



SAGEBRUSH SURGEON



~ by ~
Florence Crannell Means



THE GOOD AND THE BEAUTIFUL LIBRARY



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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 *Dinéétah*, 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 were marching



Navajo rock art

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.”¹ 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 completely unprepared for the nearly 10,000 who eventually arrived

¹ 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

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.”²

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

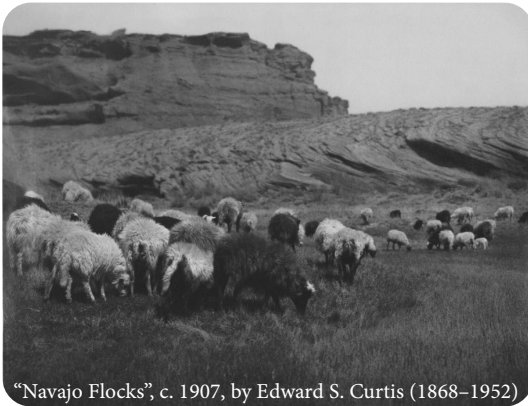
Adapting to Changes

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



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

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.

THE NAVAJO WAY OF LIFE

Religious Traditions and Beliefs

The Navajo people have traditional beliefs regarding their life here on earth and the deities who watch over them during their lifetime. They believe in two classes of beings: the Holy People and the Earth People, with the Holy People having dominion over those on earth. The Navajo people believe that the Holy People, long ago, taught them the right way to live and the way to behave in every aspect of their daily lives. They are to live in harmony with the earth and her inhabitants, including man, animals, plants, and insects.

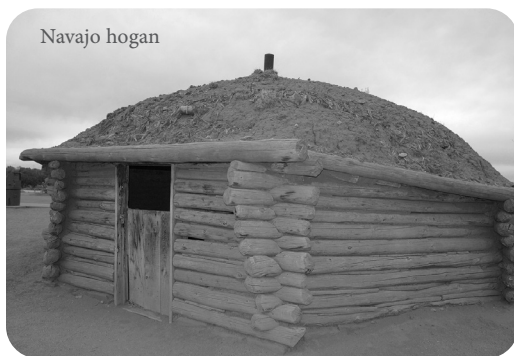
As with many ancient cultures, the Navajo have a strong faith in numerology, which is defined as a belief in the divine relationship between a number and the events that occur in life. For the Navajo, the number four holds special meaning. There are four directions, four seasons, four sacred mountains, and four colors that are associated with them. The original Navajo even consisted of four clans. Most rituals that the Navajo practice include the number four, or a multiple of four, within them. Examples of this can be found in weddings and sacred ceremonies, of which there are over fifty different kinds in the Navajo culture. Each is performed at a specific time, for a specific reason.

Many Navajo have faith in their medicine man for healing, through the use of herbs, songs, prayers, and ceremonies (known as a “sing”) to cure their ailments. While some tribal members will seek treatment at the hospital with modern medicine, the medicine man holds a prominent place in their society, as he is believed to have supernatural gifts used to diagnose an individual’s problems and restore harmony within his or her body and soul. He is held in high regard, not just as a healer, but as a keeper of the Navajo traditions and culture.

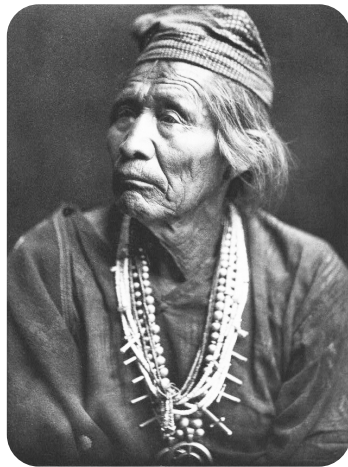
Navajo Lifestyle

The Navajo home is called the *hogan* (also sometimes spelled *hooghan*) and is considered the center of the Navajo world. Traditionally, this shelter is made of wooden poles, tree bark, and mud, with a doorway which always faces east in order to welcome the morning sun and receive good blessings at the start of the day. These homes are very simply made, often round and cone-shaped, with an opening at the apex of the cone for smoke from the fire that is located in the center of the earthen floor.

