

Returning Photographs to the Indians

Peter Gold

By the close of the nineteenth century, the forced settlement of the majority of American Indians onto less than desirable allotments of reservation land had been completed. Locked into territories and lifestyles with which they were unfamiliar, Indians were compelled to live under the control of an abstract and distant federal government and were treated as wards of the state, to be freely administered over and studied.

At the same time as they were subjected to this control, they had become, for many whites, romanticized symbols of "pure and primal man" unfettered by the restrictions of the state. Indians had become objects of an almost fanatical reverence to many of our forebears, otherwise rootless Euro-American wanderers whose ancestors, in turn, had "discovered the new world."

No doubt, it was the Indians' highly practical, spiritual, and egalitarian approach to living that made them symbols of our forefathers' fantasies. But that approach soon proved to be an obstruction in an age of land speculation and technological progress. As such, the "noble red man" simultaneously incurred, with equal passion, our forebears' wrath.

The conquest of the American Indian roughly coincided with the invention and development of the photographic camera. With the camera came aggressively individualistic and highly motivated early professional photographers. These photographic pioneers eagerly spread out over the land, recording the life and culture of what was then considered the "vanishing race." They also documented other aspects of an America which, as quickly as they were captured on the silver emulsion, were themselves changing and passing: the great Eastern forests, frontier towns, and Victorian society. Ironically, these and the aboriginal Indian ways of life were garnered for posterity by the technological process of photography, in itself an expression of the social and economical changes in the American scene.

Into this perplexing maelstrom of turn-of-the-century America were jettisoned the American Indians. And always, not far upon their trail, followed the busy cameras of early photographic pioneers such as Edward Curtis, Adam C. Vroman, and Joseph K. Dixon.

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Dixon photographed and lectured extensively on the American Indian during the first third of this century. Like many sympathetic intellectuals of his time, he felt a responsibility to help the "last members of the vanishing race" make a harmonious transition into the new age.

The vanishing race concept¹ was widespread at the turn of the century as the gross abuses and neglect caused by the reservation system became markedly evident. Dixon and his patron, Rodman Wanamaker (son of the Philadelphia department store magnate John Wanamaker), resolved to help the Indians through the medium of the photograph and public lobby. Wanamaker supported Dixon's three major "expeditions" to the North American Indian, conducted during 1908, 1909, and 1913. The resulting photographic collection, consisting of several thousand images, came to be known as the Wanamaker Collection of Photographs of the North American Indian and is, in its majority, housed at the William Hammond Mathers Museum at Indiana University.²

As Curator of Collections at the Mathers Museum and an eager student of Native American life and philosophy, I would often browse through the thousands of images of the elderly and young, the traditionally costumed and Western-dressed, and those formally posed or actively engaged in scenes from bygone days and bygone ways. And I would ponder who those people were. What were their personal histories? Why did Dixon choose them or their activities as his subjects? What place did they now have in the memories of their living descendants and fellow tribal members? Rather than idle speculation, the answer to these and other questions posed by the Wanamaker photographs would provide more accurate and complete documentation of one of the most important existing collections of early photographs of the American Indian.

While Dixon's ability as a photographer placed his work aesthetically within the realm of art, the photographs were more than *objets d'art*. They were documentary evidence of cultures and lives which played important roles in the history and complexion of contemporary America. As such, they had to be fully documented for their total meaning to be appreciated.

For these reasons, I was motivated during the summer of 1982 to seek out descendants and living acquaintances of the Hopi Indians in Dixon's photographs taken during July 1913. In cases of photographs of village scenes, I sought information on the activities or locations depicted.

In addition to providing information on the content of the photographs, I hoped that the person responding would be moved to speak of his or her inner thoughts and values as the photograph stimulated a wealth of memories and associations. In the process would be gained not only the sought-after information but also a rare insight into the current values and motivations of these Native Americans.

Photographs are very special objects. Their having frozen a heightened moment of action onto the silver emulsion makes them ideal vehicles for stimulating the flow of feelings and ideas.

Dixon's work was among the last large body of photographs taken at the Hopi villages. During the early part of the century resentment arose over the aggressive and disrespectful manner in which early photographers lined the plazas during sacred *kachina* dances, rudely intruding upon the proceedings with their large cameras and coarse actions. Today, as a result, at the entrance to every village on each of the three awesome rocky mesas, large stenciled signs inform the visitor that the clan chiefs have ordered that no photographs (nor sound recording nor even sketching) are allowed. For Hopi, photographs, or more precisely the not taking of photographs, have become an important factor in their relationship with non-Indians. And this very attitude became an interesting element in the progress of my photo-documentation work there.

