

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 today as Mount Blanca in Southern Colorado), and a second 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, became more and more visible, the gently rising eastern slope and the sheer, abrupt western face. It was in a cave high in this western wall where the earliest existence of human life in this area has been found, remnants of migrants who came here 20,000 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 to the west over the mountains, known as old Navaho Land. At the junction of the San Juan and Pine rivers, just over the divide from where we were flying, the new Navaho Dam is now being built, and here during the field seasons of 1959-60 & 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 (so recent unearthings) have revealed simple, crude hogans (Navaho houses) dating from about the middle of the sixteenth century. This time, so 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" as being farmers living in the San Juan River 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; so unlike the communal dwellings of the Pueblo People to the south and east.

Thinking always of the Navaho, where they came from, and how they traveled, and studying the terrain from the air, the actual distance from Old Navaho Land to Tsisnajini is not great, and though there are mountains between, there are always passes through which travelers can find a way. Tsisnajini, because of its severance by a wide and low pass from the ~~the~~ Sangre de Cristo Range, becomes ~~appears~~ a mountain by itself, and could so easily have become to the Navaho their symbol of the East.

To the South of us

The Four Sacred Mountains

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