The hogan is more than just a dwelling place or somewhere to eat and sleep. The Navajo believe that the hogan is a gift of the gods, and it occupies a unique place in the world. The round hogan is symbolic of the sun, and the creation of a new hogan is a community affair. Once built, a hogan is consecrated with a blessing ritual, where the Holy People are asked to bless it with happiness.



While it is built out of sight, this small hogan is a replica of a hogan without the smoke hole. The sweat hogan is constructed



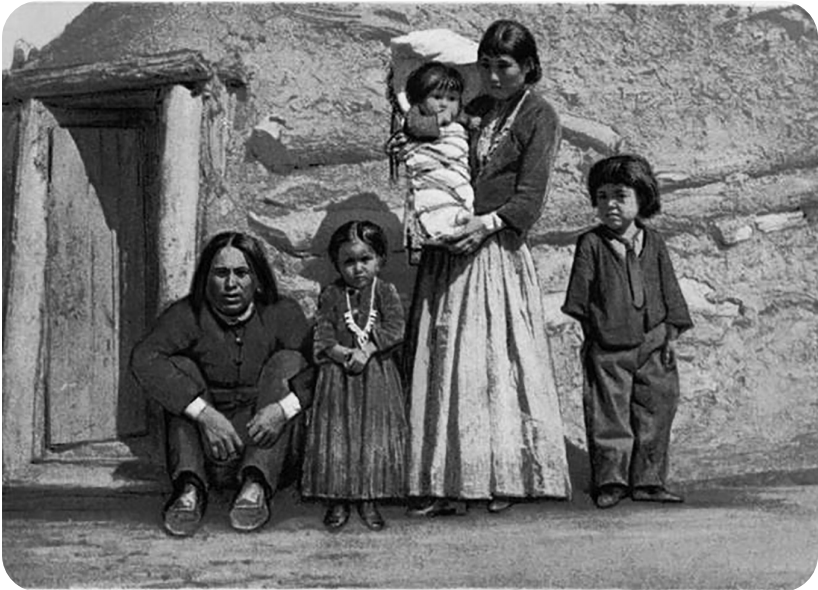
“Navajo Medicine Man,” c. 1907,
by Edward S. Curtis (1868–1952)

Most Navajo families who own sheep also have several hogans so they can stay mobile through the seasons. Usually, though, the family has one main location for the primary hogan, which will have a smaller “sweat hogan”

out of sticks with forked ends that fasten together like a tripod. Two straight sticks are positioned at the east to make a door, which can be closed with several blankets. The hogan is heated by placing hot rocks within and provides a place for purifying rituals to be held.

Navajo Clothing

The Navajo have a traditional method of dress, which is now used mainly for ceremonial gatherings. Women will wear a pleated skirt, made of velvet or cotton, with a long-sleeved blouse of similar material and color to the skirt. The skirt can be plain or tiered, sometimes with a layer of satin. The women will add a shawl and moccasins along with jewelry and a silver sash or belt. Traditional attire for men includes white pants with a velvet or cotton shirt, silver or turquoise jewelry, and moccasins. Both women and men wear their hair in a *tsiyeel*, which consists of brushing their hair back into a bun behind their head, then tying it with a white sheep wool string.



Navajo Family and Hogan, Arizona (H-2067)



Tom of Ganado (Indian Building,
Albuquerque, New Mexico)

Navajo Arts

Navajo people do not separate the concepts of art, religion, and everyday life. All are interconnected, so to describe an art form is to also describe the Navajo people as a whole. The minor details of what it is made of and what it looks like pale in comparison to what it means to the people who created the artwork.

Weaving has been an essential part of Navajo culture, dating back to their creation story in which the Spider Woman weaves beautiful rugs on her

loom. Navajo believe that it was through her teachings that the weavers learned their traditional craft.