A second motivation for doing this project came from the personal conviction that we owe the Indians a long overdue repayment for their collaboration in making these photographs possible, since the photographs ultimately enrich our lives and those of future generations by their presence in museum collections. The American Indian is probably the best-studied, photographed, measured, discoursed-upon, and collected-from—but otherwise neglected—group of people in the world. Thus, it was clear that the photographs I sought to document with their help should be returned to their rightful heirs so they too could have the opportunity to derive their own enrichment from these remarkable images.

Accordingly, quality copies were given to the children and grandchildren of those photographed as well as to the Hopi Tribal Museum. Indeed, it turned out that the Hopi Museum had very few early photographs of its people, and acquiring these photographs instantly provided the core of a museum collection. In this way the photographs will serve the Hopi Indians in learning about their cultural heritage and reinforcing their cultural pride. Their value was best summed up in the words of one Hopi man on seeing the photographs returned: "Thank you; these photographs are something we can treasure always."

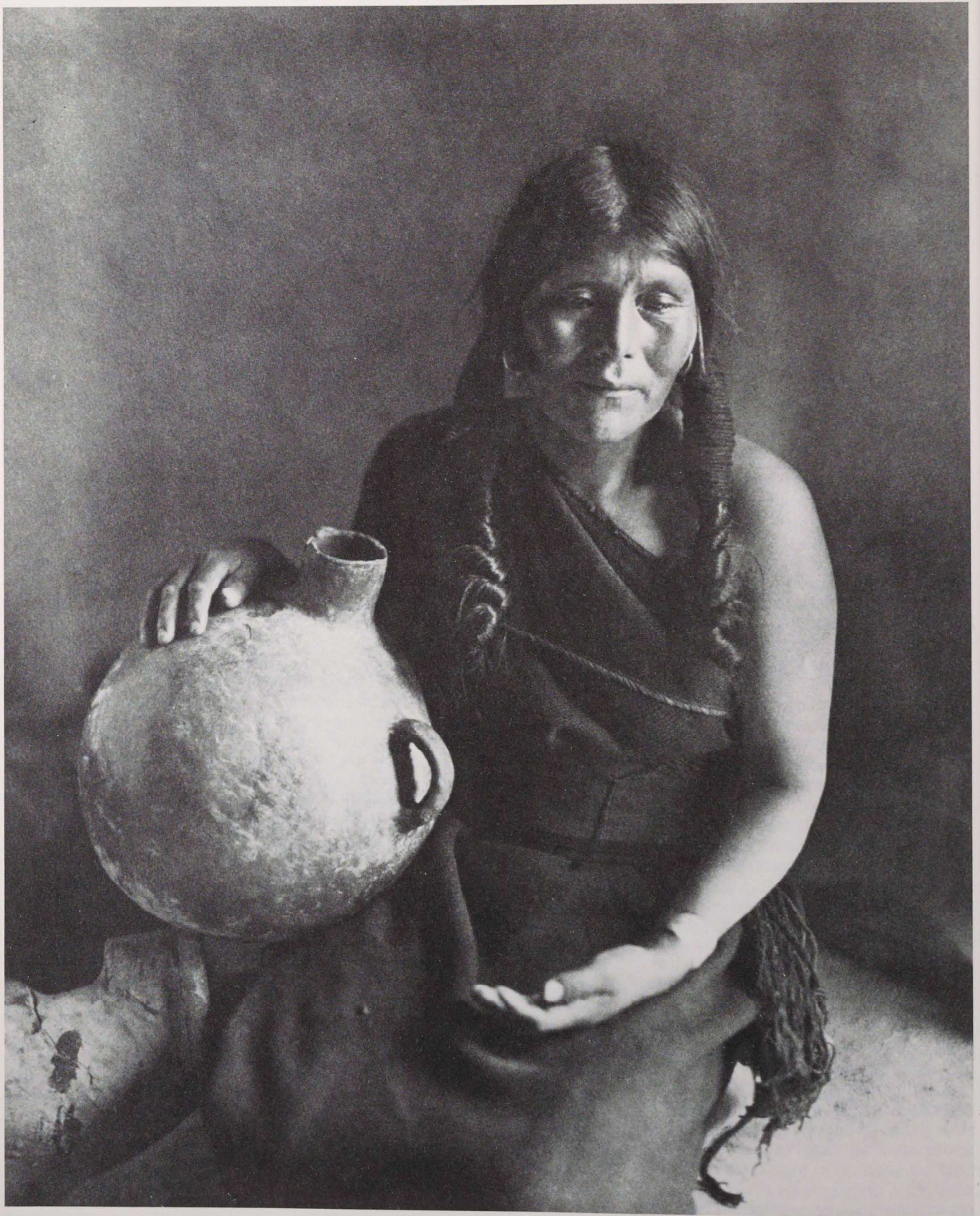
One cannot overemphasize the responsibility engendered by taking a photograph of another person, especially in a culture other than one's own, having differing values and attitudes toward such acts. Many people worldwide, as well as many Native Americans, conceive of giving one's inner being or spirit when photographed. Thus when one is photographed and, consistently, "the photograph is taken away somewhere" (in the words of one Hopi man), confusion and decreasingly cordial attitudes toward further photography result.

