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AMERICA'S NAVAJO INDIANS -- MAINTAINING TRIBAL TRADITIONS
By Boyd Norton
From Friends

SUMMARY: The Navajo Nation, located in the southwestern United States, retains its rich cultural heritage, displayed annually at the Navajo Nation Fair. The event is a fascinating blend of old and new, high-tech and ancient customs.

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AMERICA'S NAVAJO INDIANS -- MAINTAINING TRIBAL TRADITIONS

By Boyd Norton

Americans know them as Navajo -- one of the great Indian tribes. They call themselves Dine or The People. It is not a boast, just a simple statement of fact. For their land is called Dinetah. And they are the people of the land.

The land of the Navajo covers an area of 65,000 square kilometers, big enough to be a nation in some quarters of the world. And, in fact, they call themselves the Navajo Nation.

Located in northeastern Arizona, and overlapping slightly into the states of Utah and New Mexico, the Navajo Reservation contains some of the most colorful lands in North America.

The Navajo are a tough people. They are also an adaptable people, and over centuries of time have embraced and refined the arts, crafts and technology of many cultures.

Each year, in the first week of September, the Navajo Nation Fair is held at Window Rock, Arizona. The event draws an estimated 100,000 people, mostly Navajo from the far flung parts of their land, but also visitors from around the world. The four days of the fair are a blend of celebration, contests, displays of arts and crafts, renewal of friendships and a mixture of the old with the new. There are dancers in colorful traditional costumes doing the old tribal dances. There are also rock concerts. You may snack on ice cream and hot dogs or Navajo frybread. There are Navajo

youngsters running around in shorts and dignified octogenarians in maroon velveteen shirts wearing silver and turquoise jewelry. There are aged artisans and young entrepreneurs. The Navajo Nation Fair is a fascinating blend of old and new, high-tech and ancient customs.

As you wander about the fair, you may hear snatches of Navajo language being spoken. It's a lilting, musical language with much dependence on tonal variations. It's also a reflection of Navajo ancestry.

Many centuries ago, the ancestral home of the Navajo was the Pacific Northwest. Beginning about the middle of the 16th century, tribal groups migrated south and began settling in the southwestern United States. The Pueblo Indian and Spanish cultures were already established here and the Navajo quickly assimilated useful attributes of both cultures -- particularly the domestication of sheep and horses. They raised crops of corn, and when their society prospered, it also grew.

Today, there are an estimated 160,000 Navajos scattered over a wide area of their lands. Modern schooling and jobs have changed their culture. To cover the vast distances, the horse has been replaced by the pickup truck. But the cultural roots are deep. There are still large numbers who live far from civilization, and as you travel through this vast land you are likely to see numerous hogans -- traditional earth-and-log structures, always with the door facing east.

At the Navajo Nation Fair, you can see many reminders of this rich Navajo culture, a culture most finely developed in the arts. Craftsmen from all over the reservation display their works. The elegant silver and turquoise jewelry has become a particular Navajo hallmark. Equally famous -- and much sought after -- are the magnificent works of weavers, whose rug designs are unique. And the superb pottery, with its soft, sensuous lines and distinctive designs, is much in demand by collectors.

Boyd Norton writes for Friends, a monthly U.S. publication.

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CAPTION:

NAVAJO INDIAN WOMEN weave traditional tribal rugs at the Navajo Reservation, located in the southwestern United States. The Navajos retain the tribe's rich cultural heritage and customs amid the latest developments in high technology. Photo by Photri. (No. 80-1163c)

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