



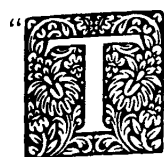
*Drawn by N. C. Wyeth.*

Navajo herder in the foothills.

# A SHEEP-HERDER OF THE SOUTH-WEST

By N. C. Wyeth

ILLUSTRATIONS BY THE AUTHOR



**T**WO GRAY HILLS," a remote Navajo Indian trading-post in New Mexico, looks for all the world like a play-village of tiny squared mud-cakes, built on a vast, undulating play-ground of sandhills, with a long, low strip of blue-paper mountains slid in behind it. And not until you get within calling distance of the "Post" can you fully determine its identity. In reality it is mud, with a few small windows pierced in three of its sides resembling port-holes, and a dirt roof, growing a veritable garden of grass and weeds, out of which peeps the top of a gray stone chimney. To the right of the main building stand two low adobe barns, and to the left a long, flat sheep-shed, fraying off into a spindly corral.

As I came upon "Two Gray Hills" one warm October afternoon, after two days of slow, thirsty travel across the desert from Farmington, Sel Ritchie, trader, received me with the hearty hospitality so characteristic of these remote merchants of the desert; and after I explained to him my great interest in the Indians and anxiety to see something of their life, he instantly invited me to make his "Post" my head-quarters.

What a remarkable vantage-point it was! Surrounding us and extending endlessly to the east lay the great gray desert, the skyline broken by freakish shapes of earth and rock and the tumbled ruins of ancient Pueblo dwellings that bore strange tales of superstition and encounter; and hidden below the gray levels, in the canyons and arroyos, were mysterious caves, poisonous springs, and enchanted pools, the site and scene of many Indian festivities and ceremonies.

And to the west of the "Post," not half a day's ride, stretched the Pine Ridge, an imposing range of jagged mountains, the home of many cold, sparkling brooks, grassy uplands, shady groves of cottonwoods, fragrant pine forests, and great spreading groups of nut-laden piñon trees.

Hidden amidst this abundance are se-

questered many Navajo settlements of dome-shaped huts, built of mud and logs; thatch-roofed sheep-barns, large corrals of gnarled roots and brush; and like gems laid deep in slumbrous colors, one would often come upon blanket weavers seated before ponderous looms, upon which would be stretched blankets of brilliant scarlet and black, or blue and white; and mingled with the chatter of the weavers or the calls of the children one could always hear the distant musical tinkle of the sheep-bells, as the many herds wandered above and below on the steep slopes of the mountain-sides.

This remote tinkle of bells was from the first fascinating and alluring to me; so one morning, while roaming around the mountains, I decided to hunt out one of the roving bands and its keeper. For three hours I climbed over ledges, crawled through thickets, crossed innumerable mountain streams, toward that always far-away tinkle; but not until the noon-day sun threw its shortest shadows did I discover that my quest was an echo; that I had climbed the wrong side of the ravine!

It was too late that day to resume the search, but on the morrow, after a delightful night's sleep under the venerable roof of a mighty pine grove, I found my will-o'-the-wisp.

From my night's resting-place, in the cool morning shadows at the base of the long steep slope, I could distinctly hear the silvery ring of that elusive bell, from far above where the morning sun shone and where the dews sparkled. How I wished I could be invisibly and silently placed amid that mountain pastoral, without disturbing the unconscious peacefulness of it all; could absorb that vision of poetry without intruding my commonplace self to disconcert the herder, to frighten the sheep, and arouse the watchful dog!

As I feared, my entrance upon the scene spoiled it all. But, thanks to my almost noiseless approach, I was able first to get at least a glimpse of the life with all its charm.

Before a small fire, its thin, blue skein of smoke floating upward on the light morning air, knelt a Navajo boy; he was about twelve years old, his bobbed hair hung down to his shoulders in a dense mass, which was held back from his eyes with a deep crimson "bandy" of silk tied around his head. He wore a faded blue blouse, belted in very low on the hips with a frayed sash. Tight trousers, split from the knee down on the outside, a little the worse for wear, and a pair of smoke-tanned moccasins completed his costume. Beside him, in a heap, lay his blanket of many colors, and upon it his bow and quiver of arrows. On a long, slender spit he was roasting a piece of meat, which was eagerly watched by a big, shaggy dog seated close at his side. Behind this group and running at a slant up the mountain-side were the sheep, busily feeding. The bell, even at so close range, sounded soft and muffled, and I wondered that the sound could carry as far as I knew it did.

But this fragment of unconscious beauty lasted but a brief moment. My presence was discovered. The dog barked and bounded toward me, the boy jumped to his feet and gathered his blanket about him, the sheep ceased their quiet feeding and disappeared into the thickets. The dog's threatening behavior occupied my attention for a few moments; meanwhile the boy, my prize, had fled; and when the dog discovered that he was left alone with me, he turned and scampered likewise.

