

Note

1. Dallin H. Oaks and Marvin S. Hill, *Carthage Conspiracy, The Trial of the Accused Assassins of Joseph Smith* (Urbana: University of Illinois Press, 1975).

A Trader and His Friends

Will Evans, *Along Navajo Trails: Recollections of a Trader*, edited by Susan E. Woods and Robert S. McPherson (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2005). 264 pp.

Reviewed by Deb Thornton

"Imagine." Will Evans's evocative text begins with an invitation to the reader to enter the Welsh immigrant's bull pen, roll a smoke with free tobacco plugged on the nailed-down lid of a lard can, and listen to any number of detailed accounts of the history and mythos of the denizens of the Colorado Plateau's upper reaches. Evans first claims to be a raconteur, then mentions that he is honest. In addition to his ready supply of the mercantile goods, the trader offers a wealth of stories, vivid descriptions of the faces and voices of his neighbors: the Dineh, the People, the Navajo.

Imagine a nineteen-year-old and two other men making what they believe to be the first wheel ruts on northern New Mexico's Hogback with two wagons, hauling the inside and the outside of what will, in a few days' time, become the Sanostee Trading Post. The December 1898 snow accumulates inside the new walls before the men can attach the roof; they shovel snow from inside the building, install a stove and shelves, and open for business. As planned, the young Welshman remains to mind the store, and the others depart to replenish the wagons.

The unremitting snow accumulates, burying alive the abundant Navajo livestock, causing economic setbacks that will require years of recovery. The Welshman will mind his snowbound post for months, melting water from drifts, trading dwindling supplies with the Navajo, and spending his lonely hours writing. The Navajo who come with Christmas greetings will receive apples and candy—he gives all that he has.

The wheel ruts carve what becomes a road, one of many Navajo trails in the Four Corners area. Having weathered the harsh storm and its catastrophic aftermath, the Welshman will not retreat with the spring thaw. For the next half century, Evans will be a trader and more, standing at the economic hub of a culture in rapid transition: "He is their creditor, advisor, and at times, their midwife and undertaker. He supplies them with flour and coffee, sugar and salt; he measures out their cloth, fits their feet with shoes and stockings, clothes them with shirts

and trousers, shades them with hats and umbrellas, protects them with coats and shawls, dispenses their medicine and soft drinks, satisfies their sweet tooth, weighs their nails and bolts, and supplies their tools," and, tellingly, he concludes, "Very little money enters into these transactions" (45). The concept of currency is called into question early in the manuscript, and it remains a numinous notion throughout the give-and-take described in the balance of the text. Nickels and dimes are assigned different colors. Language becomes currency. Intra-cultural respect becomes currency.

Evans will also be included in the spiritual life of those around him. From the Dineh, Evans will collect material goods, stories, songs, photographs, and social images. He will make the most faithful and detailed record that he can, and he will plant stories within stories, layering voices, quoting the compelling narrators as they tell their own stories of the forced march to Fort Sumner, the Beautiful Mountain uprising, healings, journeys, and skirmishes with Anglo "authorities." He will lament the scarcity of water; he will condemn the government's futile attempt to Anglicize the Navajo in a single generation, and he will decry the devastating economic effects of the government-ordered reduction of livestock in the 1930s.

Perhaps it is a coincidence that precisely nineteen years after the nineteen-year-old carved the wheel ruts, he established his own trading post in Shiprock, in which he set aside a museum space and covered every conceivable surface with Navajo designs. And from his bull pen, he begs his reader to imagine. A world unfolds in three sections: the events, the people, and the culture. The boundaries are permeable because the people create the events and manifest the culture, which is shaped by history and living symbol. The reader is offered lavish glimpses of many aspects of Navajo culture that Evans witnessed: birth, maturation, childbearing, illness, death, and the rites and ceremonies that accompany crucial junctures. Throughout the book one learns delectable tidbits about his trading practices and his appreciation for the individuals he encountered and the broader economic circumstances of their lives. He repeatedly mentions with respect the work of Mrs. Mary Eldredge and Mrs. H. G. Cole, who established a Methodist mission near Farmington and dedicated their lives to helping the people of the Four Corners. At one point, he muses about the fact that the Navajo do not use the still sharp arrowheads that dot the earth (132); later he writes that the people eschew any contact with the dead and dying (228), but he does not tie that fact back to the disuse of arrowheads.

When possible, Evans collects accounts of witnesses to historical events, attempting to preserve the authenticity of the narrative voices. Particularly vivid are accounts of the infamous long march to internment in the Pecos in 1864. They witness the hardships of the punitive relocation as well as of Yellow Horse's clan-destine hunting expedition and a warrior's incursion into Comanche territory.

Starvation and smallpox ravaged the displaced persons, and the cultural injunction against handling the dying and the dead left many parents with the heart-breaking task of abandoning nearly deceased infants along the trail.

Also notable is Evans's detailed version of the Beautiful Mountain uprising, compiled from first-hand accounts. In 1913, the government agent, William T. Shelton, attempted to end the practice of polygamy among the Navajo. He dispatched policemen to arrest Little Singer and his three wives; they returned with the women only. Little Singer, son of the formidable traditionalist medicine man Bizhóshí, formed a band that forcibly removed his wives from their few guards, and all retreated to Beautiful Mountain, a landscape that afforded sound protection for a standoff. Shelton ordered the troops in, and rumors ran amok that the Navajo had threatened to kill the Anglo traders. In the end, leaders from all parties converged to diffuse the tension; and after a prolonged humiliating lecture from General Hugh Scott, the Navajo returned home and continued to practice polygamy. The traders involved, Evans concludes, "agreed it was too difficult to end a custom that had been practiced for centuries. Education, not force, was the better remedy" (103).

