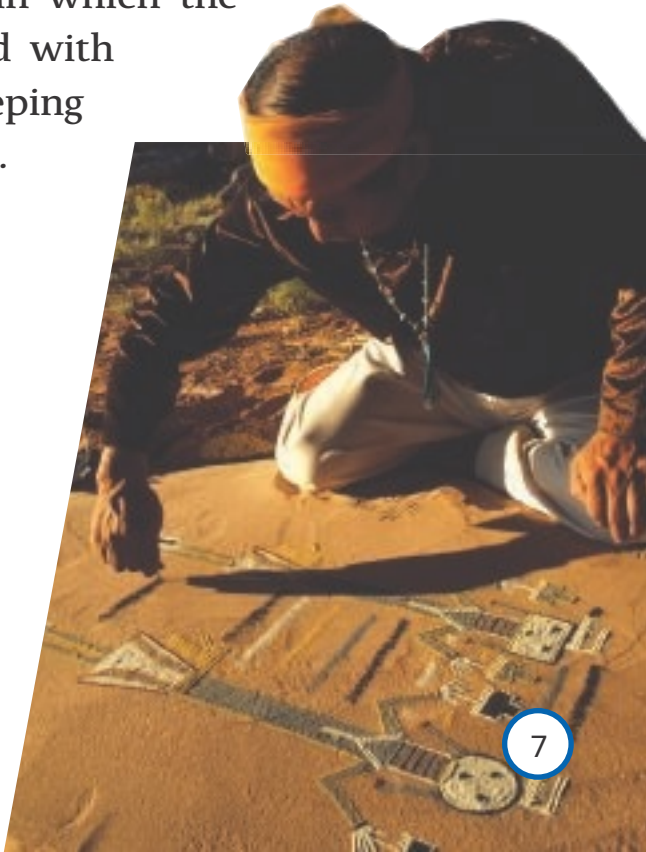
KEEPING TRADITIONS ALIVE

Today many Navajo still follow the traditions of their ancestors. They keep their language alive and live in harmony with nature. One way they do this is through stories which have been passed down. Many stories feature animals or other elements, such as the sun and the wind.

The Navajo still perform ceremonies to mark important times, such as getting married. They also create the art their ancestors did. They weave beautiful blankets and make sand paintings.

Navajo tribal delegates continue to meet several times a year. Many delegates at the meetings speak in the Navajo language. This is just one more way in which the Navajo have changed with the world while keeping their traditions alive.

Sand paintings, or dry paintings, are often used in Navajo ceremonies. ►



GLOSSARY

delegates representatives

eroding wearing away little by little

hunter-gatherers people who moved around, following the animals they hunted and gathering berries and other foods

migrated moved from one place to settle somewhere else

negotiate talk over in order to come to an agreement

scholarships special money set aside for people to go to college

thrive to do very well; succeed

Reading Skill

Cause and Effect In the 1920s oil was found on Navajo land. How did this discovery change Navajo life? Find and list some effects this discovery had.

Cause → Effect
→
→
→
→

Check Understanding

- 1. Recall** Who are the Navajo?
- 2. Synthesize** Settlers and Navajo fought over land. In 1864 the government made the Navajo leave. What other way could the government have ended the fighting?
- 3. Evaluate** When new people came to Navajo country, they brought change with them. For the Navajo, were the changes good, bad, or both? Tell what you think and why.

Writing in Social Studies

Essay The Navajo still keep traditions passed down to them from their ancestors. What are some traditions you might pass on to your children? Explain in an essay.



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