

What I had to learn

By [James Calvin Schaap](#)

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The subjects themselves weren't young, which is to say they weren't kids. They were adults, and, often as not, they were either at or approaching senior citizenship. They were grandparents because the focus of the interviews—and the stories I eventually wrote—was history, how the people, the Dine' and Zuni, had come to be part of the mission family of Rehoboth, a mission endeavor of the Christian Reformed Church for more than a century.

It didn't take me long to realize how little I knew, because the story I heard retold, time after time, began with something called "the Long Walk," the Navajo's own Trail of Tears.

In a story repeated for centuries after Plymouth Rock, white folks streamed into Native lands creating friction and hostility because co-existence, it seemed, was not a possibility. If there was to be peace, white people determined it would come at the expense of the indigenous, wherever they were, Massachusetts to California.

When the sheer numbers became overwhelming, the only alternative to the genocide advocated by many good people, even Christian people, was American apartheid, putting Native people their own land somewhere out of the way where they wouldn't hinder the rich blessings of American progress. Hence Oklahoma, for thousands upon thousands of Native peoples. Hence Bosque Redondo for Navajos.

Because no Navajo wanted to depart their canyonland home, getting them out required shed blood. Washington recruited its own dime-novel hero, Kit Carson, to do the dirty work, to clean the Dine' out of their storied land and herd them, literally, to Fort Sumner, a river-bottom cottonwood grove where as many as 9,000 Navajos were commanded thereafter to create a new homeland. Those who resisted were killed.

Think of it this way. Point guns at 1,000 farm families from Sioux County, Iowa, great-grandmas and newborns, and fly the whole bunch to El Paso, then get them off the plane and march 'em east, all of them, day and night, night and day, into west

Texas, a landscape so painfully unlike home that life will be not only strange but physically impossible. March 'em all—man, woman, child—in the hot sun. Feed them garbage, if anything; when some die, let 'em rot. Then jam all the survivors together when they get to this dream world and tell them that all of this relocation is for their own blessed good. Give them a plow and a mule and tell them to raise corn where no one ever has.

The story the Navajos call "The Long Walk" began exactly 150 years ago this month. A defeated people, hunted and hungry, were driven east from their homeland to a place far, far away, to a 40-square mile compound that amounted to little more than a desert prison camp.

What I discovered when I asked the people their stories was what an idiot I was. Just about every time I began an interview, I started with this question: "I want to know how and when your family became part of the Christian family."

It was a question they all could answer, in part, I'm sure, because they were recipients of a way of learning that was more effective in many ways than book learning; they understood who they were by way of oral history and the close attention given to the wisdom of the elders. Time after time, the story would reference the Long Walk. "When my great-grandma survived The Long Walk," they'd say, or something similar, as if I understood.

I didn't. I'm sorry to say, I didn't. I didn't know. There was so much I had to learn. Still is.

Just knowing the facts doesn't guarantee wisdom, but wisdom can't be had without knowledge. For me at least, a white man, to know the story of what happened 150 years ago, from the experience of those whose families were part of sadness, was itself a lesson in humility, a good lesson for this and all particular sons of Adam.

Not to remember is to forget and to forget is to dishonor.

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