1-1-1926

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An All-American Fabric---The Navajo Blanket

By H. S. Farley

Lazily I threw back the covers of my camp bed and with numerous yawns and stretches, tried to rid myself of the kinks my body had acquired through sleeping on the hard ground. I had made a hasty camp the night before and had not the remotest idea of my surroundings, but as the sun peeped over the eastern horizon, I saw I was camped upon a knoll, which rose many hundred feet above what I supposed to be a vast plain.

Far below me a dense, low-hanging cloud obscured my vision and I seemed to be a castaway on this lonely promontory in a sea of mist which encompassed it.

As the sun rose higher and its lances of light pierced the mist below me, gigantic shapes appeared—dimly at first—through a curtain of purple haze. Here and there, a rugged butte reared its shaggy crest for a moment, only to be lost again in the ever moving mist.

Gradually, as the sun ascended toward its zenith and the mist was disseminated, miniature mountain ranges took form, their sides lacerated with the tentacled tributaries leading to the dry river beds in the valleys below.

Could it be that I, while in the embrace of Morpheus, had been transplanted to some far off fairy land—was this the land of my promises, of which I in my childhood had been taught, or was it a dream, from which I would suddenly awaken? A feeling of awe, inspired by the magnitude of such a scene, welled up within me, dwarfing me with a sense of my own insignificance.

Mile upon mile, as far as the eye could see, lay this vast stretch of desert waste-land, in colors beyond my power of description, but somehow it didn't seem to be either desert or waste-land—rather, it seemed for a few moments that heaven was opening and I was being permitted a glimpse into the Celestial gallery of art, and while invisible angels rolled back the curtain of mist, I stood with Him who had created it, and watched the unfolding of the Painted Desert of Arizona.

The scene changed swiftly, but the memory of the picture has ever been before me, for this was my first visit to the land of the Navajos. Perhaps this is why I have a greater respect, a kindlier feeling, toward the nomads who
wander over our great southwestern country; perhaps this is why I have tried to learn more about them and the origin of their principal industry, the Navajo Blanket.

Go back with me, if you will, to that remote date long before Columbus voyaged across the uncharted seas, and look upon a race whose struggle for existence has carried it down through the centuries to the present day. Originally of the great Athabascan tribes of the north, they wandered south until they reached what is now southern Utah and Colorado, and northern Arizona and New Mexico.

Prior to the advent of the Navajo, this region was inhabited by the Cliff Dwellers, a race whose origin is still lost in the depths of obscurity, but of a certainty, a race whose progress toward a civilization is plainly perceptible. Among the ruins of the Cliff Dwellers now being excavated by our Geological and Archaeological Societies are found cotton fabrics. It is an interesting conjecture that the Cliff Dwellers were the first of our aboriginal tribes who had a definite knowledge of the art of weaving and during their sojourn here taught their neighbors, the Pueblos, the rudiments of the art.

The lure of gold which prompted most, if not all, of the early Spanish conquests, was definitely responsible for their explorations into this territory. It was the Spaniards who gave this nomadic tribe their name of Apaches de Navajoa, their own name for their race being “Tinnai,” or “Tinneh,” meaning “The People.”

At this time the Navajos were a wild and warlike race, clothed with a covering made of the skins of small animals, hunting, their means of subsistence; their chief industry, that of raiding and plundering their more industrious neighbors.

It was during the conquest of Onate in 1598 that sheep were introduced into New Mexico and the Pueblo tribes, who at that time were weaving cotton fabrics, soon abandoned their cultivation of the plant for the easier spinning and weaving of wool.

Due entirely to the Spanish rule of oppression and their methods of extortion, many of the Pueblos deserted their villages and joined the Navajos. This number was materially increased following the Pueblo revolt in 1680 and the subsequent re-conquest by DeVargas in 1692, for having been free from the Spanish yoke of tyranny for twelve years many refused to again subject themselves to it. This not only increased the Navajo tribe, but, without their knowing it, laid the foundation for their present industry.
By this time the Navajos had acquired large flocks of sheep, mainly by pillage, but partly through barter, though they had made no effort to use the wool, utilizing only the meat for food. Necessity, the Mother of Invention, aided perhaps by a series of severe winters, caused them to seek a more substantial raiment, which would withstand the elements and afford them a greater protection than the skins of animals. Therefore they willingly permitted the Pueblo members of their tribe to teach them the principles of weaving. At first the fabrics were crude and of uneven texture, but even so they filled a long felt need. Little by little they learned to spin a finer yarn and make a fabric large enough to afford the protection they desired.

