
Chapter
5
*The Lives of Some of the
Navajo Students*

Before we continue our account of the research activities, it may be useful to review the backgrounds of some of our students.

Maxine and Mary Jane Tsosie

Like so many Navajo girls of their generation, seventeen-year-old Maxine Tsosie and her twenty-one-year-old sister, Mary Jane, daughters of Juan Tsosie, live in two contrasting worlds. When they are away from home in boarding school or working off the reservation, they live essentially in the white man's world. With that small percentage of Navajo girls who reach high school, they live with their classmates in a kind of adolescent culture typical of the American rural West, or more accurately, the rural West of America some decades ago. Their high school, however, is less a place for college preparation than a place for vocational training.

A school like the public high school at Fort Defiance, run by

the state of Arizona, superficially appears to apply to its students the same molding process as those elsewhere in the country. But there is one important point of contrast. The white student in a high school in Albuquerque or Phoenix has some sense of continuity between life at school and home. The language, the religion, the behavior of their teachers, the goals and values taken for granted are not unlike those of their parents. For Maxine and Mary Jane there is very little shared by the two environments. The life style of their parents, and to a much greater degree their grandparents, is in sharp contrast to what they are taught at school. The use of the Navajo language at school has been discouraged if not forbidden. Traditional Navajo religion is practiced at home; starting in elementary school, time is set aside for learning one of the varieties of the Christian faith. The degree to which a Navajo of the Tsosie sisters' generation uses the native language and takes part in Navajo religious practice and belief is largely dependent on the continuity of family and community life. For the Tsosie sisters and many others of their generation, this continuity has been badly fractured by long stretches of time spent away from home.

Maxine

Maxine was born at the government hospital at Fort Defiance, a few hours' drive by auto from where her family was living. When she was only two years of age, her mother died and her father moved to Barstow, California. Maxine attended school there until she was about ten years old. Her father then brought her back to the reservation to live with her maternal grandmother, following the Navajo matrilineal custom. In the old days upon the death of a mother, it was her sisters, her mother, or another woman of her lineage who would assume the responsibility for raising the child, who would not have been taken away by the father as was Maxine.

The grandmother lived at Oak Springs, a community about ten

miles to the northwest of Pine Springs, which became Maxine's primary home. While there, she saw her father only when he returned to the reservation from his job in California.

For three years Maxine attended a government boarding school at Fort Wingate, sixty-five miles to the east, then a public school in Gallup for two years while her father, back from California, worked as a silversmith for one of the local craft merchandisers. She then entered public high school at Fort Defiance and was to start her last year in the fall after we met her during summer vacation.

Maxine did well in school, especially in English. She placed first in a high school speech contest. She told us that since she was a young girl, she had wanted to be an elementary school teacher and she planned to go to Arizona State University for teacher training.

In talking with her during the months of the project and watching her make her film concerned with ritual, we realized that she knew very little of the religious life of her people and had attended very few of the traditional curing ceremonies; she said she had never seen any of the sand paintings. The squaw dance held at Pine Springs that summer was the first she had been to. This is exceptional; most girls of her age have been to many such dances. She had not known her grandfather, Sam Yazzie, the father of Juan Tsosie, a prominent medicine man in the Pine Springs area, until five years before. Although her grandmother at Oak Springs speaks some English and had been married to one of the most acculturated members of the Pine Springs community of that generation, it was she who encouraged Maxine to learn the ways of her people and who scolded her father for not taking her to Navajo ceremonies.

Maxine considers herself a Roman Catholic. She was baptized as a small child when she was living at Barstow. When she is in high school she attends mass every week. Thanks to her grandmother she has learned to speak Navajo, although she was ten

years of age before she heard the language spoken by others in the community.

Mary Jane

Mary Jane is five years older than Maxine and the second of the seven sisters (Maxine is next to the youngest). Unlike Maxine, her early years were spent in government schools and her first two years of high school were at a public school in California. While there she did part-time domestic work. She then returned at her father's request to help out at home. Unfortunately appendicitis, followed by a severe infection and intermittent hospitalization, delayed her last two years in high school. Like her sister, her best subject in school was English. She hopes to become a laboratory technician after taking a two-year college course.

Mary Jane also considers herself a Roman Catholic and has been to very few Navajo ceremonies. However, when she was eighteen, she was shown the Yeibechai masks at a Night Chant she attended with another sister; this rite was traditionally part of every young Navajo's initiation into the ceremonial life of the people.

Mary Jane, although shy and less outgoing than her sister, is, perhaps because she was older when she lived away from the reservation, more oriented to the non-Navajo world than Maxine. Mary Jane told us, "I didn't like it on the reservation after living in California; people seemed different. They were not friendly and stared at me." She had a more difficult time learning the Navajo language. "My grandmother and uncle scold me because I speak English nearly all the time." Mary Jane looks forward to returning to California for more schooling, and hopes to live there.

