INTRODUCTION

Trading posts played a unique role in the economy of the American West from the 1870s through the 1970s. John Lorenzo Hubbell was the most successful, respected, and influential trader of the era. The Winslow trading post and warehouse played a critical role in the Hubbell family's trading empire.

The Winslow area has long been at a crossroads of commercial and cultural exchange. The Little Colorado River sustained the nearby villages northeast of present-day Winslow from A.D. 200 through 1600. Inhabitants likely grew and traded cotton for pottery with the Pueblo villages on the mesas to the north. When they vacated Homol’ovi at the end of the 14th century, the inhabitants likely migrated north to those mesas, where the federal government established the Hopi Reservation in 1882.

In order to establish a military presence in Navajo lands, the federal government established Fort Defiance north of what is now Winslow Rock in 1851. Fort Defiance and other military posts consumed most of the Arizona Territory’s crops and livestock. Soldiers obtained additional supplies from local market traders, local farmers, and the surrounding area.

Traders started out carrying improved versions of familiar basic staples. But they eventually stocked a wide variety of foods including beef, mutton, lard, bacon, flour, sugar, salt, baking powder, coffee (usually Arabbecks), tobacco, potatoes, and canned peaches and tomatoes. Their Navajo customers also asked for cookware and utensils, tools and oil lanterns, saddles and harnesses, shoes and hats, and thread and fabric. In exchange for these goods, Navajos brought in livestock, wool, and hides as well as blankets, rugs, pottery, baskets, and jewelry, for either sale or trade.

As the Navajo population increased from a low of 8,000 in the 1860s to over 20,000 by 1900, the number of trading posts also increased. In 1876, five posts were in operation and by 1900, there were about eighty posts in operation on or near the Navajo Reservation. Though the Great Depression and subsequent New Deal sheep reduction program in the 1930s forced a severe decline in economic activity for both Navajos and traders, there were almost 150 posts in operation by the mid-1940s.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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This map of the Little Colorado River watershed boundary (in blue) shows Winslow’s proximity to Navajo and Hopi tribal lands and the Hubbell Trading Post in Ganado. (Archaeology Southwest)

TRADING POSTS BEGIN

In order to establish a military presence in Navajo lands, the federal government established Fort Defiance north of what is now Winslow Rock in 1851. Fort Defiance and other military posts consumed most of the Arizona Territory’s crops and livestock. Soldiers obtained additional supplies from local market traders, local farmers, and the surrounding area.

In the summer of 1864, the federal government forced nearly 9,000 Navajos on the “Long Walk” (Hewidii in Navajo) to desolate Fort Sumner at Bosque Redondo in New Mexico Territory. Over 2,500 Navajos died from starvation and exposure on the journey, and more died from deplorable conditions at the fort. In 1866, the survivors returned from their imprisonment to the newly established Navajo Reservation, created from a small portion of their original lands. They stopped at Fort Defiance along the way to pick up thousands of sheep and goats provided by the federal government for resettlement.

The interned Navajos had acquired a taste for certain foods and goods during their confinement at Bosque Redondo. Many Navajos began to establish more permanent enterprises, usually near water sources and known trade routes, and encouraged Navajos to trade their surplus livestock and wool for supplies. If these new trading posts were located on the Navajo Reservation, they were licensed and taxed by the federal government and the tribe, and traders were prohibited from selling alcohol or guns.

TRADING POSTS EVOLVE

By the 1880s, a trading post usually consisted of a grocery store, blacksmith, water tank, trader’s living quarters, guest hogan for Navajo customers, corrals and hay barns for cattle and sheep. After a long day of travel to the post, Native customers could eat, stay the night, and socialize with each other before they began their trading business.

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The Navajo economy

Trading posts played a critical role in the economy of the Navajo people. More than other Native peoples, Navajos produced a high variety and volume of goods and welcomed the opportunity to exchange them for the supplies they needed. Trading posts provided a vital link between the reservation and the marketplace by offering an exchange system for goods, as well as transportation of those goods over scarce and hazardous roads.

Due to the seasonal nature of the tribal economy, trading posts were critical to household economies because they offered not only sales and barter but also credit and pawn. Credit and pawn debts were usually settled up twice a year in the spring. They offered economic security. Trading posts played a unique role in the economy of the American West from the 1870s through the 1970s.

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