

A Navajo GI Joe

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My father managed a general store called Greasewood Trading Post north of Holbrook, Arizona (T'iisyaakin*) on the Navajo Reservation for more than thirty years. All across this reservation up until their slow demise starting in the late 1960's, these unique stores provided a convenient place for the Navajo to buy a wide variety of merchandise but an equally important place for them to socialize. Bilikona Lachee or the Red White Man as my father was called, learned Navajo at an early age in Bluff, Utah. His enterprising father had owned or managed a number of different stores in both Southern Utah and Northern Arizona where many of their customers were the local Paiute and/or Navajo people.

In 1943 my mother Frances and my brother Jack traveled with him from Southern Utah to what was for anybody but the Navajo, a very isolated place to live. The Greasewood (Díwózhii Bii'Tó*) valley was comprised of a sparse sprinkling of Navajo hogans, our store, a small chapter house, an equally small catholic chapel and the much larger federally operated day school just below them.

Early in World War II, two of my dad's brothers were called up and then eventually my dad's older brother



Leo in the Army

Emery and he were drafted together in early 1945. Thankfully the war ended later that year and Leo returned and purchased a home in Holbrook but continued to manage the store at Greasewood. Stories abound regarding his catching large trout, shooting that big buck, holing out eagles and birdies but this is one of his stories that I just couldn't seem

to forget. The various services' most Indian traders



Greasewood Trading Post a1950's

provided would not fall into any job-description for today's managers of off reservation stores. However to these traders, helping their customers with funerals, weddings, writing letters, opening up in the middle of the night for emergencies, loans and so on, were common place back then. Last names of traders like McGee, Powell, Foutz, Wheeler, Lee and many, many others provided generous assistance to their Navajo customers well above and beyond the call of selling simply a bag of groceries or a tank of gas.

As told to me by my dad...

Nilthji-tso, or 'Great Cold Wind' is what the Navajo's call December. Well, it was as I remember late in the morning on the 5th of December when I had to go across the tracks to the Arizona Rancho Motel in Holbrook. That's where I'd put up Herbert Joe for the night. Having driven the whole way back from Los Angeles, California the previous day, I can tell you I was bleary-eyed and still vibrating. In 1946, Route 66 was a serious driving test. There wasn't any room for error on that narrow two-lane highway. Especially at night with

those big trucks, bright headlights and narrow bridges. You really had to grip the steering wheel for your life. To make matters even worse the morning that we left LA, it began to rain and when we got into the higher elevations of Arizona around Flagstaff, it'd changed into a blanket of snow.

Herbert Joe as I recall was already standing outside waiting for me when I pulled up to the motel. He had this small bundle that he sat in the front seat between us and then we went on up through town, up past Howard's Hill. The dirt road leading out to the reservation at that time exited just this side of the 66 Motel. You had to pass the airport, then close by

the airplane beacon and for awhile it took you through a real sandy stretch of road. In fact, it was just the beginning of fifty-five miles of some real rough going. The county would occasionally send out a grader to the reservation line but it usually succeeded mostly in re-arranged the rocks and creating even more dust. This was always a bumpy ride that snaked here and there as needed. I'm sure that melting snow didn't help driving on that road that morning. We needed the moisture I'm sure. We always do. Anyway, Herbert was real quiet. He was still in disbelief that he was actually going home. If you've never been out there, the Greasewood valley stretches north to south with the road paralleling it for quite awhile. The road has completely changed now but back then you couldn't see down into the valley until you were right there. Finally within a mile of the store, the road went east, straight towards the trading post. I don't remember noticing but I'm sure Herbert was looking directly across the wash to his family's place. I remember as we approached his family's hogan's, I could see fifteen to twenty people standing around next to a

rather large fire. I hadn't called ahead to anyone that I had found him, apparently they just had faith that it would be him. When I slowly pulled up and stopped, they quickly eased Herbert up, up into their collective arms. It took a remarkable amount of patience and hope for his wife and parents waiting all those years. The circle was now finally complete I thought! I didn't wait around very long, I decided that my job was done and I just drove back over to the store. It was the start of another day trading with my customers.



Well I've obviously gotten somewhat ahead of myself, so let me go back and explain how all this first got started. I was working for my father in 1943 at Greasewood when I was eventually drafted into the army. After the war ended, I returned back to my old job around February of 1946. I guess it was probably about three or four months later when Sam and his wife first approached me about their son Herbert. I didn't know anything about him then because

when I first came to Greasewood he like so many other Navajo boys, had already been drafted into the army. You see they were concerned because the family hadn't heard from him since he'd left. They just knew the war was over and they wanted him to come home. I'm afraid to say but my first thought was that he had probably been killed. His wife Lena, at that point hadn't received a single letter or anything from him since the day he'd left. When I asked them if the War Department had ever notified them that he was missing in action, I recall they just silently shook their heads a collective no. By then, that was almost four years not knowing anything about him. His wife was destitute. She'd been caring for their two young boys. Eventually she started getting a small check for around \$30 or \$40 dollars a month from the state. It was called Aid to Dependent Children. I remember his mother was a particularly hard worker. She wove rugs to help support their family. But mostly all they had was a tiny band of sheep and goats, just barely enough to help them all survive.

