

New Mexico Quarterly

Volume 19 | Issue 3

Article 19

1949

Rehabilitation of the Navahos

Dorothea C. Leighton

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq>

Recommended Citation

Leighton, Dorothea C.. "Rehabilitation of the Navahos." *New Mexico Quarterly* 19, 3 (1949). <https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/nmq/vol19/iss3/19>

This Contents is brought to you for free and open access by the University of New Mexico Press at UNM Digital Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in *New Mexico Quarterly* by an authorized editor of UNM Digital Repository. For more information, please contact disc@unm.edu.

Dorothea C. Leighton

REHABILITATION OF THE NAVAHOS

DR. GEORGE I. SÁNCHEZ, Professor of Education and Consultant in Latin American Education at the University of Texas, was asked by former Commissioner Brophy to survey the Navaho school system and make recommendations. "*The People*"; a Study of the Navajos * was published as a summary of this report.

Dr. Sánchez is horrified by the physical defects of the present Navaho school buildings, and duly appreciative of the efforts made by the teachers and supervisors to carry on their work in the face of such appalling inadequacies. He places the blame for these conditions where it belongs, namely on Congress with its "scarcity budgeting" and its unwillingness to undertake and carry out a long-range, all-round program.

As he sees it, day schools as originally defined are impossible under present circumstances, both because of difficulty of transportation and because of the Navaho way of life. He would effect a compromise between day and boarding schools by further developing the sort of school that had to be operated during the war: semi-boarding schools at which all but very near-by pupils boarded for the school days of the week, some for the whole term. He would organize his schools into ten regions, each with a central plant at which would be located the secondary school and all the common facilities such as laundry, bakery, shop, etc., and six or eight primary schools placed according to population needs and availability of roads and water. As a matter of fact, with a few exceptions all these schools would be where there

* U. S. Indian Service, Haskell Institute, 1948.

already are either day or boarding schools, and existing plants would be used to the extent possible.

Dr. Sánchez would provide much more elaborate dormitories than were built during the war, and would have improved hogans as guest houses for visiting parents. Better quarters for personnel, greatly improved roads, and the development of both primary and secondary schools as community centers and adult education centers are included in the plan. On the whole it appears to me to be an elaborate version of what was intended in a groping way when the new day schools were planned and built. The improvements are due in part to what has been learned from the operation of the day schools, in part to the lack of haste in formulating the present program.

The entire effort is envisioned as educational, from the construction of the roads to the use of the schools, and including the improved hogans for parents. It could undoubtedly be educational just as Dr. Sánchez would like; but all too often the constructing agencies involved in such an enterprise pay little attention to these considerations in their haste to achieve the goal of so many buildings or so many miles of highway. Sometimes, moreover, the education misfires—the guest hogans suggest to parents that they should demand similar ones from the Government, or that they should move to Gallup or some other center of white luxuries rather than that they should try to copy the improvements in their own homes.

The argument is developed cogently that a thoroughgoing program of rehabilitation will be the cheapest in the long run, in terms of actual dollars and cents, in benefits to the Navahos, and in self-respect to ourselves for finally carrying out our part of the treaty that ended the Navaho captivity of eighty-odd years ago. In addition to the proposed educational improvements, this will include better health facilities, irrigation projects, various manufacturing and marketing ventures, employment supervision for off-reservation Navahos, and in general

the development of all possible resources to raise the Navaho standard of living somewhere near our own. In spite of the ultimate economy the initial cost is high. For example, the estimated cost for construction (only) in one of the ten school regions, exclusive of access roads, is \$6,346,000. Perhaps this is cheap for what is obtained, but it is still a great deal of money when multiplied by ten. When one considers that this huge plant has to be maintained as well as built, there seems to be no end to the costs.

My principal quarrel with Dr. Sánchez' plan is that it seems to me much too elaborate for the present educational needs and for the future economic ability of anyone—federal Government, state governments, or the Navahos themselves—to maintain adequately. I realize that some sort of balance has to be struck between the simplest system that would serve to provide Navaho children with elementary education, and something that would attract a high calibre of teacher; but I doubt that such a fine physical plant is the answer. For many school generations, much of the instruction will have to depend on the ingenuity of the individual teacher. One of the chief difficulties has always been to get enough of the right kind of teachers, and it seems to me that the conveniences recommended would be even more attractive to the wrong kind than is the present set-up. A better solution, to my mind, would be to build as many school rooms of the simplest sort as are needed to house the children, and then really spend money on salaries and on reorganizing the recruiting methods and civil service requirements so that people with the essential qualities and abilities could be employed regardless of their educational backgrounds, and at a rate that they could afford to accept.

When one considers that in spite of all the clamor—both Navaho and public—that something be done about educating Navaho children, Congress has not seen fit to keep open even the few schools already built, it seems to me entirely fantastic

to suppose that the same body would regularly appropriate funds to do the job that Dr. Sánchez feels necessary. But even if it would, I question the wisdom of such a program at present; in fifty years, maybe. It seems to me very ill-advised to speed up the acculturation of this group to the extent that Dr. Sánchez' plan would if put into effect. Acculturation is in the cards for the Navaho anyway, and all the indications are that they should be able to handle the situation more successfully on the whole than have some of the other Indian tribes. However there is no doubt in my mind that "the people" also can be overwhelmed by the changes demanded, if too many of them are forced to accept these changes in too short a period. In fact, the haste of the change seems to have been the most destructive feature in many other cases.

Educate the Navaho children by all means, but don't at the same time teach them to regard as necessities many items of our culture which not even their grandchildren, perhaps, will be able to afford.

Haldeen Braddy

POE THE PEACOCK

AMERICAN READERS are probably more familiar with Edgar Allan Poe's "The Raven" than with Walt Whitman's "Song of Myself"—but possibly not as aware that Poe no less than Whitman cultivated a pose. Anybody who comprehends Whitman grasps the mawkish affectionateness of his confessional poems and understands that this in his nature may conceal an element of the effeminate. Fewer persons know that aspects of Poe's character revealed to his contemporaries a By-