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## The Price of a Horse

Franc J. Newcomb

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## THE PRICE OF A HORSE

*Franc J. Newcomb*

### 1. A Row of Skulls

Diary of Franc J. Newcomb, Aug. 30, 1919.

**O**N THURSDAY, our noon meal was a hurried affair and as soon as Mr. N. and I were finished, I stacked the dishes in the big dishpan and left them without benefit of soap or water. Dishes were unimportant on Thursday, for this was "mail day"—the red-letter day of the trading-post week. Whenever the weather permitted I rode my pony to the postoffice at Crozier, ten miles up the Tumecha Valley, for our week-old accumulation of letters, papers, and parcels.

Bay Billy was still munching his noon oats when I slid the saddle across his back, tightened the cinches, and forced the bit into his reluctant mouth. But when I sat enthroned in the big western saddle and the pony's swinging stride had taken us around the point of the mesa and out of sight of the trading post, my haste vanished in the warmth of the midday sun. Not even letters from home or papers containing news of the "civilized world" seemed of pressing importance. Bay Billy needed no guiding, for he knew every inch of the Valley trail over which he jogged with the easy shuffle of the well-trained cow pony. The morning wind had died away and the only sound to break the wide silence was the thud of my pony's unshod hoofs on the hard-packed earth. Occasionally a lizard darted across my path, or a desert sparrow, disturbed by our passing, flew aslant from one clump of rabbit brush to another.

It was Bay Billy who heard it first. Then distinctly, through the clear air, there came to my ears the faint rasp and crunch of metal biting into hard earth, followed by the grating sound of gravel sliding or falling.

"Someone is over by Yellow Peak, digging ruins," I remarked to the

pony. "Let's go over and see who it is." Digging ruins, or as we called it locally, "pot-hunting," was the chief outdoor amusement of all white people who came to Tumecha Valley, for there seemed to be ruins everywhere, and many of the burial mounds yielded very fine pottery, shell bracelets, and jet beads.

For about an eighth of a mile Bay Billy picked his way over loose rock and low bushes. At the top of a slanting ridge we came to a sudden halt, for just in front of us was a trench about fourteen feet long and four to five feet deep. The man who was still busily enlarging this trench stood in the bottom, more than half hidden from my view.

"Hello!" I called as he lifted his head to see who was approaching. "Been finding anything?"—meaning, of course, anything of value to a collector.

"Just what you see over there," was the answer as he waved his hand to indicate a long row of bleached skulls which glared back at us with empty eye-sockets.

"How many?" I asked, for the row seemed fairly endless to me.

"Twenty-seven!" he answered. "And a good many more got smashed in the dirt—too old to take out."

Throwing the reins around a stone, I walked to the edge of the pit and looked down. Then I went over to examine the row of skulls, arm bones, and the few beads he had sifted from the dust.

"Those bones were down pretty deep for a prehistoric burial," I remarked. "How were they lying?"

"Full length," he replied, "and they must have been a poverty-stricken bunch, for there was not a pottery bowl in the whole outfit!"

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The mystery of the skulls was much in my mind during the next few days, and then the crowding events of life at an Indian trading post pushed it into a half-forgotten background. Some years later I happened to make a visit to the home of Chee Dodge near Tson-sa-la Mountain, and he showed me a book published in 1849, which carried the following account.

## 2. Record of Invasion of Navajo Country

"Aug. 30, 1849—The troops decamped at seven this morning and shortly observed a group of Navajos watching them from a distance. The women I noticed wore blankets, moccasins, and leggings—the blankets being confined about the waist with a girdle. They bestrode

their horses '*a la mode des hommes.*' Several of the Navajos I noticed wore helmet-shaped caps, heightened in picturesque effect by being set off with a bunch of eagle feathers.

"Fifteen miles on our route we came to a hill fifty feet high, up which our artillery was drawn with some difficulty. During the next six miles we passed some very extensive and luxuriant corn fields, the plant looking finer than any I have seen in this country; and what makes it more remarkable is, there were no evidences of a resort having been had to irrigation. Col. Washington informs me that this is accomplished by deep planting, which the Navajos practice more than any other Indians. The water in the Rio Tumecha we find amply sufficient and good, and doubtless its constancy may be relied upon. The pasture along the stream, however, is but scant, and therefore the corn fields of the Navajo along the valley will be drawn upon. It having been represented that the Navajos would resist the troops in cutting their corn, Captain Dodge with a command was sent to enforce the order.

"Aug. 31, 1849—Today, about noon, at our last camp three Navajo chiefs appeared in council—Narbona, José Largo, and Archulette. The several points of the treaty having been explained to the chiefs to their satisfaction, Narbona, the head chief, and José Largo—both very aged—the former about eighty and the latter about seventy, voluntarily signed powers of attorney granting authority to two younger chiefs, Pedro José and Armijo, to represent them in the next council which was to be held at Canyon de Chelly.