Frankly when I first heard their story, it really touched me. Right away I contacted the tribe in Window Rock and they suggested that I call the Red Cross. In those days we were on an old party line and even in the best of times it was difficult to hear what anyone was saying. Course some of that was because everyone on the line picked up the receiver to see what was going on. I made a number of calls but then all we could do was wait. The family would come over every few days to see if I'd heard anything. I tried to sound encouraging but for awhile nothing turned up. Finally three or four months later, the Red Cross notified me that they had located a Herbert Joe in a VA Hospital in Los Angeles, California. But they didn't have any more specific information other than that. When I told his family, they asked if I would go and see if it was their boy. They didn't have anyone else to turn to and they really didn't have any idea how far California was from Greasewood. Because they were so poor, the Navajo Tribe agreed to pay me if I would furnish an expense report to them when I returned.



Margaret on the left and to the right Jane Dinetso at their home.

My wife decided to come along and so we had a Navajo lady from Greasewood named Jane Dinetso watch Jack in Holbrook. I didn't have that much problem finding the VA hospital. It was just a block off Hollywood Boulevard but I just can't seem to remember the name. They knew we were coming and when we told the aide who we'd come to see, he told us to follow him. He didn't seem to be in any particular hurry. Well we went down this long corridor where he stopped and unlocked the first door. Then we crossed another hall and then he unlocked another heavier door. I can still recall this distinct empty, hollow ring as that last door swung open. I'll tell you at this point Frances and I was concerned. We were worried about what mental state this person must be in to have this amount of security. I can remember clearly how it looked even today. It was quite a large open room with a series of twenty or so beds and very little other furniture. At the far end was the only person in the room. I remember he was just sitting on his bed in hospital clothes. The mattresses on the beds must not have been more than an inch thick. When we got up closer, I asked him in English. "Are you Herbert Joe?" He didn't respond right away but just kind of stared straight up at me. He didn't have much of an expression and so I repeated it again. This time, he slowly nodded yes. I then asked him in Navajo "What is your name?" "Do you know Sam Joe?" "Is that your father?" At this point he had this total look of amazement, his eyes seem to finally shine and he answered me right away in Navajo, "yes, that's my father". That's when he first began to smile ever so cautiously. I felt then that he knew his folks had sent me to get him. When I looked at him closer I could see the resemblance to his father. In Navajo I told him I was the trader at Greasewood and that I had come to get him and take him home. I reached down to shake his hand and he responded in that soft gentle way the Navajo do. You can imagine how happy and relieved he was and to this idea of finally leaving. I still to this day don't understand why he was locked up. At this point he couldn't have whipped his bedpan if he'd wanted to. He was pretty weak physically but otherwise he seemed quite normal. I don't suppose the army doctors realized that he never could speak much English to begin with. I was totally convinced that this was Herbert Joe and we told the aide this

was the guy we had come to get. Within a very short time, they'd gotten him dressed out in some old army khakis and surprisingly without signing any paperwork we walked him out the front door. My wife and I can't remember Herbert saying that much on the way back. I believe he thought that this might be a dream or maybe it wasn't real. I'm sure he didn't want to wake up and find himself back in any Army ward.

Some time later, I found out that he had been involved in fighting Rommel's army in Africa, which would have been in early 1943. There had been hand to hand fighting and when they swept the battlefield after the fighting they obviously picked up the wounded and shell-shocked troops. Without him being able to speak much English I'm sure they thought he had some mental problems. I understand he was sent to a series of Army hospitals during the war until the Red Cross found him in Los Angeles for us. Shock treatments and other attempts to treat him I'm sure harmed him more than anything that the Germans might have done. It was a stalemate. He never could speak much English and they apparently weren't going to let him out until he got better and started talking. I'll bet he completely quit talking to them after a few years. The Navajos you see believe that if you don't understand what they're saying, you must be dead because you can't hear what they're saying.

A couple of months after all this, Herbert and I drove down to Phoenix to the veterans' hospital to apply for disability payments. I translated to Herbert a number of questions the nurse asked and he took a physical. He got a one hundred percent disability. It wasn't that long when the first of his disability checks arrived for him and his family. That was the first money that they'd seen since he'd entered the army. You know, I don't remember them getting any money from the service for all those missing years. Fittingly with all this bureaucratic bungling, the tribe lost my expense report and I never did get paid. However, throughout the years every time his dad and mom would come to the store, they would always remember to thank me for finding their son. To me, that was more than enough payment.

*Navajo place name



Inside the store during those early years. The stove in the middle of the store was the only source of heat for everyone.



Greasewood in the 50's. My mother with Joyce and her sister Carol. Rusty our dog is in the background.



Later with the new addition to the front of the store.