New Mexico History Museum

The Long Walk of the Navajo and Mescalero Indians, and its Enduring Mark on Western History

One of the least-told and darkest chapters in the history of the American West

Welcome to the latest installment of our media-release series, "Telling New Mexico: Stories from Then and Now." See the links below for previous releases, along with information about obtaining photographs to accompany your coverage.

SANTA FE – The story was born in one man's misguided notion of a utopia for Native Americans. It ended with one of the most shameful chapters in the history of the American West – the Long Walk.

More than a century after, the disastrous relocation of Navajo and Mescalero Apache Indians to Bosque Redondo, its scars still haunt the memories of the Navajo and Mescalero people, and the history of Kit Carson – who he was and what his rightful legacy might have been. The stories of Carson and of the Long Walk are among the many told at the New Mexico History Museum now open at 113 Lincoln Avenue on the historic Santa Fe Plaza.

In 1862, Col. James H. Carleton, then in charge of the U.S. "Department of New Mexico," perceived a threat to settlers from the Native Americans who had long called this place their home. Clothing his solution in the form of a benevolent future, he created a vision of an agricultural reservation in eastern New Mexico, a sparsely populated area fed by the slender Pecos River. His intent, now seen through the darker lens of history, was to force the tribes "to give way to the insatiable progress of our race."

To carry it out, Carleton turned to Christopher Houston "Kit" Carson, a Kentucky-born frontiersman and ally of the near-mythical John C. Frémont. At first, Carson resisted the order, which read in part: "All Indian men of that tribe (the Mescalero Apache) are to be killed whenever and wherever you can find them. The women and children will not be harmed, but you will take them prisoners."

Carson could not bring himself to abide in full. Instead, he took Apache men prisoner and eventually persuaded the tribe to surrender and move from their southwestern New Mexico homelands to Bosque Redondo. In 1863, more than 400 arrived at an incomplete military fort



Navajo Girls



Carson Group

On June 19, motorcycle enthusiasts will gather on the Navajo Nation in Kirkland, N.M., to ride together to the Bosque Redondo Memorial in commemoration of the Long Walk."The Long Run" began eight years ago. Event programs throughout the weekend, June 19-21,

and put to work.

Carleton then issued a similar order for the Navajo, but had to play upon Carson's duty to country. He complied – again, in part. In the siege of Canyon de Chelly, the spiritual heartland of the Navajo people, Carson burned

at Bosque Redondo include cookouts, traditional singing, participants' testimonials, and spiritual observances. For more information, go to http://www.nmmonuments.org/

the tribe's crops and peach orchards, shot their livestock and destroyed wells. Eventually, the Navajo surrendered and 10,000 of them began the 350-mile walk from northwestern New Mexico to Bosque Redondo. Marched at a constant pace, the people were poorly clothed and fed. One in five died. One account says a woman in labor was shot to death because she could not keep up.

Once at the 400-square-mile Bosque Redondo, the futility of Carleton's utopia was exposed. The two tribes had longstanding rivalries and different languages. Little firewood was available, there were no tents, and the only water source, the Pecos River, was laden with salt that weakened the soil and caused intestinal trouble. Comanche raids cost the tribes what little they had. Smallpox infected them. An estimated 1,500 perished in the winter of 1863-64 alone.

Carleton's own soldiers, perhaps sensing this last gasp of Manifest Destiny, dubbed the place "Carletonia."

In 1865, all of the Mescalero Apache escaped, despite the death warrant it carried. The Navajo remained until 1868, when Gen. William T. Sherman crafted a treaty granting both tribes permanent rights to a portion of their ancestral lands. On June 18, 1868, freedom in hand, the Navajo people began yet another long walk, this time home.

Today, the Bosque Redondo Memorial at the Fort Sumner State Monument southeast of Santa Rosa, N.M., recounts the suffering – and the resilience – of the people who endured Carleton's "utopia." The National Park Service is exploring the creation of a National Historic Trail commemorating the Long Walk. And on the Mescalero and Navajo reservations, people continue to practice their traditional ways and speak their traditional languages, while fully engaging in 21st century life.

As for Carson, the debate over his legacy continues. In his 2006 book, "Blood and Thunder," award-winning author Hampton Sides examines the many sides of the story, which continue to confound. Of Carson, he writes: "He was the prototype of the Western hero. Before there were Stetson hats and barbed-wire fences, before there were Wild West shows or Colt six-shooters to be slung at the O.K. Corral, there was Nature's Gentleman, the original purple cliché of the purple sage. Carson hated it all. Without his consent, and without receiving a single dollar, he was becoming a caricature."

Without resorting to caricatures, the New Mexico History Museum aims to lay out the facts and let visitors come to their own conclusions. In its 96,000 square feet, the Museum shares more than 400 centuries of cultural interactions among Native Americans, Spanish colonists, frontier settlers, nuclear scientists and the artists, writers and photographers who continue to plant new and fruitful roots. Get into it!

New Mexico History Museum

at 113 Lincoln Avenue, just behind the Palace of the Governors on the Santa Fe Plaza

For more information about the New Mexico History Museum, including a selection of user-ready high-resolution photographs, log onto http://media.museumofnewmexico.org/nmhm. More than 8,000 additional, high-resolution photographs illustrating the history of New Mexico are available by keyword search at www.palaceofthegovernors.org (click on "Photo Archives" then on "Digitized Collections"). Most requests for scans from this site can be delivered the same day, and usage is free for publicity purposes only.

Previous releases:

It's History in the Making as the Nation's Newest Museum Opens its Doors

Spiritual Blessings and Pilgrimage Kick Off Museum's Second Day of Grand Opening Events

Riding the Rails ... In Style

Duty, Sacrifice, Honor

Where ancient artifacts meet cutting-edge art

Fashioning New Mexico

The Tiffany Ties that Bind

The Railroad Wars

The New Face of History

The Tales that Made the American West

New Mexico History Museum's Core Exhibits

Telling the People's Stories: A Message from the Director

Creating a Place for Our Past, by Dr. Frances Levine, El Palacio, Summer 2006

Other Sites:

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