

Transcript of KMYR series on The Public Affair: "Navajo Country"
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Albuquerque Museum, gift of Zane Blaney

This radio program is a five-part report by Carrol Cagle on the activism of the Navajo community near Farmington and Gallup, New Mexico after the murder of three Tribal members by Anglo teenagers. Border town tensions, racial discrimination, and the formation of the Coalition for Navajo Liberation are topics discussed by Carrol Cagle. Also touched upon is the impact of coal gasification on the Navajo Reservation.

Keywords and topics: Navajo Reservation, coal gas, energy, land use, Native Americans, civil rights, discrimination, tension, racial issues, protest, Coalition for Navajo Liberation, John Redhouse, Peter MacDonald, Raymond Nakai, Marlo Webb, Carrol Cagle, Farmington, Gallup, activism, Civil Rights Commission

ZANE BLANEY: Following the murder of three Navajo men in the Farmington and Gallup areas, freelance investigative reporter Carrol Cagle wrote the following series on "Navajo Country".

CARROL CAGLE: New Mexico, which long has prided itself on being a tri-cultural state of harmonious diversity, has now been witnessing racial strife. There has been bitterness and there have been confrontations, some of them violent. Three brutal mutilation murders are a part of the story. The setting for the conflict is Navajo Country in northwest New Mexico, primarily the reservation border towns of Gallup and Farmington.

[background music with Cagle voiceover]

The leadership of the angry Navajos lies not with the tribal government, but with the Coalition for Navajo Liberation formed this Spring after the three Navajo murders. Those murders, through with three teenaged Anglos were sent to the boy's institution in Springer, provoked a series of Saturday protest marches and the formation of the coalition. And they are bringing to the forefront of some long submerged grievances. Coalition leader John Redhouse says the murders should not be regarded as, in his words, "the acts of three crazy kids". A longtime Farmington-area resident, as are the other coalition leaders, Redhouse says Anglo

high school students have long had, what he calls, “a sport, sort of a perverted tradition, of beating up and rolling drunken Indians and bragging about it in the hallways the next day.”

Drunkenness among Indians also has emerged as a major grievance. The coalition and its allies charge that Anglo merchants are trafficking in misery by peddling cheap booze to Indians, including Indians who already are drunk or underaged. And the coalition leaders say that the violence directed against Indians and rampant alcoholism are only part of an entire system of racial discrimination, some subtle and some overt. This racism, they say, includes police brutality, discrimination in restaurants and other public places, and a lack of adequate Indian-oriented services in schools and the Anglo-operated Indian Center. They say it also involves examples of plain cultural insensitive, as when the sheriff’s posse parade included a contingent of mounted cavalry from Fort Bliss [Texas], wearing 19th Century trooper uniforms. This provoked a tear-gas throwing melee in downtown Farmington because, as Redhouse put it, “The cavalry are our Nazis.” And the coalition leaders add that the racism includes economic discrimination in many forms. They say it ranges from the housing and job markets to exploitation of Indian jewelry and crafts, and particularly includes full-scale energy industrialization of the reservation. Some Navajos are bitterly angry at the development of coal-burning electricity generating stations, strip mines, electronic plants, and massive coal gasification plants on the reservation. The benefits of these projects, they say, go to Anglo corporations and energy-hungry Anglo cities, while rank-and-file Navajos have been sold out by their own tribal government and by the federal government. Two entities supposedly charged with protecting the rights and interests of the Navajo people.

[Buffy Sainte-Marie singing “Oh what can I do? say a powerless few/ With a lump in your throat and a tear in your eye / Can’t you see that their poverty’s profiting you?/ My country ‘tis of thy people you’re dying” from her song, “My Country: ‘Tis of Thy People You’re Dying”]

CAGLE: This is Carrol Cagle on KMYR.

[04:14]

BLANEY: It comes as a shock to some that the normally quiet and reserved Navajos are now marching in the streets, forming coalitions, and fighting back. Today, Carrol Cagle talks about the reaction in the Farmington area to the new activism.

