

# The Matriarch of McCracken Mesa

*With sinew and soul, Grandma Betty Jones fights on.*

*Words by Marjorie Haun.*

*Photos courtesy Grandma Betty and Anna Tom.*

**T**hough her life is enveloped by the silence and lonesomeness of an arid, rolling rise in earth's crust known as McCracken Mesa, Grandma Betty Jones has never known lasting peace. Having endured years of hardship, servitude and want, at somewhere between 90 and 100 years of age Grandma Betty still finds herself at odds against powers and people who would invade her land and thwart her traditional way of life.

pregnant, Slow Runner's wife climbed over the rim of a sandstone cliff where she hid and gave birth to Betty Jones' grandmother. The dispossessed family eventually created a colony near the Bears Ears buttes. A generation later, Betty's parents migrated to the Blanding area where she was born. After her father died an untimely death, her mother also succumbed while giving birth to her last child when Betty was just two years old.



*Grandma Betty Jones enjoys time with two of her many great-grandchildren, Sara (left) and Jada.*

## **Bears Ears Granddaughter**

Grandma Betty's ancestral clan was the "folded arm people." Her great-great-grandmother was called Des Jáa or Shash Jáa Bitsui, meaning "Bears Ears granddaughter," and Shash Jáa's son was called Slow Runner. Between 1863 and 1866, during the forced removal of nearly 10,000 Navajo (or Diné) to the Bosque Redondo Reservation at Fort Sumner, N.M., Slow Runner and his wife fled from their home into the labyrinthine canyons near what is now Lake Powell. Though heavily

consequently, Betty was treated much like a slave: forced to care for livestock throughout her childhood and never given the opportunity to learn English because she was withheld from a formal education to work on the family farm. As a young teenager, having come of age according to the tradition of the time, Betty was given in marriage to Navajo rancher S.P. Jones, who was significantly older. She bore and raised 12 children and continued to ranch throughout her life.

S.P. worked for a few white ranchers in the

area, but he grazed his own sheep and cattle through an immense region recognized as Navajo land that reached from Indian Creek to the Abajo Mountains to Monument Valley all the way to the Colorado state line. In 1935, with the implementation of the Taylor Grazing Act, pressures came to bear on S.P.—errantly named "Espie" by the Bureau of Land Management (BLM)—and he was limited to permits in Districts 6 and 12 of the Navajo reservation. Despite having lost access to the vast acreage once available to him, in 1958 the Interior Department granted S.P. a little portion of his former range, of which 53,000 acres went to his heirs at the time of his passing in 1997.

Having spent her life ranching and raising children on McCracken Mesa, Grandma Betty continues to run livestock on the 53,000 acres with the help of her remaining children. Anna Tom is the daughter most involved with caring for the animals and watching out for her mom, but family members of all ages pitch in when it comes time to shear the small herd of churro sheep. However, things are far from settled for Grandma Betty, and she still finds herself struggling against governments, both tribal and federal.

## **The Broken System**

The Indian reservation system as created by Congress—wherein things are owned communally by tribes and private property ownership is neither absolute nor clearly defined—conflicts in many ways with the U.S. Constitution. According to Grandma Betty, numerous people have laid claim to S.P.'s ranch on McCracken Mesa, but they are not relatives and have never helped with the livestock. Because private property is a nebulous concept in tribal law, Betty and her children have been beset by strangers wanting a piece of what belongs to her both on paper and in sweat and toil.

Yearly budgets upwards of \$2 billion in direct assistance to tribes are administered through the Bureau of Indian Affairs, yet a large percentage of those living on tribal lands still lack electricity and running water. Roads usually go unimproved and poverty is endemic. Tribal governments often seem indifferent—or worse, corrupt.

Of the reservation system, history professor and researcher Andrei Znamenski recently wrote: "Imagine a country that has a corrupt authoritarian government. In that country no one knows about checks and balances or an independent court system. Private property is not recognized in that country either. Neither



ABOVE LEFT: Prior to the creation of Bears Ears, Grandma Betty joined members of the Navajo and Ute tribes on the steps of the Utah Capitol to protest the proposed monument.

ABOVE RIGHT: In December of 2017, Grandma Betty and Anna Tom gathered with other locals in San Juan County to celebrate President Trump's proclamations downsizing Utah's controversial national monuments.



can one buy or sell land. And businesses are reluctant to bring investments into this country. Those who have jobs usually work for the public sector. Those who don't have jobs subsist on entitlements that provide basic food."

With the infusion of COVID funds to the Navajo Nation in the amount of \$218 million, in 2021 Grandma Betty finally got electricity to her small home. Although she has running water and an indoor toilet in the house built for her by her family, the water is not potable and she must purchase bottled water to drink. Regrettably, her predicament is not unusual for those living on the Navajo reservation, and many have it worse.

### Bears Ears Medicine Woman

In 2014, Grandma Betty and Anna attended a meeting of the Aneth Chapter House and learned about the federal government's monstrous plan to ingest over two million acres of land and surface resources into a new Bears Ears National Monument. Named after the twin buttes rising above her ancestral lands to the west, the new monument would reach into her property on McCracken Mesa. Although some in the Aneth Chapter supported the monument, Grandma Betty was incensed.