In my own experience with extensive photography of Tibetan life in the Himalayas, it was made patently clear to me by my more outspoken Tibetan friends that it was my obligation either to send back or to return in person with snapshot copies of the photographs I had taken. Would you expect any less if I had taken your photograph or that of your grandfather?

For people everywhere, photographs are prized mementos. Indeed, they are often icons imbued with a special kind of power when they depict a deceased family member, an object of religious veneration, or a momentous event, time, or place from the past.

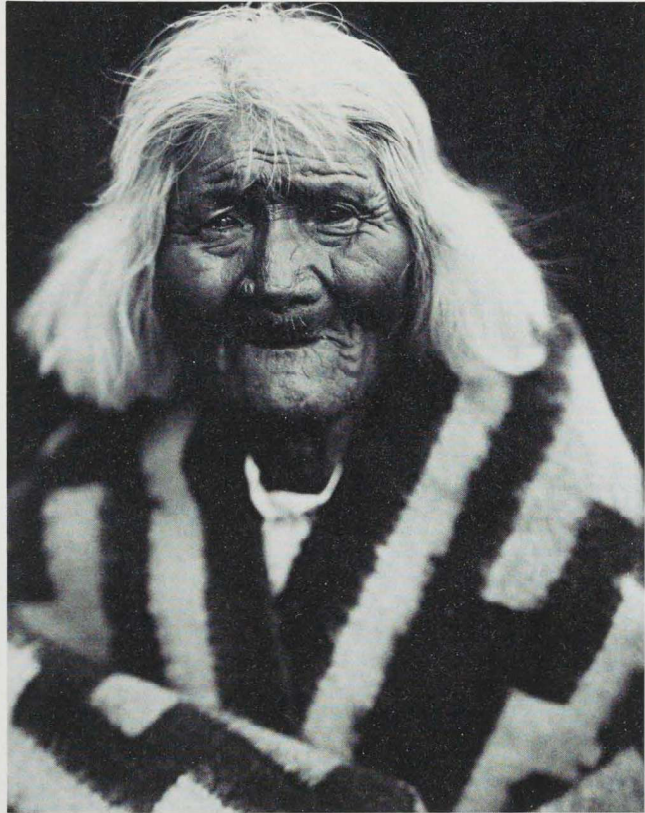
In addition to the data and responsible feedback, much goodwill was generated by the project. The gift of photographs of individuals' parents and grandparents elicited satisfied smiles or heartfelt thanks from people who, understandably, are generally distrustful of the white man. Returning photographs to their source serves to open channels of communication and provide understanding between groups of people whom the long years and their events have kept apart. It seems ironic then that, according to one First Mesa man, this was the first time in his experience that anyone had photographs to give back to the Hopi rather than to take from them.

In sharing special photographs a constructive intercultural dialogue is set into motion. Whites learn to respect Indian ways and to throw off erroneous or romantic conceptions of Native Americans, while Indians come to realize that there are many whites out there who comprehend and cherish their ancient ways. In the process everyone gains: Indians, non-Indians, and the generations of both to come.



A Hopi Indian Photographic Album from the Wanamaker Collection of American Indian Photographs at the William Hammond Mathers Museum, Indiana University

The following photographs were taken by Dr. Joseph K. Dixon on July 8 and 9, 1913, at Hopi communities on First and Second Mesa in Arizona. The individuals pictured represent accessible tribal leaders, artists, and otherwise typical individuals. Other photographs were candid shots of village scenes. These photographs were identified at First and Second Mesa by village elders and by close family members of those whose portraits were taken.