The final event Evans highlights also underscores the unseemly practices of government agents. In the 1930s, the Soil Conservation Service deemed that Navajo overgrazing was responsible for soil erosion causing the silt backup that threatened Hoover Dam. John Collier, Commissioner of Indian Affairs, ordered livestock reductions that shattered the Navajo economy. Evans notes that the promised remuneration for the losses never arrived and that no money was spent to tap into water resources that could have provided a sound economic base. The New Deal brought nothing but a raw deal from which the people never fully recovered. Evans includes one emblematic account of goats being "practically confiscated," then "shipped . . . butchered and processed, then sent back to the Navajos as canned goat. What a waste this dole was when freighting is considered—and the fact that the people used practically everything but the goat's bleat" (107).

The section entitled "Navajos I Have Known" reveals Evans's interactions with mainstream as well as historical figures. He is particularly fascinated by medicine men, who often emerge as leaders, and he gives accounts of the men as well as the ceremonies and cures for which they gained fame. Documented in some detail are Costiano, practitioner of the complex Night Chant; Ugly Man, the bear-mauled rainmaker; and Fat One and his son, who banished the works of witchcraft. Evans acknowledges several miraculous healings and maintains that faith is the primary ingredient of most of the healings he witnessed. Evans's respect for politicians is evident in his description of Sandoval and Bizhóshí. Evans delights in Black Horse's yanking tufts from the beard of an Anglo agent trying to impose education on the people, and he laments the murder-suicide of a couple who chose to die rather than surrender their polygamous relationship. A more

personal glimpse of Evans's assistant Dan Pete, whose delousing practices are revealed and slightly reviled, is followed by Pete's first-person renderings of Ute creation stories and explanations about why Navajos eat neither fish nor fowl.

The most compelling glimpse of person and culture may be in the story "A Dedicated Medicine Man," which begins with a description of Evans's construction of a school near Tohatchi. He includes a discourse on how adobe bricks are made and ends with an account of how Tall Man, the great medicine man, cured a child by crafting from a root four emblems of an animal the boy's mother had seen when she was pregnant with the boy. Four times Tall Man performed the ritual of breaking the animal effigies and burying the halves in the desert. The boy was cured. Evans confesses, "I tried much later to find one of the broken images but failed. It is just as well that I did not. What right had I to pry into the sanctity of his belief?" (162).

That very question resonates through the culture section of the book. Evans provides detailed accounts of Navajo daily life, the food, clothing, marital customs, family life, and other mundane activities. He also discusses the commercial processes of weaving and silversmithing, trades with which he was intimately familiar. He could be gullible; the documentation shows that he sometimes misinterpreted gestures. Somewhat more controversially, Evans assesses the morality of the people and describes various sacred ceremonies he was invited to attend. He was permitted to copy numerous sandpainting designs, and he includes parts of chants and describes in detail several of the most sacred ceremonies.

The latter acts are subject to a great range of assessment: One person's grateful idea of preservation can amount to another's perception of blasphemy. Evans, quite rightly, notes that the ceremonies will be lost to unwritten history if they are not preserved in some form, and shamans visited him to refine or remember various sandpaintings. At the same time, he traverses sacred terrain casually, and few believers would wish their sacred rites to be so exposed to the world. Should Evans have splashed the sacred designs on the sides of buildings and on table tops? The reader must decide.

The book was intended to be published half a century ago; and had it been, the amateur folklore and charm of the narrative would now be viewed as one man's intricate view of the people he worked among for half a century on a seam between two very different cultures, one dominant and one indomitable.

Its recent publication, however, seems to have necessitated the scrutiny of the manuscript through a twenty-first-century lens. The unsigned introduction, presumably written by the editors for this printing, flops all over itself to establish a Mormon context for Evans, while his manuscript makes but two mentions of the religion (one to a Mormon bishop, and the other to an account of a Relief Society shipment of clothing sent to the destitute Navajos one Christmas), and it is not clear from the text that Evans was Mormon. He does not identify himself as such,

and he scarcely acknowledges his private life or that of his wife, Sarah Luella Walker Evans, and their four children. This is a book that looks outward; and like all labors of love, it has its flaws, but its heart is in a solid place. Evans does not pretend to be an anthropologist, a folklorist, or a social critic; he is a trader, observer, and storyteller deeply steeped in one time and one place—a location he found needed recording.

Also included in the introduction are quotations from a series of letters that indicate Evans's biases and a latent racism. Both are less evident in Evans's *Navajo Trails* manuscript. No hardened racist could have endured the first savage winter, much less abide for fifty years among people he despised. He is no less a product of his time than is the reader. Evans does not cloak himself behind a veneer of objectivity, and that is one of his book's virtues. The author(s) of the introduction should trust readers to sort through the moral issues for themselves.

The introduction so strongly brands Evans an apologist that I steeled myself for a load of pious pap, but I found nothing of the sort in Evans's writing. Similarly, the editors' italicized introductions to the three sections were annoying impositions between the reader and Evans's text. Arriving at Evans's own text (p. 37) provides instant relief. The endnotes helpfully point to scholarly works, but the editors' imposed scholarship often creates dissonance with Evans's finely textured writing.

Finally, among the book's many virtues are the abundant photographs—including the exquisite work of William Pennington, whom Evans hosted and guided. The words and photos give the reader a sense of the time and place, the very different world of a century ago. Like a bee collecting desert nectar, Evans gathered narratives in all weathers, blending them into his sweet and pungent story of souls alive in the slender meridian between starvation and prosperity, between history and mystery.