[Buffy Sainte-Marie singing in the background]

CAGLE: The people of Farmington have reacted in several ways, mostly negative, to the sudden development of militancy on the part of area Navajos. Many have reacted with fear, which has been fed by the typical, rhetorical excesses of militant groups. Many have responded angrily in ways ranging from sullen hostility to gossip about vigilante movements. And a minority of Anglos have been sympathetic to the Navajos' grievances. A spokesperson for one such group responding to charges that her group was unrepresentative, said that was the case because, in her words, "There are few concerned people to speak out on injustices."

However else the Anglos feel, most began with responses of surprise and shock that the long-peaceful Navajos, a fixture in the reservation border town, would be involved in demonstrations and other disturbing activities. The charges are constantly made that the Coalition for Navajo Liberation, which is the leader of the militant Indians, is made up of outside agitators, even though all the coalition leaders are longtime Farmington-area residents. One Anglo auto parts dealer told me, "The ones that are protesting have come from other places. They are a bunch of outsiders that are trying to stir things up. I've talked to some of the local Navajos and, hell, they don't have any complaints." The mayor of Farmington, a handsome automobile dealer named Marlo Webb, doesn't use the outside agitator label, but he does say that the coalition leaders are a self-appointed clique representing no one but themselves. Webb told me in an interview, and I quote, "Any permanent solution will have to involve a majority of the Navajo people. These people don't represent the majority. Whether we can ever satisfy them, I don't know. We can't continue to devote so much time and energy to such a small segment" end of quote. Although many Anglo townspeople were shocked at the mutilation murders of three Navajos this Spring, they think the reaction of the Coalition has been excessive. As in the case of Watergate, many feel that enough controversy has erupted and that it's time to restore tranquility

to Farmington. Val Cooper, the pleasant but puzzled editor of the *Farmington Daily Times*, says of the Coalition, "This bunch seems bet on self-destruction and they'll take a lot of innocent people with them."

There's a contrast between what has happened and the scene over in Gallup, another rough-and-ready reservation border town. Gallup, although it has been the target of opposition by militants to the Navajo Tribal Fair, has moved much faster in dealing with alcoholism treatment programs and its city leaders appear to be more responsive to the need for reforms. And Farmington is a much more conservative city, culturally and politically, than Gallup due to Farmington's agricultural, oil field, and Mormon-religion influences.

[Buffy Sainte-Marie sings, "The government now wants the Iroquois land/that of the Seneca and the Cheyenne/ It's here and it's now you must help us dear man/ Now that the buffalo's gone" from her song, "Now That the Buffalo's Gone"]

CAGLE: This is Carrol Cagle on KMYR.

[08:22]

BLANEY: The drunken Indian. A myth or a reality? In Farmington and Gallup, it's both. Today, Carrol Cagle takes a closer look at the problem.

[audio clip from about putting alcohol in the water on an Indian reservation and running a railroad through the land]

[Buffy Sainte-Marie singing "I tippy-toe across your dream each night/So as not to wake you" from her song "Poppies"]

CAGLE: Not too long ago, a movie company planned to come into New Mexico for location work on a flick called "Nobody Loves a Drunken Indian". After some protests developed, the name of the movie was changed. But here in New Mexico, the stereotype of the drunken Indian remains very much alive. That's particularly the case in Gallup and Farmington and in the roadside honky-tonks adjoining the sprawling Navajo Reservation. It's true, as any visitor to these border towns can see, that alcoholism is rampant among Indians. Even on weekday afternoons, but especially on Friday and Saturday nights, groups of Navajos can be seen standing in small circles passing a bottle of cheap wine