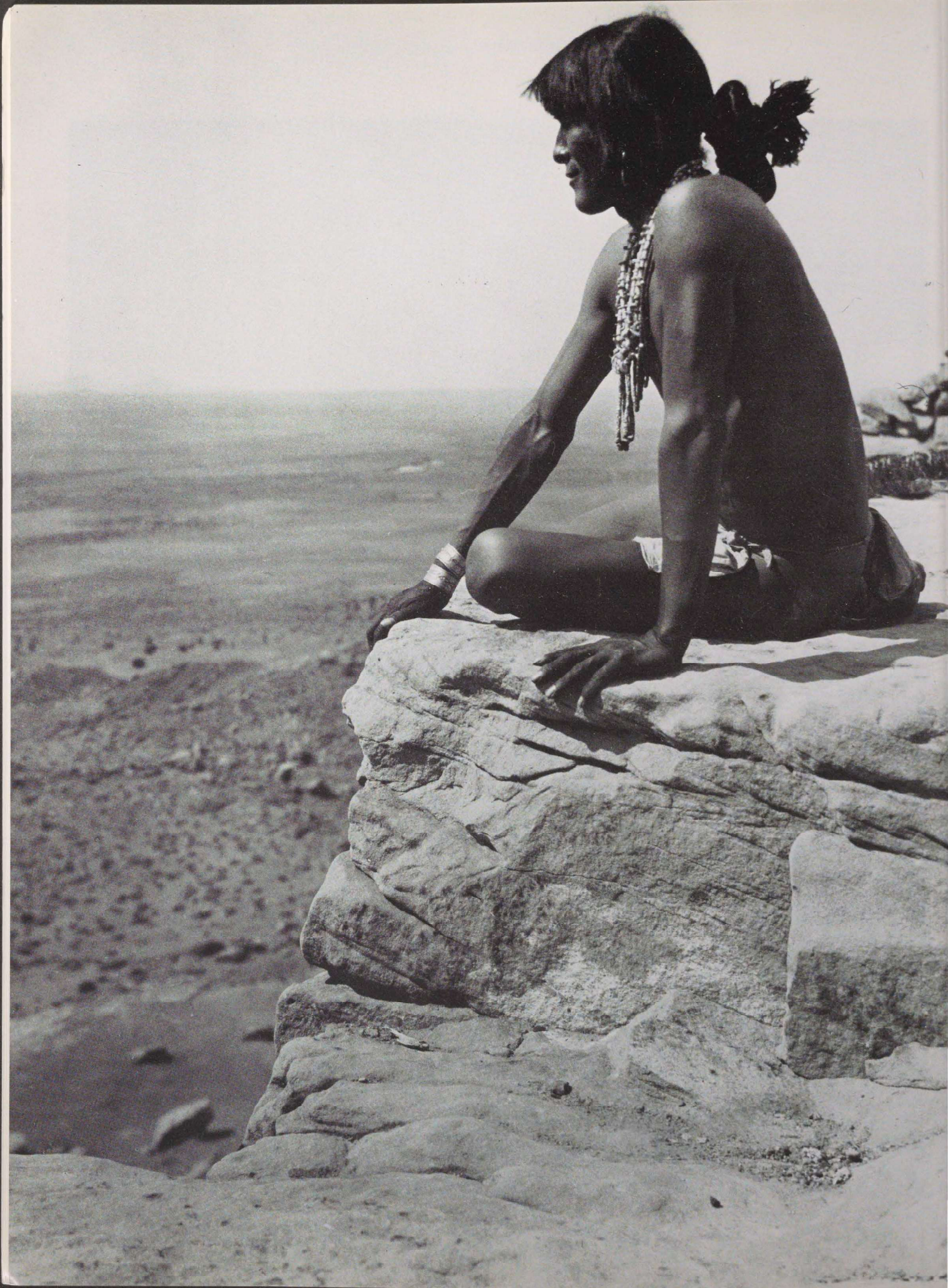


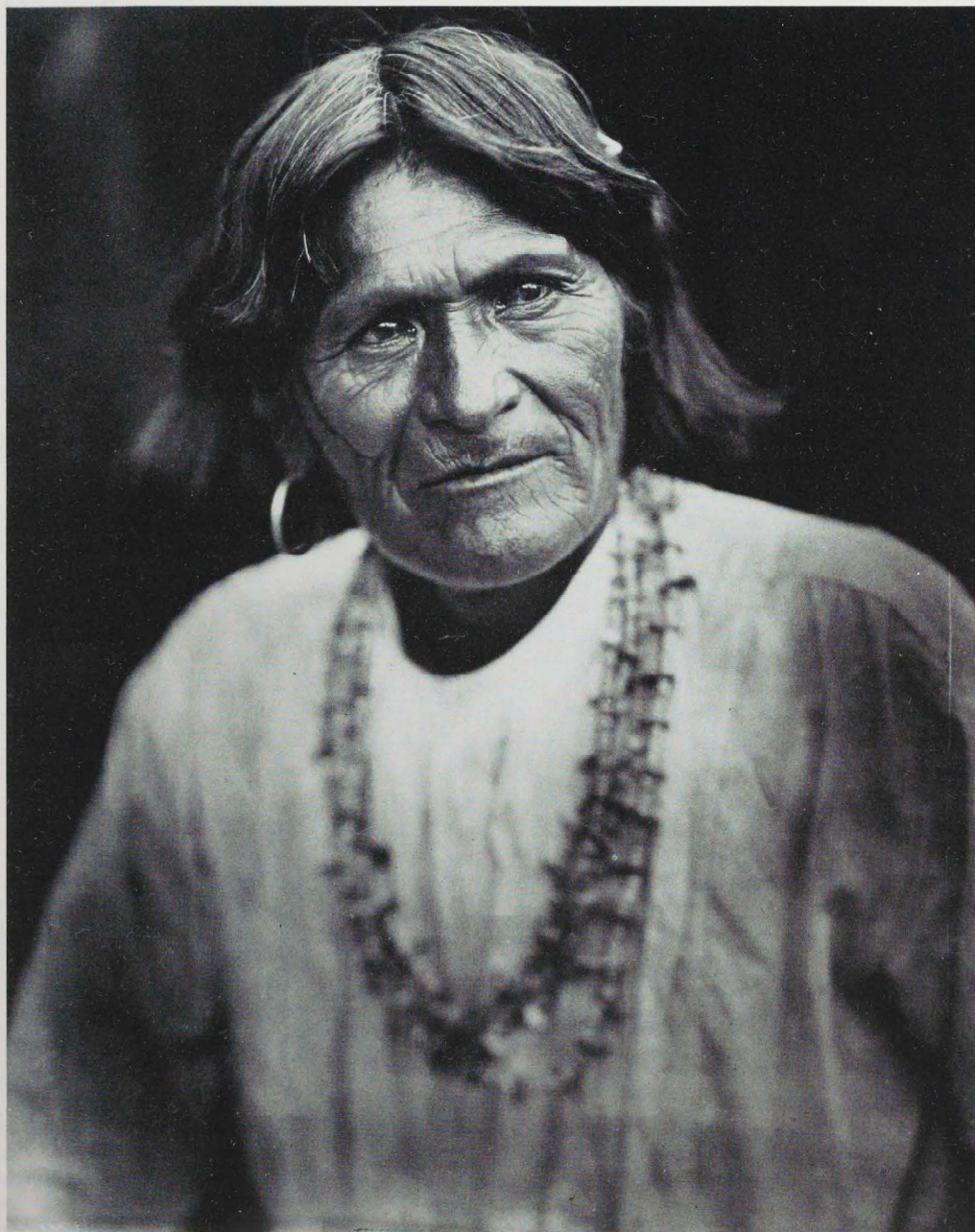
Taláwunqa

◀ Taláwunqa lived in the First Mesa village of Walpi. A member of the Flute and Antelope societies, she, like many Hopi and Hopi-Tewa women, was also a potter. The old-style ceramic water canteen pictured with her was probably of her own manufacture. One elder proudly informed us that a piece of hers was, in fact, in the collections at the Smithsonian Institution. She wears her hair in the style of a married woman and has on a handspun woven black wool dress. The photograph was identified by her daughter, Emogene Lomakema, of Polacca, First Mesa, who is also a potter. She received a photograph as did Perry Novasie, another First Mesa elder, who was Taláwunqa's godchild and was raised by her. Taláwunqa means "the stalk of the corn."

Shúpula

Shúpula was considered one of the progressive leaders at Walpi village. He was credited for helping lead his people in their move from the heights of the mesa down to Polacca village, where they interacted more openly with white society. His progressive philosophy did not, however, interfere with his traditional ceremonial duties in the Water clan. He was a *Soyal Mongwi*, a priest in *Soyal*, the great ceremony marking the midwinter return of the sun, as well as a priest in the awesome biennial snake dance held during late summer.