For a long time I sat there and listened to the diminishing sound of the bell, until finally, far up on the heights, I heard the slow, uneven chime telling me that peace and quietude reigned once more. I hadn't courage to molest them again, so retraced my tracks down the mountain, took my horse at one of the settlements at its base, and reached "Two Gray Hills" that evening. Of course I related my experience to Ritchie, and it apparently struck him as being wholly to be expected. He related similar experiences of his own, and practically discouraged me from ever trying to become in the least familiar with the Indians.

One morning, not long after, I was in the corral trying to rope an old, scraggly, moth-eaten looking burro. I had caged my droll target, and resolved to practice a new throw upon it until I at least understood the method. I had made about half a dozen

very crude and unsuccessful attempts, and was preparing my rope for the next one when my captive made a run for the gate. The bar I knew was too high for the stiff-legged burro to jump—but lo and behold! he made a sort of running slide and rolled *under* it. I saw his trick quick enough to make a ragged, awkward cast, and as luck would have it, my loop made fast to a kicking hind leg just as he rolled under the bar. This sudden success came as a surprise, but the surprise that immediately followed had it "beaten a mile"—his trip-hammer kicks jerked the end of the rope out of my hand, and away he galloped, stiff-legged and awkward like a calf, with my new hemp and horse-hair rope dangling and snapping after him. I watched him with disgust until he disappeared in a cloud of dust, my chief thought being a hope that no one had witnessed this "tenderfoot" predicament; but no sooner had it flashed through my mind than I heard behind me a shrill, boyish laugh, and, turning, whom should I see, looking through one of the larger openings, but my sheep-herder from the mountains! I felt humiliated. I tried to intercept his continued laughter with an explanation, but he wouldn't listen, and suddenly left me and disappeared in the big door of the "store."

Disgusted, I made a détour of the "Post" buildings, thinking perhaps that I might locate the burro on the near-by sandhills; but he had fled from sight, so I, too, strolled into the store, determined to face out my discomfiture. There were a number of Indians inside, and when I entered they greeted me with broad, knowing grins and started talking about me among themselves. I felt like a spanked child. The boy stood over behind the big chunk-stove, his black eyes sparkling with delight. I smiled at him, and he grinned back, disclosing two rows of handsome teeth that looked like pearls against the mahogany-copper colored skin of his face, and his hair looked blacker than ever. His shining eyes followed every movement I made, and I perceived that he was intently looking at my watch-fob, a miniature stirrup of silver.

The older Indians, as they finished the bargaining, departed one by one, and finally there remained only the trader, the boy, and myself. Now was my chance! I asked Ritchie to explain to the boy who I was and

in some way break the ice toward an acquaintance. At this request Ritchie laughed and the boy grinned. "He kin talk Americano as good as you and me kin; go ahead an' hit up a pow-wow with him," said Ritchie, and added, "His name is Begay."

At this glad news I turned to Begay and burst into a flow of explanations and questions. The boy stood mute, looking at me blankly, and after a long pause he answered in a soft half-whisper: "No savvy." I tried in every way to induce him to talk, but these were the only words he would utter. His continued silence and occasional solemn glances at Ritchie almost convinced me that the "trader" was playing a little joke on his guest; but I was reassured that the boy had attended the government school at Fort Defiance for two years, and could talk freely if he wanted to.

Further efforts proved useless, but Begay continued to follow me around, always placing himself within sight of the silver stirrup dangling from my watch-pocket. At last I hit upon a plan. I would give him the stirrup. To see his face light up, to watch his big black eyes dance with pleasure, was worth fifty watch-fobs! With a grunt of satisfaction, he snatched the treasure from my hand, and concealing it in his blouse dashed out of the store.

It was only after a long search that I found him seated on the ground behind the wood-pile, gazing at the trinket with all his eyes, placing his finger in the tiny stirrup, holding it up by the strap with the other hand, and turning it in the sun to see it shine and glisten. His face this time met mine with a gracious smile; little by little I urged him to talk; and before the afternoon wore away we became fast friends.

That night Ritchie told me that the boy was about to trail a thousand sheep twenty-five miles across the desert to "Nip" Arments, a sheep buyer and cattle dealer, just off the reservation; and had come, in anticipation of his trip, to make arrangements to corral and feed the sheep for one night, as he expected to make "Two Gray Hills" his first stopping place.

Such an undertaking for so young a boy seemed to me incredible, but I was told that he had accomplished the same thing for the two previous years, and once with *two* thousand sheep. And, furthermore, he always went on foot, which to me made the achieve-

ment even more remarkable. Ritchie could not understand my desire to accompany the lad on such a wearisome and monotonous journey, but, according to my wishes, he promised to "fix it up" so that I could go.