around relentlessly until it's gone. Lurching, bloodied Indians can be seen lying in alleys. Every winter, several Indians die of exposure. Because of this obvious physical evidence, many Anglos, both in the area and casual visitors, conclude that there really is some validity in the drunken Indian stereotype. Somehow, they believe, Indians just can't hold their liquor. So, it's an easy jump from that conclusion to a more generalized assessment of the Navajos. That they're lesser beings than Anglos somehow, even though many otherwise well-meaning people believe there really may be something that happens to the Indian blood chemistry when liquor mixes with it. The assessment of most knowledgeable people in the field is clearly different. Gallup police chief, Robert Leyba, serves on an inter-agency committee dealing with alcoholism programs. He notes that it was only a generation ago, in 1953, that Indians were legally allowed to drink in New Mexico, so they haven't developed a social atmosphere involving cocktail parties and Saturday afternoon football beer busts. "Furthermore", Leyba says, "Navajos still aren't legally allowed to take liquor on to the reservation even though many do anyway. Many also end up heading into the nearest town and getting all their drinking in at a publicly visible place." Larry Dickerson, director of a church-sponsored alcoholism treatment program in Gallup, puts it this way, "They can't take booze on the reservation, so they carry it inside their stomachs." Dickerson, who has helped put together a struggling but progressive treatment program in Gallup, says he is pretty well convinced that the drunken Indian stereotype is a myth and, he adds, "There's no such thing as social drinking. You'd be drunk if you did that way, too."

So far, Gallup and Farmington have reacted quite differently to the Indian alcoholism problem. Gallup started a sleep-in program in 1970 to help prevent deaths from exposure and has expanded the program since. It also has actively sought federal grants for rehabilitation programs. Farmington's efforts have been more limited. Even the single state government alcoholism worker's position in Farmington has become vacant, and was since terminated.

[audio clip about historic treatment of Native Americans by Anglos]

CAGLE: This is Carrol Cagle on KMYR.

[12:59]

BLANEY: This week, the National Indian Youth Council, called on Navajo Tribal Chairman, Peter MacDonald, to justify development of coal gasification plants on the Navajo Reservation. Today, Carrol Cagle looks at the industrial exploitation of the Navajo people.

[audio clip of stampede]

CAGLE: The Navajo Reservation is huge, stretching across parts of three states. It's the largest in land area, 16 million acres, and in population, 125,000 Navajos, of any American Indian tribe. After the Navajos were subjugated by the U.S. government in 1868, they were forced marched to Fort Sumner in Southern New Mexico, detained there for four years, and then marched back in what is still known as "The Long Walk".

One hundred years ago, few could have foreseen the riches that would be eagerly sought in the remote high-desert country. Now, in a somewhat more genteel version of the Sooner land rush, major corporations are scrambling to remove, process, and sell those resources. For several years, huge coal-burning electrical power plants have been operating in the four corners area near Farmington. Other units are now under construction. Strip mines support the plant operations and supply electricity to major cities throughout the Southwest and California. Other strip mines, even more massive in size, will be necessary to support two huge coal gasification plants planned for the reservation. Each plant will cost 500 million dollars and each will consume huge amounts of water in order to convert coal into pipeline-quality synthetic gas. Among other industries already operating on and near the reservation are uranium mining and processing plants and a major electronics assembly plant. This rapidly accelerating process of industrialization has provoked sharp opposition among the leaders of the Coalition for Navajo Liberation and among an uncertain, but in -- but significant number of rank-and-file Navajos. This rapidly accelerating process of industrialization has provoked sharp opposition among the leaders of the Coalition for Navajo Liberation, and among an uncertain, but significant number of rank-and-file Navajos.

Coalition leaders charge that Anglo energy corporations and the federal energy agencies with the complete cooperation of Farmington-area business interests and even the Navajo Tribal government, are trying to exploit and ravage the

reservation. John Redhouse, a leader of the coalition, put it this way in testifying recently before the state advisory committee of the U.S. Civil Rights Commission, "The growth of Farmington's economy", he said, "is based on continued exploitation of our resources." Others testified, in these words, that "foreign invader corporations are destroying our land and people." Coalition leaders and a number of Navajos directly affected by industrial projects accused the tribal government of selling out the reservation's natural and religious environment for Anglo dollars and for driving cruel bargains over royalties at that. Still, there seems little prospect for immediate change in policy on the tribal government level. The newly-re-elected chairman of the Navajo Tribal Council is Peter MacDonald, a man who was booed by a few Navajos after his presentation to the Civil Rights Commission. MacDonald has a record which is oriented toward conciliation and cooperation with the managers of the energy projects.

