

# For the Navajo, the future is a tangled web

By JULES LOH  
AP Special Correspondent

BIG MOUNTAIN, Ariz. (AP) — Out here in the high desert, where people are as scarce as trees, a trip to the trading post has always been a high point in a Navajo's lonely struggle with life.

So it had been with Ella Deal. As a girl and as a woman of 69 years, a day's journey to Oraibi to trade — but mostly to visit, gossip, swap news — was well worth the 40-mile effort.

No longer. Now Ella Deal and her friends meet at Oraibi, shake their graying heads in

bewilderment, embrace,

## Relocation is a bitter pill for those whose ancestral home means everything

weep.

They weep because they are at a loss to understand why the United States government has determined that the only solution to a problem of the government's own making must be at their expense.

To clean up its own mess, the government has determined to banish one out of every 15 Na-

vajos, maybe as many as 10,000, from their sacred ancestral homeland.

In other words, from the Navajos' point of view, destroy them. From the government's point of view, the accepted term is ruefully reminiscent of the Indian Removal Act of 1830: relocate them.

"In our tongue," says one of Ella Deal's friends, Pauline Whitesinger, "there is no word for relocation. To move away means to disappear and never be seen again."

But move they must, by 1986, off of land now decreed by the government to belong exclusively to their neighbors of antiquity, the Hopi Indians.

The Hopis, for their part, have likewise been told to move off of land decreed to belong solely to the Navajos, but only about 100 Hopis are affected and the Navajos are not interested in evicting them.

The Navajos must indeed leave, however, and the tragedy is that there is no place else on their reservation that they can go.

The government's solution: buy them houses in nearby cities off the reservation.

The seeds of all this turmoil were sown in the form of an executive order written in haste in Washington a century ago.

That brief order, over the years, has evolved into a mare's nest of decrees and acts and rulings entangling all three branches of government and finally came to be described as "The Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute," which, in origin, it never was.

"Stop. Stop everything and go back to the beginning," says Peter MacDonald. "That is the only way out of this madness."

MacDonald is chairman of the Navajo Tribe. Madness is one of the more temperate words he uses in discussing the matter. He also speaks of cruelty, and of a double standard.

"If this is an Indian land claim, then settle it the way every other claim has been settled from Alaska to Maine. Compensate the Indian for his land where businesses and homes now stand. Evict a white man? That would be unthinkable.

"This time Indians occupy the claimed land and somehow eviction, removal, relocation becomes acceptable. Why?"

All right, then, back to the beginning.

For all of their known history, the Hopis have lived in several tiny villages atop three mesas in the very heart of a vast area where the Navajos, for all of their known history, have also lived.

Both regard their ancestral homes as more than a birthright.

To the Hopis, a tribe of about 7,000, their mesas are holy ground, the place where life began and harmony is possible.

To the Navajos, who number about 150,000, the surrounding land, embraced by four sacred mountains, similarly defines not just their home but their culture. Within that embrace they have woven a mythological web that holds them together as a people. Beyond it, religious songs and ceremonials lose their worth.

The climactic moment in Navajo history, in fact, was when the U.S. Cavalry drove them from their homeland — burned their cornfields, slaughtered their sheep, marched them 350 miles to a desert outpost in New Mexico, Fort Sumner, and kept them there four years.

They were allowed to return, in 1868, when it was determined there was no gold in Navajo country after all. The Navajos call the experience The Long Walk. So wrenching was the ordeal that, like the Deluge, dates are reckoned from it.

"What we confront right now," chairman MacDonald says, "is a second Long Walk."

The Hopis, out on their remote mesas, bothering no one, numbering only about 1,800 at the time, were not treated to a Long Walk and not assigned a reservation.

They needed one, though, or so the agent assigned to see to their well being decided. He wanted to get rid of a couple of preying Anglos and needed government property to kick them off of.

In 1862, by that troublesome executive order, President Chester A. Arthur gave them a reservation — sort of.

