

THE FOUR SACRED MOUNTAINS

While reading the Navaho Creation Myth, my thoughts traveled to the four sacred mountains bordering the Navaho world. It was then, I think, that it occurred to me that the best way to illustrate this beautiful story would be to photograph these mountains from the air. To do this two flights were necessary, the first for Tsisnajini, sacred mountain of the east, (known to us as Mount Blanca in Southern Colorado) and a second longer flight for the sacred mountains of the South, West and North.

Perhaps it is my love for landscape and geography that makes me want to fly. From the air one can see the great structures of the earth's surface, the different kinds of mountains, the sweep of contours, the age old erosions. In the air one becomes detached and the mind goes deep into the past, thinking of Time in Depth.

Chartering a small plane, my pilot lifted us from Santa Fe one morning with the picture of Tsisnajini as our goal. As we circled to gain altitude the form of the Sandia Mountain Fault to the south of us became more and more visible, with its gently rising eastern slope and the sheer, abrupt western face. It was in a cave high in this western wall that the earliest existence of human life in this area has been found, remnants of migrants who came here twenty thousand years ago, so old is the history of our Southwest. These ancient primitives came to North America from outer Mongolia via Behring Strait, slowly moving southward over a period of perhaps centuries.

We headed north following the Rio Grande seeing clearly the canyons cut by the river through the volcanic slopes of the Pajarito Plateau. Crossing into Colorado, the superb mountain mass of Tsisnajini grew more and more impressive as we neared. Beneath us, the southern end of the San Luis Valley looked barren and uninhabited. Here once was an abundance of game-elk, antelope, deer and bison, and here the ancient Navaho came to hunt seeing always their sacred mountain of the east before them. They must have come into this valley from the region over the mountains to the west, known as old Navaho Land. At the junction of the Dan Juan and Pine Rivers, just over the divide from where we were flying, the new Navaho Dam is being built, and here during the field seasons of 1959-60 and 61, the salvage archaeology project of the Museum of New Mexico has produced the first comprehensive data of the early whereabouts of the Navaho and their Apache cousins. These recent unearthings have revealed simple, crude hogans (Navaho houses) dating from about the middle of the sixteenth century. This date, much later than all other sources of Indian life in New Mexico, seems to indicate that the Navaho may well have been the last migration from the north. The Spanish Conquistadores did not encounter the Navaho until 1626, nearly two centuries after Coronado's first arrival. The Benevides Chronicle of that year tells of the "Navahau de Apache" being farmers living the Old Navaho Land area. It is assumed that they learned the rudiments of agriculture from the Pueblo People with whom they must have come in contact, for the archaeologists found remnants of corn, beans and squash in these recent excavations.

Thinking always of the Navaho, where they came from and how they traveled, one could see from the air that the distance from Old Navaho Land to Tsisnajini is not great; and though there are mountains in between, there are passes through which travelers can find a way. Tsisnajini, because of its severance by a wide, low pass from the towering Sangro de Cristo Range, appears a mountain by itself and could easily become to the Navaho, their symbol of the East.

version

While reading the Washington Mathews ~~account~~ of the Navaho creation myth, my mind's eye traveled to the four sacred mountains, the mountains that border their ancient known world. It was then, I think, that it occurred to me that photographing then from the air would be the best way to illustrate this ancient belief. It was on an early June morning that my pilot and I took off from Santa Fe headed first for the sacred mountain of the South, Mount Taylor. Perhaps it is my love for landscape, and for geography that makes me love to fly. From the air one can see as it is not possible to see from the ground, the great structures of the earth's surface; the erosions that have taken place during countless ages. One becomes detached and the mind goes deep into the past, into the millenniums of bygone time that created our land. Looking down on this great Southwest I could visualize the earliest known existence of man in this country, in the Sandia cave just to the south of us, he lived there some twenty thousand years ago. and then followed the ~~new~~ later migrations who came across far off Behring Strait from northern Mongolia, and wandered ~~swing~~ during generations and centuries down from the north arriving in this region before the beginning of the Christian era. As we flew over the Jemez range I looked off to the northwest into Old Navaho land, the area where the NAVAHAU DE APACHE lived at the time of Benevides in 1626. At that time these Indians were agricultural, raising corn, beans and melons, not moving too far away from their home land. I could visualize them moving slowly westward, across the great stretch of land that lies between the Jemez range and the Chuska mountains. In this region the Navho encountered the Pueblo people living in great numbers in Chaco canyon where they built great structures such as Pueblo Bonito and the 27 other pueblos in that area. At that time this was a wooded land, good timber and water. Cutting down the trees for building and for firewood, denuded the land and has turned into desert. The Spanish came up from the south bringing with them sheep and horses to the astonishment of these early Indians. Quick to learn and utilize, the Navaho somehow obtained both horses and sheep, which were to revolutionize their way of living. Horses made them mobile and as they grew bolder they began to raid the Spanish colonists and their Pueblo Indian converts, stealing more horses and sheep and often women and children. As we flew over this land where the Navaho retreated following their raids I could imagine them moving ever westward, on to the Shiprock area, to the Chuska mountains, over this range to Canyon de Chelly and the Monument Valley area. ~~xxxxx~~ Here again they encountered the Pueblo People living there long years before the Navaho came. The basket Makers preceeding the CliffDwellers, and all in great numbers in this vast region known as the four corner area, where our four states of Colorado, New Mexico, Utah and Arizona meet at a common point. In central part of the Fort Defiance plateau which slopes away from the Chuskas to the west is the spectacular Canyon de Chelly where American scientists have have traced twenty two centuries of human occupation, from early Basket Maker People to Navaho, who still live within the canyon walls.

my mind
went back
to

just
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date of
chaco.

As I look down at
on it I can see
was growing & extensive
the desert & dense
that has taken place.