“Spider Woman instructed the Navajo women how to weave on a loom which Spider Man told them how to make. The crosspoles were made of sky and earth cords, the warp sticks of sun rays, the healds of rock crystal and sheet lightning. The



Navajo Blanket Weavers, (Indian Building,
Albuquerque, New Mexico)

batten was a sun halo, white shell made the comb. There were four spindles: one a stick of zigzag lightning with a whorl of cannel coal; one a stick of flash lightning with a whorl of turquoise; a third had a stick of sheet lightning with a whorl of abalone; a rain streamer formed the stick of the fourth spindle, and its whorl was white shell.”³

³ *Epigraph to Spider Woman: A Story of Navajo Weavers and Chanters*, by Gladys A. Reichard, first published 1934, republished by Rio Grande Press, Inc., Glorieta, NM, 1968.



CHAPTER 1

Red Point Had Plenty of Savvy

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.

The sun-baked adobe hospital had little to recommend it except this able doctor, two good registered nurses, and twelve clean beds. It had no x-ray and no laboratory. It had one stove for cooking meals and for sterilizing. Yet, meager and homespun though it was, it overawed the people it was meant to serve. Death had visited it and left it swarming with evil spirits. In Arizona, United States of America, in the year 1927, it was held to be a place of witchcraft, its anesthetic and its knife ready to breach men's sacred flesh and steal their souls. A few of the neighbors came reluctantly for superficial treatment, but not one had dared risk surgery though hundreds were dying for need of it. Not one had dared until this girl had been thrown from her horse. So simple a thing as her fractured leg might be the key to the door stubbornly locked against the young doctor.

He looked back over his shoulder at the patient and out through the door at the desert. It seemed empty, but hidden in the hollows, under the junipers, against the sheltering rocks, he could envision a thousand *hogans* that nourished the free, bold life of the People, the *Diné*, the Navajo. He had found that free, bold life plagued by

all the ills in the medical dictionary. The people were blind, deaf, twisted. To their own ailments they had added the diseases of the encroaching whites. Yet they were stoic under their physical burden. They were handsome in spite of it, striding or cantering arrogantly in debonair rags, asking no pity. He found them able in their own world, knowing what to do: an admirable people.

The doctor wanted only one thing more than to heal them. He wanted to push out their narrow walls, help them to know the Father God of love in place of their careless or vindictive deities, give them hope instead of fear. He was a man of rugged strength, but often he felt physically sickened by their poverty and disease and by his own powerlessness to help them.

And now the first chink had been opened in their tight opposition to his ministry. The doctor had set this girl's leg and splinted it, but a few days ago his probing fingers, almost as perceptive as the x-ray he did not have, had given him bad news. The bone had formed a hinge, ends overlapping.

Dr. Salsbury sent for the girl's parents and, through his interpreter, put the case before them. To give their daughter a sound, straight leg, surgery was required, but surgery of the simplest sort. He had only to go in, he explained, and plate the bone. He would put in a steel plate to hold the ends until they had knitted properly. The knife? Yes; but hardly more than for cutting your fingernail or taking out a cactus thorn.

For three days the family had come and sat on the floor in the hospital hall. For three days the doctor had carried on the debate through his interpreter. Dr. Salsbury was not naturally a patient man; the glint of his eyes under folded lids showed that and so did the set of his chin and the imperious arch of his nose. But he had been patient because the stakes were big. And he had won. The parents had given their consent.

Now he went about the simple task, sure of his skill but taking no chances. He worked with unhurried swiftness, his eyes sharp upon signs of hemorrhaging in the region of the break.

“Doctor”—the little fair nurse spoke on a caught breath—“she is not breathing.”

The surgeon’s tempo quickened. Artificial respiration, adrenaline—

The normal ruddy bronze of the patient’s skin had paled to clay color. Dull white arcs of eye showed below her lids. The skin drew tight across the bones of her face.

“An embolism,” Dr. Salsbury said without expression. “Nothing we can do.”

Except for the drip of a leaky tap and the buzz of flies against a screen, the operating room was still. The pleasant dissonance of sheep bells on the road was something from another world. No sound came from the hall where the girl’s family were waiting.

The doctor was no stranger to death, and he was used to hard jobs, but up to now this was his stiffest assignment. For three days he had argued with these parents, and now he must go out to them and say, “Your daughter is dead.” That word, dead, would rebuild, higher and stronger than ever, the opposition to anything he might offer.