Of the two sisters, Maxine was much the more self-confident in her relations with us and with the members of the community. Maxine, more aggressive, is nevertheless much closer to traditional Navajo ways. If Maxine were to marry a Navajo and settle

down as a teacher in an Indian school at Oak Springs or Pine Springs, it is quite possible that in ten years she would be well integrated into Navajo family and community life. For Mary Jane, integration would be much more difficult; she is much more drawn to the world of the white man.

Susie Benally

Susie Benally was the most traditional of any of the filmmakers. She spent the whole of her girlhood with her family at Pine Springs and was over fourteen when she first went to boarding school away from home. She was shy in the presence of strangers and soft-spoken. During the first week of the class she hardly spoke above a whisper. Her demeanor contrasted sharply to the almost bold behavior of the Tsosie sisters.

Susie was born at Pine Springs in 1940, the third of eight children—six boys and two girls. For her first five grades, she attended the local elementary school where our classes in filmmaking were held. During those formative years she was in constant touch with her family and was raised in the conventional Navajo manner. Alta, her mother, was a well-known weaver from a matrilineal line of outstanding craftsmen. Mabel Burnside, her mother's sister, had taught weaving for many years at various government boarding schools, and other aunts and uncles were well known weavers and silversmiths. Susie's early memories are much like those of other women of her age at Pine Springs. She recalls herding sheep with her mother and grandmother when she was about six. At eight she began to help her mother with weaving, starting with the simplest task of carding the wool; later she was taught to spin. She was able to help her mother weave sashes when she was eleven, and by fifteen, she was weaving her own rugs. There had been a close relationship between the girl and her mother in the learning of weaving.

Susie, like most of the girls of her age at Pine Springs, went to the various *sings* with her mother and father, unlike the Tsosie

sisters. At her first menses, Susie went through the traditional girls' puberty ceremony and shared the large corn cake with many clanmates and friends in the community.

At fourteen, after several years out of school, Susie was sent to the Bureau of Indian Affairs vocational school at Stewart, Nevada. There she remained for five years in a course for hospital attendants. She did not like this type of work, however; during the five summers she used her earlier training as a craftsman by working in a curio store at Bryce National Park, where she demonstrated weaving and waited on trade.

In 1963 she married Floyd Benally, a Navajo boy from Bluff, Utah, whom she had known at school. After they returned to the reservation, Susie worked briefly as a waitress at a cafe on the highway not far from Pine Springs. Floyd entered military service and Susie continued living at her mother's home at Pine Springs.

Susie's verbal timidity with us did not seem to handicap her in learning film technique. She was an acute observer. Long training as a craftsman and thorough knowledge of her subject gave her confidence in filmmaking. Hands trained to spin and weave, and eyes trained to distinguish subtle variations in tone and texture and to compose harmonious patterns, were easily re-trained to see with critical discrimination through the camera's lens. Further, as a weaver, Susie was accustomed to think holistically about pattern; before she was far along in the weaving of a rug, she had the whole pattern in her mind's eye. Such an outlook is of course a tremendous asset to the filmmaker.

But for the Tsosie sisters, on the other hand, the task of filmmaking presented a very different set of problems. Verbal discourse was the easiest part of the job. Both were able to joke and banter with us from the very first day. They were sure of their ability as students in the classroom at Window Rock, and Worth and Chalfen were immediately accepted as new teachers. The subject of the practice footage shot by Mary Jane and Maxine—the school building and the children at play in the school

yard—indicated their feeling of ease in that environment. They wrote careful notes and were more dependent on paper and pencil than was Susie. But lack of training as craftsmen made them much less sure of themselves in learning the technical processes. They were also unfamiliar with the subject—Navajo religion—which they chose for their film.

Susie was much closer to the traditional culture of the community and she chose a subject with which she had been intimate from childhood. Likewise Susie, typically Navajo, had a close relationship with her mother who acted in her film; this intimacy extended to a shared interest in a new technical task. Each woman was able to anticipate the other's demands; Susie's knowledge of the sequences of the process of weaving allowed her to anticipate film sequences in a way that greatly facilitated the shooting of her first film.

In contrast, the Tsosie sisters found it very difficult to handle their actor, their grandfather, in any meaningful way. Not only were they unable to anticipate what would come next in the sing he conducts in the film; but the filming presented them and Sam Yazzie with a reversal of roles. Ordinarily he would tell them what to do, and not they him. But in so far as they were the ones who had the white man's technology to record his actions, he looked to them for directions which they were hard put to give, not knowing what they should expect of him in his role as a medicine man.

Mike Anderson

Mike Anderson was born at Pine Springs in 1942 and was twenty-four when we worked with him. He is the third of five siblings, three girls and two boys. One of his sisters and his brother are older. Two sisters now live in Gallup and one in California. The brother, Terry Lee, an ex-marine, is now on the Navajo police force.

Mike's first education was at a Catholic school in Gallup,

where he remained for five years. When he was in fourth grade Mike was baptized in the Roman Catholic Church as his mother had been years before. Mike thinks of himself as a Catholic; as a boy he was not taken to sings held at Pine Springs nor was he shown the Yei masks at the initiation rite to Navajo ritual.