The Navajo's spinning device is extremely crude in that it consists solely of a stick about one-half inch in diameter and about thirty inches in length. A disc shaped piece of wood with a hole in the center is fitted on the stick about twenty inches from the end. After the wool has been washed, scoured and carded, the Indian woman begins to spin her yarn, first taking a handful of wool and rolling it into a loose rope, which she starts winding around the stick. The yarn produced by the first winding is too coarse to be woven, so the process is repeated until the yarn is reduced to a smaller thread and she has spun enough wool for the fabric she intends weaving. In some of the finer blankets of today the yarn has been re-spun as many as seven and eight times. Incidentally, it is interesting to note that today the Navajo still uses this same spinning device.

As the old original fabrics were first woven into blanket sizes, the term "blanket" is still applied to practically everything the Navajo weaves, though in later years, as the demand was created, other sizes were woven and while today their fabric is used essentially as rugs, the term "blanket" is still applied by common consent.

A Navajo and his hogan, or "house".
The first blankets were woven of white wool only, but shortly they added stripes of black, made from the wool of the black sheep. That the untutored mind of the savage was groping about for something, the knowledge of which was unknown to them, is evidenced by their experiments. First by adding black stripes and second by mixing black wool with white and making what is known as "sheep's grey." Their blankets then appeared in alternating stripes of black, white and grey.

In 1680 bayeta cloth made its appearance and its introduction, without a doubt, led the Navajos to seek other colors, at least it created the desire and later laid the foundation for the most beautiful aboriginal fabrics in our country.

Bayeta is a cochineal-dyed fabric, the warp and weof of which were of such equal size and texture that it could be unraveled and woven again into the Navajo blankets, though great skill was required in handling it. As cochineal is a product of Mexico, it is reasonable to suppose it found its way into the early European markets and eventually to England. Bayeta was originally manufactured in Manchester, England, taken from there to Spain and from Spain it was sent to the traders in New Spain, or Mexico where it was bartered or sold by them to the Indian traders who had access to the Navajo country. Naturally, it was very expensive and the great skill required in unraveling and re-weaving it led them to weave only narrow stripes of bayeta into their blankets.

Prior to 1680, practically all Navajo blankets were without color, excepting natural colors, white, black and sheep's grey. As bayeta was a dull mahogany red in color it proved the needed stimulus to the Indian mind, for they then began casting about, experimenting with plants and roots, and colors proper were found.

Following the weave by periods as evidenced by age and texture, it is found that yellow was the first of the Native dyes. A light yellow was produced by steeping the leaves of the peach and a brighter and more attractive one was made from the flower heads of the Bileolvia Graveolens. A dark yellow was made from the root of a plant called "rabbit wood."

The traders at this time introduced indigo and probably Brazil Wood, the latter being a red dye-stuff discovered in South America by the Spanish explorer Cabral, taken from there to European ports, from which it was re-shipped to this continent.

Having blue and yellow, the Navajos learned to produce a green by combining the two. As black became more
popular, on account of its symbolical importance, they re-
quired more and of a deeper shade than was produced by
the wool from their black sheep. It was found that by com-
bining a decoction of the leaves of the sumac with native
yellow ochre and the gum of the pinon that a very good
black could be produced.

In the evolution of the blanket from the coarse article
of necessity to the beauty of barbaric fancy produced later,
the squaw’s whole nature was changed. Slowly she became
a slave of the blanket and was working out her destiny with-
out knowing it. Gradually the spirit of her work grew, with
colors and patterns springing into being—colors and pat-
terns that even astonished her, and she began to weave her
whole soul into the meshes of her work.

The severe plainness of the coarse, rough early fabrics
—things of utility only—prompt us to wonder what influ-
ence was at work in the mind of the native woman that led
her up from the state of mere utility to the higher plane of
color and pattern. It may be the Indian’s love for color in-
spired this departure and later was stimulated by a natural
artistic instinct. Perhaps it may have been the ancient
Pueblo pottery which gave her the idea of putting color into
the blanket, taking form and growing step by step until,
after a century of loving labor, the Navajo blanket was born
of a parentage of utility and a savage love for things beau-
tiful.

The Navajo squaw follows no patterns, all figures being
evolved as she works, weaving entirely as her fancy dictates,
which accounts for the distinctive individuality of each
blanket.

It is not every blanket that has a definite meaning in
its design, but frequently are found blankets into whose pat-
terns the squaw has woven in symbolical figures, the tales of
many stirring events. The colors, the stripes, squares,
crosses and zig-zag diamonds are not meaningless designs.
Every design may be reduced to straight lines and have a
very definite meaning to the Navajo.