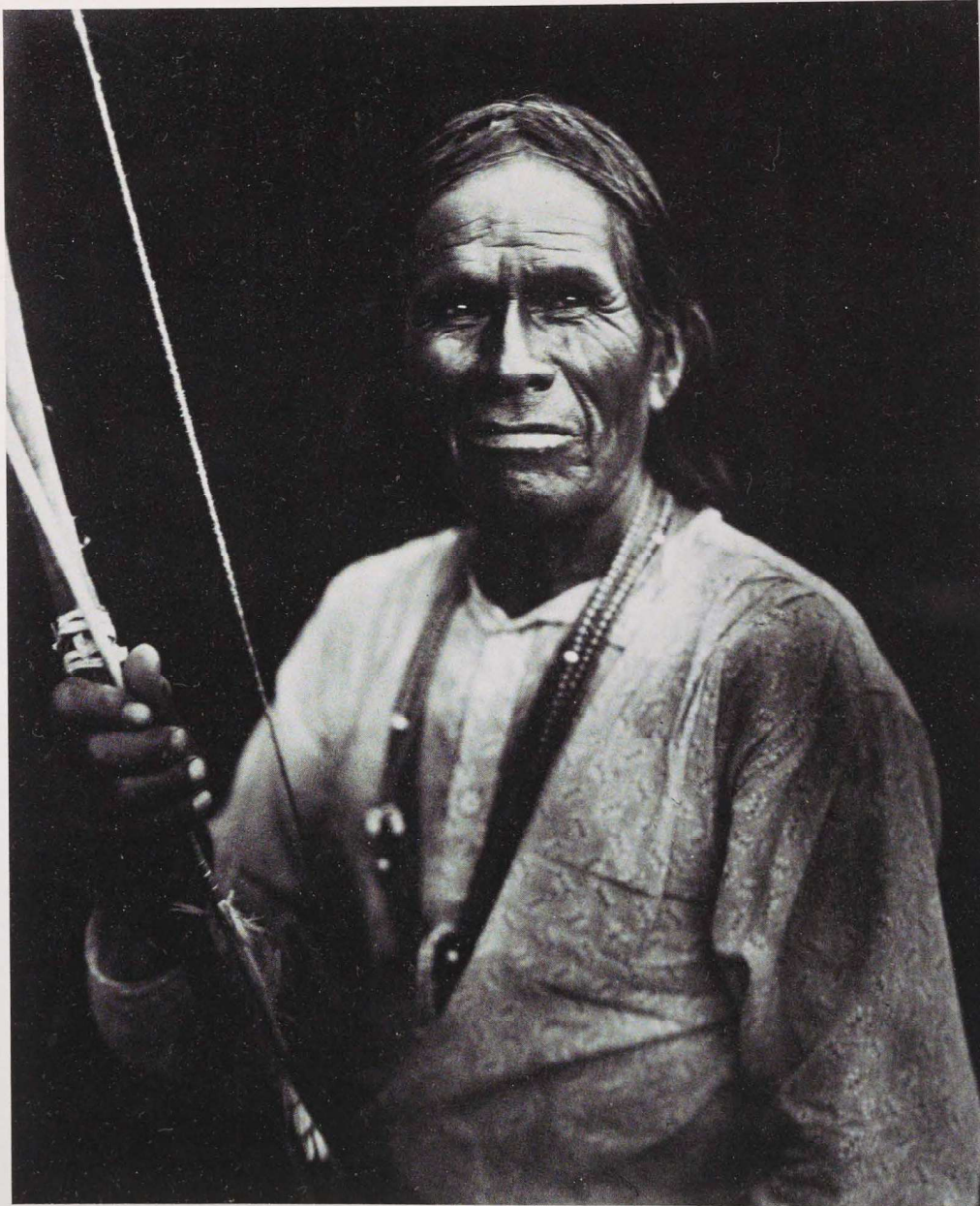


**Goyáwayma**

Goyáwayma was old Shúpula's son. This photograph was taken on a rocky ledge on the edge of the sheer face of First Mesa. The high desert floor lies far below him. Even today people live upon the mesa top without guard fences between them and the edge. Goyáwayma wears a necklace of white heishi shell and turquoise beads. His hair is arranged in the traditional men's style: bangs straight across, sidelocks perpendicular to the bangs, and long back hair tied into a "butterfly"-shaped whorl behind.

Gagápti

Gagápti's home was the mesa-top village of Walpi. He was a member of one of Walpi's major ceremonial groups, the Antelope Society. Part of his duties as an antelope priest was to take part in rituals associated with the biennial Snake Dance. These took place mainly in a semisubterranean rectangular enclosure called the *kiva*, where he is remembered as an excellent singer.