"The council breaking up, Sandoval harangued some two or three hundred Navajos, ranged before him on horseback—the object, as it occurred to me, being to explain to them the views and purposes of the government of the United States. Sandoval himself habited in his gorgeously colored dress, and all the Navajos as gorgeously decked in red, blue, and white, rifle erect in hand, the spectacle was very imposing. But soon I perceived that there was likely to be some more serious work than mere talking. It appears that the Navajos had a horse that belonged to a Mexican of Col. Washington's command. The Colonel demanded its immediate return. The Navajos demurred. He then told them that, unless they restored it immediately, they would be fired into. They replied that the Navajo boy who was riding the horse had disappeared. Col. Washington then directed Lieut. Tores to seize one in reprisal. The Navajos upon perceiving it, scampered off at the

top of their speed. The guard present were then ordered to fire upon them—the result of which was that old Chief Narbona was killed and several others were mortally wounded. Major Peck also threw among them, very handsomely—much to their terror, when they were afar off, and thought they could with safety relax their flight—a couple of round shot.

“It is to be regretted that, in the hurry-scurry movement of the enemy, some of the pack animals, which were at the time ready to accompany the troops to the next camping ground, should have been frightened off.

“Immediately after the affair alluded to, at about 5 p. m. the command resumed the line of march.

“[Recorded by] James H. Simpson, A. M., 1st Lieut. of Corps of  
Topographical Engineers.

Aug. 31, 1849.”

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This brief account did not explain the pit and all those bleached and grinning skulls. I wondered what the Navajo side of the tale might be. Perhaps some old Navajo would have heard the story from parents or grandparents. I decided to ask Grandma Klah, who was our “oldest inhabitant,” and who I had been told was a descendant of the famous Chief Narbona who had been killed on the battlefield.

### 3. Grandma Klah Tells of the Death of Chief Narbona

I am the granddaughter of the greatest war chief the Navajo people ever had! Old Chief Narbona was seventy years of age when my mother married the son of Tall-Chanter, and during that year my grandfather made the long two-hundred-mile journey on horseback, to the great river Toh Baade (Rio Grande) to see with his own eyes if all the rumors concerning the white soldiers might be true. He was gone two moons and when he returned he told his people, “The things we have heard are all true, and there is much more that we have never been told. These white soldiers are many, and we had best make peace with them, for they possess weapons and power greater than ours.” But many of the younger men were not of this opinion. They thought that by making warlike demonstrations they could keep the white people and the soldiers out of Navajo country.

Ten years later an army of United States soldiers with Mexican

helpers and Pueblo guides, using as means of transport more than five hundred horses and mules, started from Santa Fe, crossed the Jemez Mountains, and marched into Navajo territory. It was the month of Soft Corn (August) and the natives were living in summer homes near their corn fields. Late rains had filled the ponds, and the arroyos were running streams of sweet water. The army followed these water courses, and the Navajo families fled before them as they advanced. Day after day, some group of women and children stood afar and watched their homes demolished for fire-wood, and hundreds of horses and mules eating and trampling their precious corn. To many this meant just one thing—starvation during the coming winter; but there was nothing they could do to prevent the destruction.

To make matters worse, the soldiers seemed to be afraid of even solitary Navajo sheep-herders and fired their guns at all who came within rifle range. This may have been due to the tales told by the Pueblo guides from Taos, who were traditional enemies of the Navajo.

Old Chief Narbona called his men to council. "Let us go to the white commander and find out what he wants," he advised. "Whatever he asks, that we must do. Then perhaps this army will go away and we will be left in peace."

Four hundred and fifty mounted warriors, dressed in buckskins, bayeta blankets, and war-paint, accompanied Narbona to meet the white commander. The treaty of peace was signed and all was well, until a Mexican accused a Navajo of stealing his horse. No one knew whether this was true or not, for the horse could not be found. But almost immediately, the white soldiers began firing into the group of mounted warriors so that Narbona was mortally wounded and several more were killed. As the Navajo rode away carrying their killed and wounded, the cannons were discharged at them, causing many more deaths.

No Navajo were left on the battlefield, if it can be termed a field of battle. Those who were not injured carried their dead and wounded out of sight and sound of the white soldiers. In a sheltered place on a hillside, fifty-eight dead Navajo warriors were wrapped in their blankets, placed in a deep trench, and then the earth was smoothed and scattered over the burial, to create the appearance of an undisturbed hillside.

Old Chief Narbona lived to reach his home, but died that same night. His last thoughts and words were for his people: "I am not

sorry that I must die, for I am old and my time has come, but my heart is sad when I think of the women and children who are weeping for those who will never return."

Aug. 30, 1929—Grandma Klah, aged 85 years.

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Grandma Klah's story has been repeated in many Navajo households and so the Navajo still believe that the soldiers demanded the lives of fifty-eight warriors as the price of one horse.