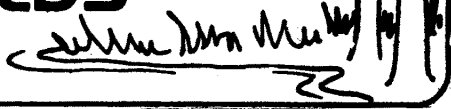


FROM WOODS & FIELDS



by Connie Magoffin

Our tour of Hubbell trading post at Ganado, Arizona, was fascinating. John Lorenzo Hubbell bought and settled at the trading post in 1878 and, according to the brochure, was more than a prosperous businessman, who, besides numerous trading posts, eventually owned stagelines, freightlines, and many other business ventures. He was also a guide, teacher, and friend to the Navajos. His trading post was not only a place for the Navajos to trade rugs and silver for needed items, but a gathering place for their friends and relatives. In the storehouse of Hubbell were two Navajo women demonstrating, one spinning on the Navajo spindle and the other weaving a copy of an old rug that was laying on the floor in front of us. It was amazing to see their hands flying—so swiftly—it was like a beautiful dance. I chatted for a while with Pat Montague who works at Hubbell. Of course, my first questions concerned the natural dyes used by the Navajos. He couldn't give me much specific help other than to show me their Navajo dye charts, but he did offer to answer any future letters. He also strongly urged me to visit the Museum of Northern Arizona at Flagstaff. I was soon to find out why. Since it was already afternoon, we decided to spend the night as already planned at the Grand Canyon, but to make a detour on the way to Boulder City through Flagstaff.

The visit to the Grand Canyon was like my first view of Niagara Falls. It's so advertised and so much is made of it, I always prepare myself for a slight disappointment. In both cases, I was awed as I was supposed to be—it was hypnotic—almost unreal—incredibly beautiful!

Monday morning we were on our way to the Museum of Northern Arizona and the unassuming building we saw as we pulled off the road was no indication of what was to come. I was immediately impressed with the quality and the attention paid to detail in the dioramas and, almost more importantly, by the concise, yet most informative captions. Our time was limited and I felt like a kid in a toy store with only one penny to spend. I had to pass over much of the museum so that I could at least study the Navajo weaving area. As I expected, it was excellent. Following are some of the displays included:

1. The development of Navajo weaving from 1860-1890, including rugs using Saxony yarn, Germantown yarn and a real bayeta from before 1805, found with a burial in Canyon de Chelly. Bayeta was the English cochineal-dyed red cloth, traded to the Indians by the Spanish, which was unravelled and reused as yarn.
2. A wall of regional rugs showing such examples as Two Grey Hills, Chinle, and Crystal, among others.
3. To illustrate the weaving process, a handmade Navajo loom is set up with a rug started by Lim Tososie.
4. A marvelous area clearly illustrating eight weaves used by the Navajos, such as plain weave, diagonal twill and different kinds of diamond twills.
5. An exhibit of samples of natural dyes used by the Navajos and examples of their resulting colors.

I spent some time that afternoon at the research area of the museum talking with a woman who had done some experimenting on her own with dye plants of the area and we talked about the possibility of a future trade of information. She also directed me to a botanist there who helped me with specific identification of some of the plants I had collected.

That afternoon we left for Boulder City and a too short, one-day visit with my family. Tuesday morning we arose early for a tour of Boulder Dam and that afternoon I spent at the University of Nevada, Las Vegas. Last summer my mother had sent me two newspaper articles that I wanted to check out. One was about Kathy Kauffman, a crafts instructor for art classes at UNLV and elsewhere. She is a spinner, weaver, and dyer and of course has done lots of experimentation with desert dyes. I stopped at the art department, but she was in the process of moving to California. I did leave a note and I have since received a card from Kathy saying that she would be interested in future correspondence.

The other newspaper article was about L. Paul Mercer, who, between his retirement in 1966 and his death in 1972, passionately pursued the crafts of spinning, weaving, and dyeing. He not only purchased every book and pamphlet he could locate on these subjects, but spent three Septembers with a Navajo family learning their techniques. His books, along with a scrapbook that he kept that included letters from such weavers as Harriet Tidball, were donated to UNLV. I spent several frustrating hours in the library trying to locate this collection. No one had any complete list and I could find only a small number of the books in the card catalogue. It was after my sixth inquiry, including an urgent "Are you sure you don't have anything?!", that they finally remembered the scrapbook. Again, by then my time was short, so I regretably had to hurry through. The scrapbook was fascinating and it was comforting to find someone else that saved every scrap of paper that "might some day be needed!" I had found no references to natural dyeing until I flipped over the last few pages while my mother urged that we really had to be going. There it was!! Mr. Mercer's notes on dye formulas and color representations included some yarn samples with the 14 pages of recipes and where these were missing, he had simulated the color using Derwent Colour pencils including the pencil number and the order in which they were used. I was allowed to Xerox the notes (alas, the color was lost) and the woman who had found the scrapbook gave me some additional names of people I might contact. My unexpected trip had certainly turned up new avenues to pursue.

As I packed to go home Wednesday morning, the odor of the rabbitbrush and mormon tea in my suitcase was overpowering. I wondered what the airlines would say! It was all worth it, the yellows, vivid orange-golds and brassy greens I got with even the dried rabbitbrush were beautiful. The colors get me dreaming of a return trip to the Southwest.

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