Honáni

Honáni, whose name means "badger," was considered one of the most outstanding progressive leaders of the Hopi. He lived in Shongopavi village high atop a spur of Second Mesa, and was a member of the Bear clan, which is thought of by Hopi as the leader in religious and civic affairs. Honáni believed in the benefits of sending children to schools and rapprochement with the whites. These two factors labeled him and others like him "progressives." Honáni and four other Hopi progressive leaders were sent to Washington, D.C., by the tribe during the last decade of the nineteenth century to find out what the policies of the U.S. government were toward their people. In a speech there he said: "My people told me to see everything, to find out how Americans live, whether there are many of them. . . . What Indians want most is green grass. The Americans must have plenty of water. We have lived for years on the mesa, away from water! With assistance we will move into the valley near springs and our fields, and then if we had sheep we could

sell wool and buy sugar and coffee and other good things to live like whites . . ."

Today at the Hopi reservation there is an ideological and physical split between the progressives and the traditionalists. The latter disagree with Honáni's desire to take on aspects of white life. They prefer to continue farming their corn without irrigation, to shun electricity, and to keep to the ancient teachings.

**Nampéyo**

Nampéyo is the great-grandmother of Hopi pottery making. She was actually a Tewa Indian whose ancestors came from the northern region of the Rio Grande river valley and settled among the Hopi at First Mesa. The so-called Hopi-Tewa became renowned for their pottery making. Nampéyo became the primary figure in the revival of Hopi-style pottery during the early part of this century. Her husband would bring her shards from the ruins of the ancient Hopi settlements of Sikyatki several miles away. These contained some of the most remarkable designs in Native American art. She incorporated them into her work and taught her daughters and others the craft. This is one of a series of photographs showing Nampéyo at work. They were identified and commented upon by her daughter, Fannie Nampéyo, matriarch of contemporary Hopi potters. Fannie now lives and works in the modern village of Polacca, situated below First Mesa. The town was named for her uncle, old Nampéyo's brother, Polacca, who accompanied Honáni and the other spokesmen as the Tewa representative on their fact-finding trip to Washington in the 1890s.



Grinding Corn

Taláwunqa was photographed by Dixon engaging in one of the most commonplace women's activities of the time, grinding corn. Every Hopi household had this three-part *mano* and *metate* (mortar and pestle) array. In the first trough (far left) the corn kernels are coarsely ground; in the second (center), after the coarsely ground corn is roasted, it is ground to a medium consistency; in the right trough the corn is finely ground. The finely ground corn is wetted and spread over hot rocks to make the paper-thin food staple *piki*. Fannie Nampéyo says that this hand grinding is very rare nowadays; only one woman in her family still roasts and grinds sweet corn herself.

**Hopi-Tewa Potters**

The Tewa residents at First Mesa are acknowledged to be the finest Hopi potters. This photograph shows three Tewa sisters making and probably selling their wares. They wear black woven woolen dresses, typical of the Hopi, Tewa, and Rio Grande pueblos, and Navajo-made squash-blossom silver necklaces. Trade among tribes is a very important source of materials and objects. The blanket at the right may also be of Navajo origin, while the other appears to be Hopi. The woman on the left was named Potchángwe; her name means "light blue like the water." Her sister at the center was named Nuva, meaning "snow," and the third sister was named Gweka, meaning "rainbow." The photograph was probably taken in front of their home (several rooms of adobe-covered stone in Tewa village atop First Mesa).





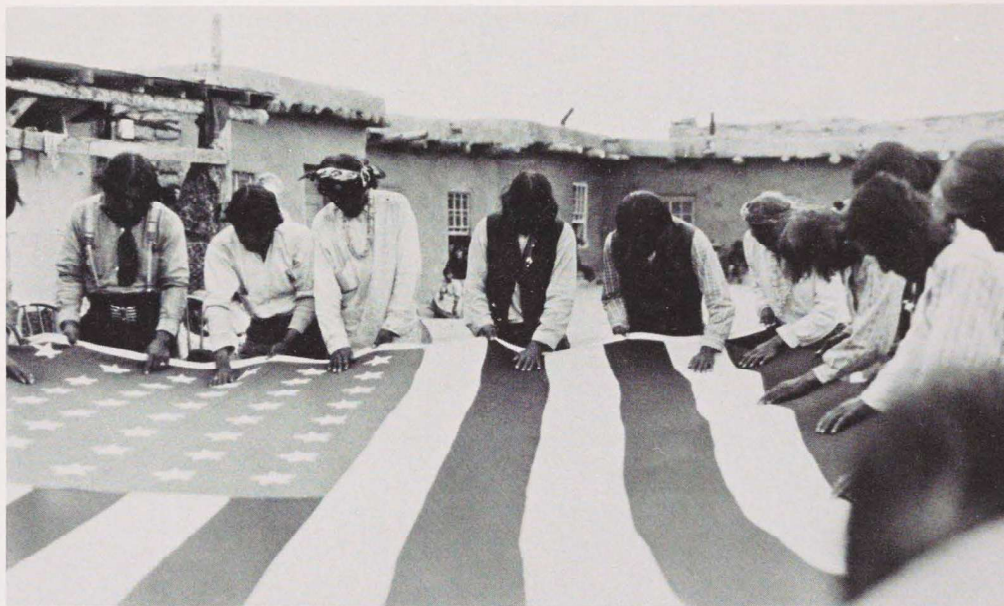
Walpi Village (close-up view)