From Gallup Mike was sent to the Phoenix Indian School for four years, and he then finished high school at the public school at Fort Defiance.

After graduation Mike decided to go to a barber's school in San Francisco, but upon arrival he found that the school was full. He got a job as a machine bag operator at a potato chip factory in Burlingame, California, and remained on that job for three years, eventually earning the maximum union wage, \$2.25 an hour. When the factory moved to Texas, Mike quit and got a job as a painter and maintenance man at Dominican College in San Rafael, a suburb of San Francisco. It was the job he held before coming back to Pine Springs for the summer.

While in California Mike would have liked to live with a brother, but since none were available, he lived alone to avoid drunken Navajos, who were constantly asking him for money. Even so they found him, and he changed his place of residence numerous times to elude them. Mike attended Sunday mass regularly and sometimes visited an uncle and a cousin who lived nearby, or another cousin who lived across the bay in Oakland. On other weekends, he would go to the Indian Center in the mission district.

Mike says that he still plans to return to San Francisco and enroll in the barber's school he tried to attend earlier. Questioned about where he will set up as a barber after he has finished the course, Mike spoke once of possibly opening a shop near Window Rock and on another occasion of remaining in San Francisco.

Of the three men, Mike seemed to have the weakest ties to traditional Navajo culture, although he did have an interest in the religion of his people. Like Mary Jane Tsosie, he had spent his childhood away from the reservation and his only close ties

were to his immediate family. The chances are that he will, as the years go by, become increasingly involved in urban life away from the reservation.

Johnny Nelson

Johnny Nelson was born at Indian Wells, seventy miles west of Pine Springs, on July 7, 1933. His mother was Florence Yazzie, of Tsina-jinnie clan, and his father was Joseph Nelson.

Johnny's mother died when he was twelve years old and he was adopted by his mother's sister Dorothy Pavatea, the wife of a Hopi, Tom Pavatea, Jr. His foster father was the son of the well-known storekeeper, Tom Pavatea, who had had a trading post for many years at Polacca, at the foot of First Mesa, Arizona; Tom, Jr. helped his father wait on trade.

From the age of twelve Johnny was part of a tri-lingual family. Dorothy had taught her Hopi husband a good bit of Navajo in addition to what he already knew as a storekeeper with many Navajo customers. Both parents spoke English. Johnny said his mother made a regular practice of speaking to him in Navajo and expected him to address her in the language of his people. Hopi was the language of his playmates and he learned enough of that tongue to get along with them on the playground and elsewhere.

Johnny's first formal education was at the Keams Canyon Boarding School, only a few miles distant from Polacca, where he finished sixth grade. There, Johnny remembered, the dormitory attendant punished the children when they spoke Navajo instead of English. During summers much of his time was spent herding sheep for his parents. His next schooling was far from home, at Carson City, Nevada, where the Bureau of Indian Affairs had a special program—essentially an accelerated course in English. Johnny completed the course, designed for five years, in two years. Next came one year in the Bureau's high school in Phoenix, where Johnny was enrolled in the academic course rather than in vocational training.

In 1954 Johnny entered the Marines and went to boot camp at Camp Pendleton, California. Unfortunately, a convoy truck in which he was riding turned over and he suffered injury to his shoulders and ribs. He was given a medical discharge after only seven months in the service. Johnny then got a job on the railroad as a track worker. After a short time with a crew laying and mending track, he advanced to assistant foreman on a track-laying machine and later became its head operator.

Johnny had met Ruby Burnside, the daughter of Mark Burnside (a former chapter chairman of the Oak Springs-Pine Springs area), at school in Carson City. They were later married and first lived at her home at Pine Springs; subsequently they set up their own home next to Ruby's parents.

Johnny soon became involved in community affairs. About ten years before, Adair had interviewed him and he had then expressed a desire to be an interpreter, to help his community to have a better understanding of the white man's world, and to improve the local educational opportunities for the Pine Springs children. In fact, he had been chapter chairman before 1957, but the exigencies of politics had replaced him with someone else. Juan Tsosie held the job when we were there in 1966, and Johnny was the number two politico in the community.

Johnny Nelson's life is typical of many Navajo men of his and the previous generation: assorted schooling, military service, shifting residence, and a variety of jobs. The one respect in which Johnny's history is different from that of fellows like Mike Anderson was the exposure from an early age to a family with obvious awareness of the importance of multi-lingual upbringing. Navajo, Hopi, and Anglo-American customs and culture all impinged on Johnny from early life, perhaps shaping his knack for ready communication with a variety of peoples in a variety of situations—good training for anyone with political aspirations.

It is obvious from these short sketches that our students were not what one could call "professional Navajo." If their films

showed a common pattern and if the pattern could be related to Navajo language and culture, we could feel certain that there was no deliberate attempt to obey Navajo rules; many of them simply didn't know them. Whatever was Navajo about their filmmaking and filming behavior had to be a result of their internalizing their culture and unconsciously acting in accordance with it when they made their films.