An arbitrary boundary was drawn around the Hopi villages: a rectangle of one degree

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latitude, one degree longitude. Tidy. An area of 4,000 square miles — twice the size of Delaware — for the use of those 1,800 Hopis and "such other Indians as the secretary of the interior may see fit to settle thereon."

Hundreds of Navajo families had been settled thereon for generations. Ella Deal's mother, grandmother and great-grandmother lived there. The latter two survived The Long Walk.

One day recently Ella Deal led her son, Percy, to the top of Big Mountain to point out his ancestor's graves. She also showed him where, at his birth, she had buried his umbilical cord, according to Navajo tradition. They stopped at one of four Navajo shrines on the mountain to weep and pray. The graves will soon be off-limits to them.

During the 1940s, to control overgrazing, the government divided both reservations into grazing districts. An area of about four square miles surrounding the Hopi mesas, Grazing District 6, was set aside strictly for Hopi use. About 100 Navajos had to clear out.

The remainder of the 4,000 square miles was designated a Joint Use Area to be shared by both tribes, although only a few hundred Hopis lived there compared with several thousand Navajos.

Picture, then, a target. The bullseye, District 6, was for Hopi use; the first ring for Navajo-Hopi joint use; the remainder for Navajo use.

That division happened in 1962. What remained was to apportion the Joint Use Area equitably to the people who lived on it, had lived on it all those generations.

Without listing each step of the way, it is enough to say that the federal court ruled that joint use meant equal ownership, Congress agreed, and so the Joint Use Area was finally divided by no more complex a formula than simple geography: half to the Hopis, half to the Navajos.

Thus the first ring around the bullseye became two rings.

Perhaps, after all those years since the 1882 executive order, no other or fairer way could be found. The real culprit is history. Certainly the members of the government's Relocation Commission are going about their joyless job with reluctance, and not without compassion.

The actual half-and-half division, for example, is not so neat as describing circles. The boundary is most irregular, designed to dislocate the fewest number of people.

It is so irregular that, to make sure everybody knows where it is, it was necessary to build a fence. The fence is 300 miles long. A five-strand barbed wire fence long enough to encircle Delaware.

About 7,000 Navajos and 100 Hopis found themselves on the wrong side of the fence. They have until 1986 to get on the right side of the fence or ... Or what?

Surely not the cavalry. A member of the Relocation Commission staff, speculating, says, "What will probably happen is that at the end of five years the names of those who have not relocated will have to be given to some law enforcement arm."

If the birth rate of the fenced-out Navajos continues at its present level they will number about 10,000 in 1986. The problem nags. Where will they go?

The tribe owns reservation land jointly; homesites are assigned by customary family usage. Where your umbilical cord is buried, that's where you belong. Besides, the land is woefully overused now. There is just no room for 10,000 more.

As for the 100 Hopis, chairman MacDonald says, "Let them be. We are not interested in moving Hopis."

Congress, realizing the Navajos' landless plight, authorized them to pick a suitable place to relocate. The place the Navajos selected was a federally-owned site near the Grand Canyon, still within their holy mountains' benevolent embrace.

Irony dictated otherwise. It turned out to be white man's happy hunting ground — a place where a group of sportsmen had a long-standing interest. The parcel was withdrawn. So far, no other has been found.

No other solution, either, than to get out.

Perhaps, in the end, the burden will fall heaviest on the tribe itself.

The fenced-off area is in the remotest part of the reservation, the heartland in more ways than one. It is the areas least touched by Anglo influences. It is where the Navajo culture flourishes, inspiring the less-traditional Navajo who lives off the reservation and returns home for spiritual sustenance. The Navajo Mecca.

A few Navajos, lured by a house with electricity and a cash bonus for relocating voluntarily, have already moved from the heartland.

One of them, Tohnas Curley, who is 91, moved with his daughter to a new house in Flagstaff. It seemed like a good idea, until one day the old man turned to his daughter and asked:

"Why is it taking so long to die?"