The west end of Walpi in 1982 has changed very little since this photograph was taken in 1913. It shows Goyáwayma standing atop a house made of native sandstone which is the same now as it was then with the exception of the small addition and passageway to the right of the building.

Traditionally, the levels of Hopi houses were reached by wooden ladders such as the one in the background. The ladder in the foreground, however, served as the exit from the ceremonial shrine chamber, the *kiva*. The *kiva* is a semi-subterranean rectangular room made of stone and earth in which the major ceremonies are conducted. Members of a particular clan are responsible for perpetuating a particular group of ceremonies, each held at a specific time of the year and mainly oriented toward maintaining natural harmony. This is one of the five *kivas* at Walpi. The black pipe behind the ladder is used to conduct smoke from the *kiva* fire out into the air.

Walpi Village

Perhaps no other village so typifies the Hopi Indians as Walpi, which hovers at the tip of First Mesa. Walpi is one of the early villages founded by Hopi who sought to escape frequent raids by marauding Navajos and Utes. The almost sheer sandstone cliffs were effective discouragement to attack. There were drawbacks, however, as water had to be carried up and farmers had to go down each day to tend their corn and bean fields as well as peach trees which were sometimes ten miles away. The Walpi of today is very well preserved and comes alive periodically with elaborate *kachina* dances and other ceremonies. Constructed of native stone, the village seems to have grown right out of the mesa itself.



Pledging Allegiance to the U.S. Flag

In addition to the desire to photograph the Indians before traditional life died away, Dixon was motivated to lobby on behalf of Indian citizenship. He and his patron, Rodman Wanamaker, believed that only by becoming first-class citizens could the Native Americans survive in a changing world. In 1913 Dixon set out with American flags, cylinder recordings of President Wilson, Secretary of the Interior Lane, and Commissioner of Indian Affairs Abbott greeting the Indians, and a plan to photograph them pledging allegiance to the American flag. With these photographs he hoped to convince the federal government of the Indians' desire to become citizens. While this approach proved to be of minimal benefit to Native Americans, the desire to grant Indians the rights of citizenship was one of the more constructive strategies taken by sympathetic whites during that period. In this photograph we see Hopi elders apparently blessing the outstretched American flag.

Notes

- 1 Dixon presented his ideas concerning the "vanishing Indian race," along with eighty photogravures (mostly of Plains Indians), in his 1913 book, *The Vanishing Race*. It contains Dixon's interpretation of Native American traditional values and patterns of living as well as narratives and reworked orations by important Indian leaders gathered together by Dixon for a "last great council of the chiefs." Despite its romantic overtones, the council apparently was well received by the participants among whom were Red Cloud of the Sioux, Two Moons of the Cheyenne, and Plenty Coups of the Crow nation. The council and its participants were well documented in the photogravures, and the content of *The Vanishing Race* was rounded out by the eyewitness accounts of several of the assembled chiefs as well as those of the Crow scouts to General Custer (of the Battle of the Little Big Horn). This was an event still active in the minds of white Americans thirty-seven years after the fact. If one reads around Dixon's baroque Victorian literary style, one gets a valuable picture of Native American life during this crucial period of adjustment to reservation life, as well as an insight into the attitude of sympathetic whites during the period.
- 2 In addition to the approximately 7,700 images at the Mathers Museum, Wanamaker photographs, negatives, or documentation are held in the collections of the American Museum of Natural History, in New York; the Library of Congress, the National Archives, and the National Anthropological Archives at the Smithsonian Institution, in Washington, D.C.; and the John Wanamaker store and the University Museum of the University of Pennsylvania, in Philadelphia.
A general discussion of Dixon and his work, an index by tribe of materials held at Indiana University, and an inventory of Wanamaker materials at other institutions may be found in *Capturing the Vanishing Race: Photographs by Joseph K. Dixon*, by Susan Applegate Krouse, an unpublished master's thesis (1980) in the Department of Anthropology at Indiana University.