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Bury My Heart At Big Mountain

By Michael Riley

Oblivious to the thunderheads that gather above her, Roberta Blackgoat, 69, an elder of the Navajo tribe, stoops with a stick to scratch a rectangle in the northern Arizona desert. Beneath this sandy soil her ancestors for five generations have buried the umbilical cords of their newborn, a ritual affirmation of their link to this harsh and haunting land. Today, however, a land dispute with a neighboring tribe threatens to uproot Blackgoat and more than 10,000 other Navajo in a U.S. Government eviction unrivaled since the internment of 110,000 Japanese Americans during World War II.

Relocation of the Navajo is the Government's unhappy answer to a quarrel that predates the white man's arrival in the American West. The Hopi, a band of sedentary farmers, crafted the earliest of their distinctive apartment-like stone dwellings atop steep mesas in northern Arizona almost a millennium ago. The Navajo, a fast-growing tribe of hunters turned shepherds, arrived about 500 years later but proved more aggressive and dynamic. Eventually, the Navajo and their herds outnumbered and surrounded the Hopi and their crops. Hopi Chairman Ivan Sidney, 37, portrays his tribe as a peaceful people provoked to vengeance: "It's like growing up in a rough neighborhood. You have to get tough to protect your property rights."

The federal action involves divvying up 1.8 million acres of disputed grazing and farm land in northeast Arizona. At the heart of the controversy is a Navajo settlement in what is supposed to be Hopi territory: Big Mountain, a juniper-dotted ridge about 50 miles east of Grand Canyon National Park. It is a place of endless sagebrush and soaring golden eagles, undergirded by rich seams of coal and uranium, where a band of perhaps 1,000 or so Navajo has vowed to resist relocation. "To move away is to disappear," says Pauline Whitesinger, an elderly resister with an easy smile. "In our traditional tongue, there is no word for relocation."

The concept of land ownership is foreign to both the Hopi and Navajo traditions (despite the tribes' vigorous assertions of territorial rights), a point little appreciated by successive white administrators. Left alone, the stronger Navajo, who now number about 170,000, would have prevailed over the Hopi, who now number about 10,000. Instead, the U.S. Government has struggled to mediate the dispute for more than a century but so far has only prolonged it.

After decades of Navajo encroachment into territory long claimed by the Hopi and successive efforts by the Federal Government to redraw the boundaries of their lands, a federal district court in Arizona in 1962 declared much of the disputed territory to be a "joint-use area." That effectively allowed the more numerous Navajo to dominate the land. But in 1974 Congress decided that it would be fairer to divide the joint lands equally, a solution that pleased neither tribe. Soon about 300 miles of barbed-wire fence bristled across the region, and the Government ordered 100 Hopi to one side and 10,000 Navajo to the other. By dangling economic incentives, the Government has managed to lure about 4,000 Navajo away from the Hopi area, a choice made easy by the scarcity of jobs and a ban on home construction there. Basic relocation benefits have grown from \$25,000 a family to \$66,000. Total costs, \$106 million to date, may eventually exceed \$500 million.

Critics say this costly program has suffered from inept management and a failure to prepare Indians for a bewildering new world of utility bills, car payments and real estate con men. "You can't take Indians off the land, drop them in the middle of a subdivision and expect them to survive," says Lee Brooke Phillips, a lawyer for the Navajo resisters. "People are losing their homes. Their families are being broken up."

One example is Roberta Blackgoat's son Danny, a strapping, college-educated 34-year-old who abandoned the reservation in exchange for a \$40,000 house and \$5,000 in cash. Like some other Indians pushed into white society, Blackgoat slipped into drug and alcohol abuse. He longed for the security of his tribal home on Big Mountain. "I remembered the land," he says. "I remembered home."

Despite their conflict over these homelands, many Hopi and Navajo have become friends through business dealings or school. Hopi Chairman Sidney and Navajo Chairman Peterson Zah were schoolmates, but as Sidney says, "When I was elected, the friendship took a vacation." Sidney threatens to break a sacred buckskin treaty

wand if the Navajo do not evacuate Hopi land, which would signify the complete collapse of an ancient vow, and he refuses to entertain notions of a land swap or cash deal to settle matters. Each side is waging a sophisticated publicity campaign, assisted by experienced outside activists. Indeed, for all his talk of "sacred" Hopi lands, Chairman Sidney has posed for pictures in ancient Hopi villages, violating a religious prohibition.

The evacuation was originally planned to begin this month, but the Government will not force any of the Navajo to move until new houses can be built for them. Yet a cloud of paranoia darkens Big Mountain. Many Navajo believe their relocation is the result of a conspiracy between the Government and energy companies eager to mine the reservation's riches. Meanwhile, Danny Blackgoat has decided to move back to Big Mountain. He wants to be near his mother and rebuild an abandoned hogan, the traditional Navajo dwelling of juniper logs and mud. His mother, stoic and unyielding, welcomes the support. "The Creator," she vows, "is the only one that's going to relocate me."

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