Three evenings later, a thin drift of dust appeared directly in the light of the setting sun, and by eight o'clock a thousand bleating sheep were driven into the cedar corral for the night. Many loosened bales of alfalfa were thrown in for them to eat, and the long, shallow troughs were filled with water. The boy was accompanied by his father to this point, who stopped only long enough to see the sheep safely corralled, and with a few parting words to Begay disappeared into the night toward his distant cornfields in the bottom-lands, where his squaws had already started the harvesting.

We started two hours before sun-up. The bars of the corral were lifted out, the dog wormed his way amongst the still sleeping herd, and suddenly the dim, gray mass poured out of the gate, turned a sharp angle to the left and streamed off into the darkness. A few quick, mysterious words from the boy sent the dog hurtling after. Begay, his blanket girded about his loins with an old cartridge-belt, a small haversack of buckskin hung over one shoulder, and a curious stick from which dangled a number of empty tomato-cans, suspended by thongs, left us without a word in the direction of the vanished herd; and with a hurried "so long" to Ritchie I followed him.

The long, hard journey had begun. Dust arose from the herd in clouds; I could not see it, but could feel it sift against my face, and I could taste the peculiar, sweet flavor of alkali. Frequent calls from the boy to his dog, punctuated by the occasional clatter of the tin cans on the stick was all that broke the silence beyond the soft, quivering rustle made by thousands of feet as they plodded through the sand.

The level horizon of the desert lay before us, toward which we slowly trudged through endless stretches of loose sand, around the bases of towering buttes and down into and out of many dry arroyos. It was in these places that I saw Begay put the mysterious stick with its jingling cans into effective use. To drive the sheep over the banks and down into the dry river beds was an easy matter, but to force them up the sharp acclivity on the opposite side required consid-

erable strategy. As the herd approached the embankment, it would invariably turn either to the right or left and run along the base of it, vainly searching for easier footing. At a word from Begay, the well-trained dog would dash to the front of the bunch, frantically jumping and barking, nipping the legs of the leaders, and eventually turning the entire herd in the opposite direction. Then the boy from his position between the sheep and the open stretch of the arroyo, waving his blanket and hissing loudly, would hurl his stick and jingling cans in front of the sheep fast escaping through the unguarded side. The cans would jangle and crash on the stones and hard gravel, and the panic-stricken animals, frightened at the noise, would scramble up the bank. Begay would recover his "tanglang," as he called it, and we would laboriously crawl up after them.

The trip had been one of very few words; those that passed between us could be numbered on the fingers of one hand. Twice, with solemn gesture, he pointed out distant landmarks, and explained, in short, quick accent, "Toh," meaning water; and another time he fondly pulled the silver stirrup from inside his blouse, and, holding it up, smiled and questioned, "To qui?" meaning "how much?" I did not comprehend exactly what he meant, although I could interpret the words. Finally I answered, fully an hour later, "Peso," meaning one dollar. At this he smiled a broad, pleased smile, and from then on he would take out the ornament again and again, and holding it in the sunlight would watch it glisten, casting laughing sidelong glances at me.

Except in these few moments of slight diversion, Begay's attention was fixed steadfastly on his sheep, his eyes always watchful of the condition of the trail ahead. Toward the end of the afternoon he urged the sheep on at a faster pace, and frequently looked at the position of the sun.

His anxiety evidently grew greater as it neared the horizon, and once I questioned him about the distance to water, but he was silent and seemed not to be conscious of my presence.

The slow, steady walking since four o'clock that morning, with not even a halt for noon lunch, through heavy sands, up steep slopes, and over rough mounds of shale-rock and loose gravel, began to tell on

me. My thighs at times became cramped and stiff, and for miles I would walk stooped in order to proceed at all. And now, as the herd increased its speed to almost double, I was gradually left behind. Begay appeared as fresh as in the early morning. He walked with perfect ease and grace, his long, slender legs measuring off the distance in rhythmic steps, his body bent slightly forward, one arm clasping his blanket and "tanglang," and the other swinging free like a pendulum.

I managed to stagger along for an hour more with the herd well in the lead; the sun had disappeared behind a deep purple horizon, and the afterglow flooded the desert with a radiant, liquid light. All the earth glowed as though lighted from within, the very sands at my feet looked a stained orange, and the few clumps of dry, dusty sage-brush fairly burned in the weird light; while far ahead, just over the margin of a low hill, a great, red, golden cloud of dust told the tale of the fast-moving herd.