The Swastika, or ansated cross, an evolution from the
Greek cross, and so long an emblem of the Ayran tribes of
Europe, is found on some of the very oldest Navajo fabrics.
This does not necessarily imply that because the Swastika
is found on the very old Navajo blanket, its presence is evi-
dence that the Navajo is remotely of Asiatic origin. The
Swastika appears on some of the pottery found in the cliff
dwellings and it is highly possible the Pueblos inherited it
from them and the Navajos, in turn, copied it from the
Pueblos.
In 1863 the United States Government sent a force of soldiers into the field under the leadership of Kit Carson, to put an end to the depredations constantly being perpetrated by the Navajos. He was successful in capturing the principal leaders and compelling a general surrender. The prisoners were taken to Fort Sumner, New Mexico, where they were held until 1867, at which time, upon their promise to be good, they were returned to their present home and their reservation was assigned to them. While the present reservation does not nearly cover the original area occupied by them, it is wholly within the lines of their first occupation. The reservation contains 12,000 square miles or 7,680,000 acres.

Upon their return the government paid them four annuities and in 1869 distributed a large number of sheep and goats among them. Since that time they have been self-supporting, with the exception of the winter of 1894-95, when, on account of drought and crop failures, the government distributed rations to prevent suffering.

Regarding the so-called factory imitations of the Navajo blanket, there is not even a similarity; there are factories, however, whose product is "Indian style blankets," but their texture, weave and design differ widely from the Navajo made fabric. Not infrequently do we find blankets in which the squaw, after starting the pattern, has made changes and added characters, which could hardly have been intended when she began the fabric. This may be due to her forgetting the original pattern she had in mind, or perhaps her fancy suggested the change.

In all machine made fabrics the pattern which goes into the beginning must necessarily be the same when it comes out at the end, as no machine has ever been invented that will change designs, or patterns, after the fabric has started through the loom.

The Navajo weaves may be divided into four general classes: the very old in natural colors; the bayeta; the "native wool with native dyes," and the Germantown. By "native wool," is meant the natural wool as taken from the Navajo sheep, the natural black, white and grey. The term bayeta, is applied to blankets in which some of this material is shown. By "native dyes," is meant the colors made by the Navajos without outside assistance. Indigo having always been used with colors produced by them, it is included among the native dyes; by "Germantown," is meant the blankets woven from the commercial "Germantown yarn."

The old blankets may be divided into early and later types, with respect to their patterns. The very first blan-
kets were plain white fabrics. The early pattern blankets have broad stripes of black and white only—their first crude conception of design. The second consists of broad stripes of black, white and grey, the grey being a mixture of black and white wool, thus marking the second step toward pattern design.

The bayeta blankets may be separated into two divisions, the first being blankets with narrow stripes of bayeta red alternated with wider stripes of natural colors; stripes, constituting the entire pattern effect. In the second is found the development of the more complicated designs in which the conception of symbols made its first appearance and from this time on has grown to the elaborate system of symbolical figures which are firmly established in the blanket today. The bayeta is no longer used, having passed out entirely about 1875.

Woven into certain old and very valuable Navajo blankets are found the colors red, yellow and green, the shades and texture differing from anything else found in the Navajo weaves. These colors antedate the bayeta and native dye periods, they are strong and unlike anything developed later by them and are traced to discarded army uniforms—the red coat of the infantry, the yellow of the cavalry and the green of the medical staff. There have been times in all countries when the surplus of army clothing has been sold for anything it would bring and in cases where the colors were such as to attract the eye of the primitive people, it has been purchased by traders for barter. There is no doubt but that some of this clothing found its way into the Navajo country, being utilized by them in the same manner in which bayeta was treated later, raveled and worked into the blankets. These blankets are the oldest in which colors appear and are very rare.

The Navajo blanket should be our most treasured possession as an outstanding example of an all-American fabric. Born of necessity in the minds of an untutored race, its blending of colors, though barbaric, is ever harmonious and when placed on our floors gives the room the home-like atmosphere we so much desire. In perfect accord, with itself it seems to fit in almost any place and will not quarrel with its surroundings.

It does not need a prophet to foresee the day, which is not far distant, when the production of Navajo blankets will be very limited, if not entirely stopped. Its arrival will herald the death-knell of one of America’s most interesting arts. The establishment of Indian schools throughout the reservation by our government has taught the Navajo new,
and better, ways of living and earning an existence. The child of today who is taught domestic science will find greater remunerative qualities in her culinary art, consequently she will not replace the squaw of yesterday at the loom. Added to this, the men are being taught to improve their sheep, but improved wool does not work into blankets as well as the native wool.

Let us not lament the progress and development of the Navajo race; rather, we should extend to them the assistance which for centuries they have been denied, but as the inevitable approaches, let us treasure the blanket more dearly, remembering that it emerged from utter darkness and fostered by a savage mind, has risen to the heights of beauty—a gem of barbaric weaving, an all-American fabric—The Navajo Blanket.