

Committee on Resources,

Subcommittee on National Parks, Recreation, & Public Lands

[parks](#) - - Rep. Joel Hefley, Chairman

U.S. House of Representatives, Washington, D.C. 20515-6207 - - (202) 226-7736

Witness Statement

TESTIMONY OF THE NAVAJO NATION ON THE PROPOSED H.R. 1384 BILL TO AMEND THE NATIONAL TRAIL SYSTEM ACT TO DESIGNATE THE NAVAJO LONG WALK TO BOSQUE REDONDO AS A NATIONAL HISTORIC TRAIL

BEFORE THE HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES' COMMITTEE ON RESOURCES

MAY 4, 2001

There is really a lot to this story, but I'll tell you just a portion of it. The Journey to Fort Sumner began because a terrible war. That was what my grandmother told my mother, and she passed the story on to me. My mother was probably a young child at that time of the Long Walk. There is a place called Dleesh Bii To (White Clay Spring), a little way southeast of here. From there on up this way there used to be farms. One day as some of the Dine were roasting corn from a pit, all of a sudden a loud noise was heard from the direction of a place called Atch'inaa'ahi (Points Come Together). The noise resembled thunder crashing. Our people were always on the alert, as it was a fearful time. Other people sleeping on the hill also heard the noise. Then someone yelled from the top of a hill, as men did in those days. As the man was yelling, horses hoofs were heard. The Utes were approaching fast. They attacked the people who had been sleeping and killed a lot of them. Some Dine fled up the hill where, on the very top, stood a man named Ats'aali (Branch of the Wash) who saw the shooting and killing taking place down below. He saw a lot of our people killed....

Yesbah Silversmith who at age 90 still herds sheep near her home in Lukachukai, AZ. Her story of escape was handed down by a grandmother.

INTRODUCTION

The Navajo Nation and its people have a rich and proud history. Our history recounts the journeys of our ancestors through several underworlds, into the present. The Navajo are known as the *Ni'hookáá' diyin dine'é bíla' áshdlá'ii* – "Five Finger Earth Surface Holy People," the name given to the Navajos by the Holy People at the time of their emergence into this world. From time immemorial the lands between the four cardinal mountains of *Sisnaajini* – Blanca Peak, Alamosa, Colorado; *Tsoodzil* – Mount Taylor, Grants, New Mexico; *Dok'o'ooshíid* – San Francisco Peaks, Flagstaff, Arizona; and *Dibé Ntsaa* – Hesperus Mountains, Durango, Colorado, have been the sacred homeland of the Navajo. It is in this world, *Ni'hodis's* – the Glittering World - that a fairly recent historical event challenged the Navajo people's very existence within the boundaries of the sacred mountains of Navajoland.

The Spanish and later Mexican governments, forced themselves into the aboriginal lands of the native populations of the Southwest. By the mid 1800s, the Navajo people, after approximately three centuries of unwelcome encroachment by Europeans and later Americans, were reacting to a situation that was tearing away their culture and land base. This era is bitterly remembered as a dark page in Navajo history, when the United States set out to obliterate Navajo culture, at a place known as *Hwééldi* – Bosque Redondo, or Fort Sumner, NM.

THE LONG WALK

In the mid 1800s, well after the Civil War, enslavement and slave trade of Navajo women and children was still actively practiced in the Southwest. The slave raids lead by Mexican and American settlers of reciprocal raids retaliation by Navajos against the communities that surrounded the Navajo lands.

From 1849 through 1860 several failed peace negotiations with the United States Government lead to a military campaign to subdue the Navajos. The Army would not tolerate any humane treatment of Navajo people who would not surrender. The United States realized that the Navajos in their own land could not be subjugated, and viewed removal as the only alternative.

Beginning early in 1860, the Military posts in Navajo land under the leadership of Brigadier General James H. Carleton, set the stage for the campaign against the Navajo people. Colonel Christopher Carson, known as "Kit Carson," commanded the Army troops that ravished through Navajo country "rounding up" the Navajos to be removed to a foreign land. Almost every Navajo family today has family history describing the terrifying destruction and annihilation of the determined Army campaign against the Navajos.

Hwééldi, more than 350 miles from Navajo land was the desolate site chosen to confine the Navajo people and force them to live according to the foreign laws of the United States Government. Thousands of Navajos walked the entire distance to Fort Sumner under the watchful eyes of the U.S. Military. Thousands of Navajos endured the trek with severe starvation, hunger and attacks from other tribes to vile flat land and appalling living conditions which was devastatingly traumatic to the Navajo people.

The Navajos were held as "prisoners of war" for four years at Fort Sumner. Poor planning, drought conditions, severe winters, and continued slave raids took their toll on the already suffering captive Navajos. Finally, in the spring of 1868, the worn leaders begged to return to the land within the Sacred Mountains. The drive to return to their homeland kept the people alive, despite the vast distance to where the Navajos were removed. On June 1, 1868, a treaty was drawn up that ended this nightmare and allowed the Navajos to walk 350 miles back home.

RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Navajo Nation urges Congress to defer to the Navajo Nation in determining which route will be designated. There were four primary routes that were used United States Military during the Navajo removal.
- The Navajo Nation also recommends that Congress mandate that the National Park Service consult with the Navajo Nation in the interpretative material such as brochures, trail markers, scenic off-ramps and the like.
- The Navajo Nation urges Congress to add appropriations authorization language to the bill so that the

Navajo Nation and the National Park Service are able to conduct the necessary research, consultation, and maintenance of the Long Walk Trail.

CONCLUSION

The horrible accounts of this period in Navajo history are not openly discussed or willingly shared by Navajo people. This test of Navajo fortitude remains in the shadows of American history left to be forgotten. The proposed H.R. Bill 1384 "*To amend the National Trails System Act to designate the Navajo Long Walk to Bosque Redondo as a national historic trail*," will insure that this page of Navajo and American history will be remembered and the Navajos who endured the Long Walk and incarceration at *Hwééldi* are properly honored.

The Navajo people have a culture unique to the United States Southwest. It has sustained the Navajos for countless generations. The symbolism imbued in the landscape has created unbreakable ties between the land and the people. It is the devotion to the sacred land and the enduring culture that has fostered a viable sovereign nation that continues to survive and prosper. The strength of Navajo culture and its ties to the land have been challenged throughout time and continue to be challenged.

It is the strong culture and sacred landscape that the Navajos cherish, and these fundamental values will keep the Navajo Nation and its people living between the four cardinal mountains in their sacred homeland. The Long Walk serves to remind society of the importance of cultural perseverance, and as a national historic trail; Navajo history will never be forgotten. Hence, the Navajo Nation and its people support H.R. Bill 1384 "*To amend the National Trails System Act to designate the Navajo Long Walk to Bosque Redondo as a national historic trail*," and respectfully request immediate legislative action to ratify this important page in American history.

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