He summoned the interpreter and stood looking down at the father and mother, at the assorted relatives. “Your daughter is dead,” he told them gently.

While the waiting family sat as if they had not heard, the interpreter repeated his words in the clicking gutturals of the People. When he had finished, the mother turned her face aside and drew the folds of her blanket across it.

The doctor went on talking, trying to tell, simply, how the clot of blood, which no physician could capture or delay, had gone its relentless way to the heart. The interpreter’s voice jerked, slowed, hesitated, before the alien idea. The doctor caught at the few words he could make out and wondered about the rest. The interpreter could condemn him with the twist of a phrase.

After a taut silence, the father spoke. His slow monotone gradually quickened as he addressed his wife, the interpreter, his

brothers and sisters, and his mother. After a single unblinking stare, he did not look at the doctor at all.

When he was done, the women gathered themselves up from the floor in one fluid movement, and the whole group padded out at the door. They climbed into their wagon, and the team jogged down the rough road. The doctor watched them till they were out of sight.

“Doctor,” called one of the nurses, “every last patient in the hospital has got up and skipped, even the sickest ones. The minute they heard there’d been a death—”

“Well, I guess that’s that,” said the doctor.

It was by no means all of it, as he was soon to learn. At Hubbell’s trading post, a mile from the hospital, the dead girl’s family clambered out, heavy-footed, and told the story to acquaintances they found there. A trading post is a focus in the desert, one of its rare social centers. There are always Navajos at a trading post.

On this day a few women were sitting out on the ground in the sun, their babies on cradleboards beside them. A few sailed along slowly on ample skirts, studying the shelves and charting their trading strategy. A few men lounged with hands spread on counters, likewise surveying the stock of canned tomatoes and peaches, of crackers and tobacco and coffee, and speculatively eyeing the racks of pawned silver, picking out jewelry they recognized.

At first the audience was scanty, but it grew with magic speed. The group in the store drifted outdoors, still talking, and passing Indians stopped to see what the trouble was; then, kicking their horses’ flanks for speed, they galloped out beyond the horizon. Soon others came riding in. The haranguing went on.

Don Lorenzo Hubbell was away, and his man considered the crowd uneasily. It had been a long time since the Navajos had gone on a rampage, but today the talk of their medicine men was fanning their banked fire into a blaze. The medicine men had been watching the new mission doctor restively. He was muscling in on their territory, and they weren’t at all sure they could hold their own with him. They knew force when they saw it.

They themselves had force and weight with the people by reason of their numbers, wealth, and subtlety. Some of the spellbinders among them were recounting the wrongs done them by the *Bilagáana*, the Americans. The orators went back to the days of their grandfathers in 1864, when white troops corralled the tribe in the Canyon de Chelly, deep with winter snows, burned their hogans and their supplies, drove off their sheep, and took the people away to starve and die at Fort Sumner in New Mexico. Four years later the soldiers brought them home again, cut in half by sickness and marauding Apaches, a band of eight thousand men, women, and children. The Great White Father had promised them schools for their children if they would cease their wild, free raiding and live at peace. From that time on the Navajos had been as meek as whipped children. They had kept their word. How had the *Bilagáana* kept theirs? The *Bilagáana* had limited the grazing ground of the Navajo and destroyed his hunting ground and killed him with new diseases. As for educating all his children, that promise also the *Bilagáana* had forgotten.

Now was a good time to show that even whipped boys can turn on their tormentors. Now was a good time to show that the *Bilagáana* could not safely send white medicine men to lure strong young Navajo women into the hospital and kill them with their knives.

For those who were ignorant of it, the speakers gave a brief account of the girl's death. She and her parents had ridden from their distant hogan to this same trading post. Near it a dance was to be held, not only a major social event but the place to find a husband for a marriageable daughter. The hearers needed no descriptions. They could see the girl sitting on her horse lightly, her skirts fanned out over its sides like medieval trappings. Her best velveteen bodice would be fastened across her round young body with buttons of silver and turquoise. Her hair, browned by the fierce sun, would have strayed out of its heavy binding of sacred cord. Silver and turquoise would gleam white and blue at her neck, wrists, ears, fingers.