[XIT sings, "Our people have survived/ And our eyes glow with memories / The reservation is our home / But for now we'll let it be/ The battle is not over / And our struggle has begun / A new hope has been born / And our sunny day will come" from their song "Someday"]

CAGLE: This is Carrol Cagle on KMYR.

[17:47]

BLANEY: Today, Carrol Cagle concludes his five-part assessment of hostilities between the Anglos and Navajos in the Farmington and Gallup areas. And a conclusion is, there is none.

[audio clip about loss of land and lifestyle of the Native Americans]

[Shannon McNally sings "Cowboys and Indians couldn't get along / Words were said / And blood was shed / The Indians lost their home" from her song "Cowboys and Indians"]

CAGLE: There's no simple assessment of racial conflicts between Anglos and Navajos in the Farmington area. Both groups are divided. Among the Anglos, the feelings range from overt sympathy toward the Navajo dissidents to outright

hostility and everything in-between. Most people appear to be disturbed and anxious that their once-peaceful community of 23,000 in northwest New Mexico finally has been hit by turbulence and strife. Mayor Marlo Webb, the main antagonist of the Coalition for Navajo Liberation, probably summed up the attitude of a majority of local Anglos when he testified in Civil Rights Commission field hearings. Farmington, the mayor said, and I quote, “has been the target of countless unfounded charges and numerous protest marches by a very small group of self-appointed militant anti-establishment individuals.” The Coalition leaders see things a lot differently. Sometimes their rhetoric angers or frightens the Anglos as when John Redhouse testified that “Nazi-ism is alive and well-hidden in the lily-white community of Farmington.” Fred Johnson, another Coalition leader, welcomed the Civil Rights Commission to what he called, “the Selma, Alabama of the Southwest. The only thing lacking”, Johnson said, “is the white sheets and the K.K.K.”

There are Anglos who side with the Indians. Henry Bird, an Episcopal clergyman who heads the San Juan Human Rights Committee, says Mayor Webb, in his words, “Just doesn’t know how to deal with people. He’s sort of like a computer.” During random interviews along Main Street in Farmington, I found several Anglo defenders of the Navajo cause, including one man who said, “They’ve been mistreated. There’s no doubt about it.”

The Navajos themselves are obviously divided on the issue of what to do about the grievances brought forward by the Coalition. In fact, one of the main themes of the coalition people is that tribal chairman, Peter MacDonald, his predecessor, Raymond Nakai, and the tribal government, have been working too cozily with federal energy agencies and large Anglo energy corporations. MacDonald recently was booed by a handful of angry Navajos after he testified before the Civil Rights Commission and was escorted from the auditorium by deputies. That was evidence enough that MacDonald simply is not trusted by some Navajos because his testimony had been strongly supportive of the Coalition. The issue of how much popular support the dissident coalition leaders have was not tested in this November’s election for Chairman, since MacDonald and Nakai were, once again, the contestants. At times, though, hundreds of Navajos have turned out at chapter house meetings with Mayor Webb or energy company executives, but it probably won’t be through the electoral process that any major resolutions are

reached. At least, not this year. The most likely result is sporadic but continued tension, some steps toward accommodation, possibly more violence.

[Buffy Sainte-Marie singing "Oh what can I do? say a powerless few/ With a lump in your throat and a tear in your eye / Can't you see that their poverty's profiting you?/ My country 'tis of thy people you're dying" from her song, "My Country: 'Tis of Thy People You're Dying"]

CAGLE: This is Carrol Cagle on KMYR.

[22:42]

[end]