Twenty minutes of weary, anxious plodding brought me to the summit; the light was growing dim, but I could vaguely see, way down the gentle slope, a fringe of cedar clumps, and from beyond them I could hear the faint murmur of the sheep, like distant strains of many bagpipes. I knew they were nearing water; and I felt so relieved at the thought that it was comparatively near that I lay down in my tracks, and in perfect contentment watched the stars as they appeared one by one.

I don't know how long it was before I was suddenly conscious of a distant call; the sound drew nearer until I recognized the boyish voice of Begay. He had returned to find me, and as we slowly made our way in the dark, he told me in his own quaint way the reason of his anxiety and hurry: "Sheep no drink for long time—dark come quick—afraid for no find trail to water in deep hole—sheep run and fall on rock—get kill." And with a long impressive pause, "Me no want kill sheep—Savvy?"

I understood, but I understood far better when we cautiously picked our way down one of the most precipitous trails I ever saw. How he managed to get those thousand restless, thirsty sheep down into that canyon, fully two hundred feet deep, unscathed, as they proved to be, is far beyond my imagination. It was incredible!

We ourselves *crawled* down, and frequently I lighted matches to see where to place my foot next, sick, dizzy, to see the edge of the trail not a foot away disappearing into a chasm of blackness. Now and then a loose piece of shale would slide off into space, and it seemed minutes before the dry click sounded as it struck the bottom.

Once at the base, Begay led me to a large log "hogan," similar to the dome-shaped huts I had seen in the mountains. We crawled through the low door, and soon had a cheery fire of crackling cedar logs burning in the centre of the floor, the smoke rising and disappearing out of the large vent in the roof. This shelter had been built for the use of any one who found it necessary to spend the night in the canyon. On one side were piled two or three dozen ragged and worn sheep skins for bedding, and alongside, piled in a heap on the ground, were a number of blackened and dented tin dishes. In the centre lay a great pile of wood-ashes, telling the tale of many camp-fires, and over the low door hung a tattered piece of buckskin. We made a pot of strong, black coffee from the muddy water, from which a stench of sheep now rose, and with a large can of veal-loaf and some pilot bread we ate ravenously until barely enough was left for breakfast. With the last mouthful swallowed, the boy dragged four or five skins to the fire, and wrapping himself in his blanket threw himself upon them, and immediately fell into a sound sleep. The night promised to be a sharp, frosty one, so I dragged a huge cedar root on to the dying embers, and preparing in my turn a bed of skins was soon dead to the world.

It seemed hardly an hour's time before I was aroused by the bark of the dog and the bleating sheep. I crawled out of the hut wrapped in my blanket; it was still dusk, but the sky was rapidly brightening. A sharp, cutting wind swept through the canyon, and I could hear Begay down at the water-hole cracking the ice with a stick. The high rock walls that hemmed us in loomed gigantic and black in the gloom; they resembled the ruins of mighty castles, fringed at the top with the silhouettes of tufted cedar. The steadily increasing gray light sifted down upon us, disclosing enormous rounded boulders, jagged pinnacles

of rock, mysterious caves, gnarled and twisted cedars through which the winds moaned and sighed, drifting the loose sands in tiny eddies into caves and crevices or piling it in fantastic mounds on the open stretches. Directly behind the hut, and protected by a projecting ledge, nestled the corral enclosing the sheep, and beyond, at the foot of a long, gentle incline, lay the precious pool of water.

A light breakfast eaten and the sheep watered, we started the second and last lap of our journey. Unlike the descending trail of the previous night, the way out of the canyon was comparatively easy, except that we had to be very cautious and evade the many soft and treacherous sand-drifts. I asked Begay what time he expected we would reach our destination; he replied by pointing to the sun and following its orbit till its position indicated three o'clock.

It was about that time when we descended into the bottom-lands of the "Rio Las Animas," where lay "Nip" Arment's thriving trading-post.

The sheep moved slowly, and the dog, his services unneeded, lagged behind. We were seen long before we reached the "Post," and upon our arrival a dozen Indians aided Begay to count and corral the sheep. I stood apparently unnoticed, until, as all were walking toward the "store," Begay flourished the silver stirrup; a brief explanation followed and all eyes were turned on me.

A moment after "Nip" Arment appeared upon the scene, and with a hearty welcome led me to his house. The home was lavish in comforts; many Navajo rugs adorned the floors, numberless trophies of the hunt and rare relics from the desert hung on the walls; but I missed my new friend. That night I talked long and late with the trader, and once in bed I fell into a sound, sound sleep. I did not wake before noon; but then I dressed hurriedly and rushed out in search of Begay. A group of Indians were playing cards behind the "store" in the warm sun, and I asked them where to find him. One of them, a tall, sinister fellow, slowly and solemnly arose, and coming over to where I was standing, placed one hand on my shoulder and pointed with a long, dark finger at two disappearing specks on the western horizon. They were Begay and his dog.