A Last Glance

Trading Posts of the Four Corners

photographs by Edward Grazda
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By Edward Grazda
Text by Willow Roberts Power

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pl. 6  Tuba Trading Post, Tuba City, AZ, 2010
A Last Glance: Trading Posts of the Four Corners

Starting around the 1870s, in an area that would come to be known as the Four Corners, there were places where Native Americans interacted with the Anglo world, their commodities and culture. They were called trading posts. The Native Americans bartered wool, rugs, baskets, and jewelry for coffee, cooking oil, flour, and manufactured goods.

Later the trading posts served as stores, gathering places, and U.S. post offices. During the 1930s, with the coming of the Works Progress Administration, the Civilian Conservation Corps, and new mining interests, Native Americans were paid with checks that the trading posts cashed in exchange for goods.

Today a few still function as trading posts and post offices, but many have become convenience stores and gas stations while others have closed and fallen prey to vandals. When searching out former trading posts sometimes all you find is a wall or foundation.

As you drive through the Navajo Reservation and the Four Corners area, unless you are looking for gas or a Coke, you will likely miss these former trading posts. The buildings that housed the trading posts mark a Native American landscape with Anglo structures, culture, and values.
pl. 9, 10, 11  Hubbell Trading Post, Ganado, AZ, 2010
pl. 24
Rough Rock Trading Post, AZ 2010

pl. 25
Round Rock Trading Post, AZ 2013
pl. 27  Old Red Rock Trading Post, AZ, 2010
pl. 48, 49  Nazlini Trading Post, AZ, 2010
pl. 55  Tohatchi Trading Post, NM, 2013
pl. 59 Twin Lakes Trading Post, NM, 1971
pl. 70
Cedar Springs
Trading Post, AZ
2013

pl. 71
Pine Springs
Trading Post, AZ
2013
Indian trading posts: the words conjure up another time in reservation life, another era, when distances seemed longer and cultural divides greater, when shopping was done face to face, often item by item, and over the counter. Then there were the constraints of language as well as culture, and many differences in economies. That time has gone, as these photographs will illustrate: the twenty-first century has brought about many changes. In fact, the world of trading posts began to disappear some twenty years earlier, as modernity—in the form of better roads, electricity, computers, and especially shopping centers—moved into the Southwest. In their day trading posts were thriving centers of commerce; by the end of the twentieth century they had become an emblem of an older way of life, an unequal system of trade. There were trading posts on the Hopi mesas, at Zuni Pueblo and the Rio Grande pueblos further east, Acoma and Laguna and others.

How did the trading posts operate? What did they provide and why? It’s a long story, but just the outline will show how vital these buildings once were, housing as they did a century-long economic and cultural exchange. That exchange flourished on sheep, wool, and the art and crafts of Navajos. The trading posts were run by Anglo-Americans, usually but not always southwesterners, but influences came from each side of the counter. The traders were from the dominant culture, and there is no doubt they had the commercial upper hand, but they lived on Navajo land, in Navajo communities, and were subject to both the tribal government and community pressures. For many traders—men and a few women, though in most cases it was a husband-and-wife team—it was a way of life that was unique and rewarding.

Navajo trading posts emerge around 1870, two years after the Navajo treaty with the U.S. government. Navajos needed goods; They had just returned to their homelands from the four-year military incarceration known as Hwéeldi, at Bosque Redondo in southern New Mexico, destitute and lacking the wherewithal to make a living. The government provided them with sheep and some goats, to replace their once-plentiful herds, and initially some basic foodstuffs and tools were distributed to headmen from Fort Defiance, an old military fort on the southern edge of the reservation, rebuilt as an Indian agency. Here, and spreading outwards from Fort Defiance, the first trading posts started up. By the 1880s, Navajos had, through hard work, built up their sheep herds and they had something to trade: wool, a sought-after commodity in the greater economy. Trading posts provided that link.

Initially, the exchange was limited: flour, sugar, coffee, baking powder, a few canned goods, tobacco, calico and sometimes velveteen, all traded against bags of wool. The nineteenth century traders set up business in a tent, in which they lived and stored the goods until they found the right location to put up a building. Traditionally, Navajos lived in family groups spread out across the landscape, to give the sheep space. They moved, spring and fall, taking their flocks to fresh pastures in certain areas where they had use rights. They farmed in their summer camps, depending on the soil and water, while women wove the blankets that were
coming generation had been educated with tribal funds and knew what modern shopping was like. Moreover, automobiles were easier to come by or share, and gas was cheap enough to make shopping further away possible—and even cheaper. When twenty-five-year leases ran out in a cluster around this time, the tribe did not renew them. Typically, a trader went to the chapter house to be formally approved by the community; community approval for a good trader was usually obtained but not so a lease from the tribe. Operating without a formal lease meant an uncertain future. Navajos and Pueblos could shop elsewhere, and soon chose to do so. Trading posts lingered on, some, like Lukachukai, Shonto and Shiprock, sustaining good businesses into the twenty-first century, others becoming convenience stores for milk, canned goods, and diapers. Now, as these photographs illustrate, most are gone, the traditions and community focus of a commercial hub with them. The central role the trading post played was, for better or for worse, exceptional, and though the Navajo tribe now provides such services, the old buildings give mute evidence of a Navajo past, a shared history.
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