The sun had set, the narrator said, before the party reached Hubbell's. As their horses drank at the watering troughs in the wide crossroads, lights began to shine from the stone trading post and from the Hubbells' house adjoining it, and beyond the post, in the open, families were gathered round little campfires to cook and eat before the fun began. The girl would be eyeing the crowd expectantly, as she and her elders cantered toward it. Perhaps one of these young men would someday become her husband.

Coffee pots steamed. Browning bread and sputtering goat's meat gave off a hungry smell. A stick of green juniper snapped out showering sparks. Rearing, the girl's horse shied away from the fireworks while children scampered, laughing and shrieking, out of his way. The girl sat him easily as he veered and set out across the desert on a dead run, and all would have been well if one of his flying hoofs had not found a gopher hole. He plunged forward, the girl shot over his head, and he crashed down upon her.

She had pulled herself free of his thrashing body and tried to stand but crumpled on the ground. A medicine man pushed through the gathering crowd and studied her with professional keenness. Her leg was broken, he said.

Don Lorenzo strode over from the trading post to investigate. The hospital was a bare mile away, with a new doctor, he reminded them. The doctor had good ways of setting legs, and there was nothing to fear from a mere broken bone.

That was how it had been. A strong, healthy girl, a common break, lying promises, death.

At this point a few of the old women joined in. Though anonymous in the tribe, they were powerful because they held the whip hand in their family groups. Their eyes glittered out of old faces hardened in passionate contours. They reminded the assemblage of the happiness and virtue of the past—The Good Old Days—when the People were devout and worshiped their Mother, the Earth, and their Father, the Sky, and observed all the taboos and all the injunctions; and how this strange doctor was here for the

purpose of overthrowing that allegiance and setting up pale new gods. It would be a good deed to strike a blow against the whole thing, the old women said.

Out of the rising fire of anger, men spoke boldly. There were enough of them. They could easily kill the white doctor, each taking an oath of silence to protect the rest. They could kill him as easily as killing a fly. They could kill him tonight.

Another medicine man took the floor. Red Point spoke with easy poise among his people: “This is how I see it. When you are sick or hurt, you call in a Navajo medicine man or a white doctor. That is because you know that they have spent their lives studying sickness and health and can see further into them than you. Sometimes the patient does not get well. I have used all my knowledge and strength and yet have seen my patient die. You know that this is true, my brothers. And you other medicine men and women, you, also, have seen your patients die. So it is with the white medicine man. I do not know what happened to our daughter. But of one thing I am sure: it was not what the doctor wanted to have happen.

“You could easily kill the white doctor, as you have said, and there are many of us to hide the killer. But for every one of us, ten *Bilagáana* would come riding in, and before this thing ended, twenty *Diné* would be dead or imprisoned for the sake of one white man.

“And remember this, whatever you do, you cannot bring our daughter back.

“So my advice is go to your homes and forget it all as quickly as you can.”

Red Point was one of the greatest of the People’s shamans. He bulked large in every way—a large man with a large family and a large hogan that held even a *Bilagáana* sewing machine so that his wife and daughter could sew up their dozens of voluminous skirts with flying wheels instead of trudging fingers.

And Red Point had “plenty of savvy.” So the crowd listened, some scowlingly, more with reluctant nods. Their fire had cooled, and they scattered to their hogans.

When the word was brought to Doctor Tso, or Doctor Big, as the Navajos had nicknamed Dr. Salsbury, he was waiting for it, and so was his wife. Cora Salsbury was no Mrs. Big. She was pint-size and looked even smaller beside her husband. The Little Chief of the Salsbury team, she was the kind of small woman who stands and walks defiantly, proudly, almost pugnaciously erect, because her spirit is six-foot-four. If she was scared now, she did not show it, except by keeping her husband in sight and working even more snappily than usual. This was not the first time the two of them had waited for the next moment to bring them death or life.

When the good news came, the doctor threw back his head and let out his breath in a long whistle.

“Might be a good plan to put Red Point on the hospital staff,” he said. “But I bet it’s a long day before I get a chance to operate on another Navajo.”



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 overcome other 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.