

BOOK REVIEW



Dine Tah: My Reservation Days 1923–1939, by Alwin J. Girdner. 336 pages, 40 half-tones, Rio Nuevo Publishers, 2011. \$15.95 (Paper). ISBN: 978-1-9338-55561.

Reviewed by Malcolm Benally, author of *Bitter Water: Dine Oral Histories of the Navajo-Hopi Land Dispute*, published by First Peoples.



Alwin J. Girdner's memoir, *Dine Tah: My Reservation Days 1923–1939*, is a written account of early missionary activity on Navajo lands. It is a collection of stories about a young Anglo kid who grew up around Navajo people at Immanuel Mission neighboring Sweetwater, Arizona, near the beautiful Carrizo Mountains in northeastern Arizona. The book's foundation is a collection of notes and impressions from the author's father, Glen Girdner, which he wrote in the two decades that they lived among the Navajo people as missionaries of the non-denominational Plymouth Brethren.

To begin the book, the author introduces the Navajo culture in short, highly detailed chapters about life in a hogan, the internment of Navajos at Bosque Redondo, and ceremonial life. Throughout the book intermittent sections explaining or describing Navajo names, sheep dipping, or the behavior of Navajos who gather daily at a trading post inform the reader about the nuances of Navajo life. While providing the foundations of Navajo culture and traditional worldview, Girdner then takes the reader on a tour of various missionary accomplishments on Navajo land. He starts with the first Catholic missionary contact with the "Apache de Navajos" as early as 1748 in Cebolleta, New Mexico, near Mt. Taylor. While missionary activity had already begun to flourish in the Southwest, Alwin and his father Glen's own story really began in December, 1924, when they moved into an abandoned trading post near Sweetwater, Arizona, a community that has remained isolated to this day.

In the chapter titled "Navajo Ceremonies," the author reminisces about his own proximity to Navajo life as an eight-year-old boy who never had all the information he needed to understand the complexities of the culture. Yet what he observed as a young man were the impressions that led him to fill in the blanks years later, after he learned the language and studied the culture in an academic setting. The overwhelming amount of research on Navajo culture enables the author to share important historical and cultural details that are poignant,

insightful, and distinctive as the book's greatest strength. It is obvious the author's research along with his father's voluminous collections of notes helped his memories as well, as they are vivid and carefully detailed. He writes: "Occasionally a ceremony was held near Immanuel Mission. Although curious about Navajo beliefs, I did not ask questions, and was therefore completely unaware of the myths and rituals involved in any Navajo social activities and ceremonials, as I had never attended anything but weddings."

During the summer months, the author, as a young kid at the mission, slept outside for comfort. On occasion, when an Enemy Way—a popular ceremony with social elements still practiced to this day—was held, he writes that he could hear singing and laughter from the *Ndaa'* ceremony as participants rode their horses home at night. What cultural details he absorbed as a young boy became fragmented memories that he was able to revisit years later when he studied anthropology. Occasionally the author engages Yellowhair, a young Navajo man who lived at Immanuel Mission, to explain to him the mores of the culture. All the information that Girdner became a party to serves as the source material for this book.

In other accounts, the author describes the competition to bring several denominations of churches to Navajo country. He writes, "relations between Catholics, Mormons, and Protestants were always very competitive, occasionally vituperative, but relatively peaceful." After one last trip to their ranch home in Oak Creek, Arizona, the Girdner family set up camp in a two-room, abandoned trading post with the help of the Navajo farmer, trader, and interpreter, Bob Martin. Although Immanuel Mission was not opened with full Navajo consensus, "by continuing discussion until everyone present agreed" it finally opened two years later in January 1924.

Chapter twelve, "Two Women on Horse Back," is a remarkable section about Florence Barker and Clara Halcomb, who carried two large format cameras on horseback through Tsegi Canyon while they spread their missionary word of God in their daily field work. (For the interested reader, their work can be viewed by visiting the archives at the Cline Library Special Collections at Northern Arizona University in Flagstaff, Arizona, where their journals and photographs are preserved to this day.) Other portions of this book, such as chapter eighteen, "When the Queen Came to Shiprock," is somewhat of a misnomer as it does not discuss the visit by the Queen of Romania at any length. It is hard to tell how this chapter fits into the rest of the story and may have served the book better by including it in chapter 19, "Getting There Was Half the Fun," as the emphasis is on driving reservation roads, travel, its trials, and unknown obstacles.

The book is filled with the extraordinary work of missionaries in Navajo communities throughout the years. The reader learns how Navajo families brought in sick or injured family members to the mission for help; how missionaries helped grind Navajos' harvests of corn; and how they took Navajos across rough,

expansive terrain during the early decades of the 1900s. Girdner gives his readers a taste of missionary life beyond just spreading the word of God. The author succeeds in giving his readers a portrait of a time when most major thoroughfares were rough dirt roads, and the hardship of a 50-mile trip could often take days. Additionally, the reader is treated to a description of the network of traders throughout the Navajo reservation and learns about their great resourcefulness in Navajo communities.

Alan J. Girdner's book is fulfilling. Its carefully details character sketches of Navajo friends, travelers, traders, government officials, and social centers that made lasting impressions as they came to visit the mission and while the author traveled through Navajo lands. Although the family was often disconnected from English-speaking people for long periods of time, usually due to inclement weather—and missionary life must have been lonely—the book dignifies the livelihood of Navajo people at that time as they quickly recovered from the historical traumas of internment at Fort Sumner (1864–1868) in some of the most isolated areas of the country.