Earlier that year a meeting involving environmentalist A-listers took place in San Fran-

cisco. According to Amy Joi O'Donoghue in *Deseret News*: "In October 2014, a group of people sat around a table and discussed their campaign to bring a monument designation to southeast Utah for the region they called Bears Ears. This wasn't a group of Native American tribal leaders from the Four Corners, but board members from an increasingly successful conservation organization who met in San Francisco to discuss, among other things, if it was wise to 'hitch our success to the Navajo.'" Although the media coverage of Bears Ears supported the narrative put forth by primarily wealthy white environmental elitists, members of the tribes themselves were deeply and painfully divided on the issue.

At over 8,000 feet in elevation, the slopes of Bears Ears flaunt species of herbs and trees not found in the open desert far below. As a medicine woman, Grandma Betty uses such herbs in healing rituals as well as compounds and balms for those with ail-

ments who come to her, bartering food and other gifts for her traditional skills. The imposition of a national monument with its many restrictions threatened to shut down her ability to gather herbs from traditional resources. Access to the dense, well-seasoned cedar trees used by countless families of the Navajo Nation for firewood and building hogans was also threatened by the new designation, along with the ability to graze animals, hunt game, gather pine nuts and perform sacred rites such as the Bear Dance.

The potential of another fiat federal designation was too much and Grandma Betty's sense of injustice overwhelmed her. Having survived almost every hardship and insult imaginable, she refused to accept its inevitability and resolved to fight it. With everything to lose, Grandma Betty stepped up and became a leader in the movement to stop the monument. She appealed to the Chapter House, which at first refused to take a stand. She then went to the San Juan County Commission because its District 3 representative, Rebecca Benally, was Navajo and clearly understood what was at stake. The county sided with Grandma Betty, and



ABOVE: The family hogan is not used for everyday living, but is reserved for special occasions, such as the birth of a child and sacred rites.

LEFT: Mountain ranges in Colorado, New Mexico and Utah can be viewed from Grandma Betty's home on McCracken Mesa.



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*Flanked by Sen. Orrin Hatch and Utah's former governor, Gary Herbert, with Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke standing behind her, Grandma Betty looks on as President Trump signs the proclamation downsizing the monument she worked for years to stop. BELOW: Without electric implements, Grandma Betty shears her sheep in a process that takes many days and requires the help of family members.*

after a time—and many meetings with her and Anna Tom—in May 2017 the Aneth Chapter put forth a resolution opposing the monument.

### **Battle of Bears Ears**

Though small in stature, Grandma Betty assumed the role of fiery protester at dozens of events throughout 2015-2016 where forces gathered both for and against the monument. With Anna Tom as her interpreter, Grandma Betty implored for her ancestral lands and traditions to be preserved and not sacrificed to a government-run tourist attraction. She became emblematic of the larger struggle, which was not native versus white, but outside special interest groups versus local needs; centralized government versus states' rights; industrial tourism versus ranching and resource development; big money to be made versus a way of life to be lost.

With the sting of President Clinton's 1996 (surprise) designation of the unpopular and economically devastating 1.87 million-acre Grand Staircase-Escalante National Monument still smarting in Utah's collective conscience, the state's congressional delegation, headed by Sen. Mike Lee, went to bat against the Obama administration. With Obama beholden to his environmentalist donors the outcome was predetermined and days before he left office on December 28, while on Christmas vacation in Hawaii, he used the Antiquities Act to establish the 1.4 million-acre Bears Ears National Monument.

Far from conceding, Grandma Betty and her fellow protesters appealed to the incoming Trump administration and new Interior Secretary Ryan Zinke of Montana, who listened to both the emotion and logic of the anti-monument argument. In June 2017, Zinke visited the Bears Ears and Grand Staircase-Escalante national monuments and heard from leaders and local interests both in



favor and against the designations. Grandma Betty was front and center, fighting for her life. The national monuments battle flared hotter from that point and protests continued. Through this clamor, the voices of Grandma Betty and others like her were heard by President Trump. In December 2017, using the same presidential powers that created the monuments, President Trump visited the Utah state Capitol, and with Grandma Betty watching over his shoulder, signed the presidential proclamations not abolishing, but significantly reducing the size of the contested monuments.

With stunning ignorance, some pro-monument media reports painted Grandma Betty and others in the Ute and Navajo tribes who joined President Trump at the Utah Capitol as “political props.” Grandma Betty's unassailable independence proves such accusations to be beyond ludicrous.

### **Reversal**

Following President Trump's downsizing of the enormous monuments, those opposing the monument celebrated and those in favor launched invectives and lawsuits at local governments as well as the Interior Department. For five years the Trump boundaries held, but the intrinsic weaknesses of the Antiquities Act would soon allow President Biden to reverse Trump's proclamations. In October 2021, Biden, again bending to the wishes of

NGOs and giant corporations, reimposed the original Clinton/Obama boundaries on the monuments.

Grandma Betty says of Biden's reversal: "He can't do that. I believe what President Trump did for us should stay." But a great deal of the damage feared by tribal members and other locals in southern Utah had already been done, with even more federal restrictions on ranching and energy development now overlaying the few open lands left. In what amounts to a hard slap in the face to locals, SITLA, the Utah School and Institutional Trust Lands Administration, recently gave state lands within the Bears Ears to the BLM in exchange for tracts of land in other parts of the state.

Ironically, the "moral" angle in the Bears Ears National Monument debate has been to ensure the preservation of cultural resources—antiquities, artifacts and historic dwellings. But due to massive publicity campaigns by outdoor recreation companies including Patagonia and Black Diamond since even before the monument was established, many of those precious antiquities, including the hogan once dwelt in by Grandma Betty's ancestors, have been vandalized, trampled and picked apart by growing hordes of tourists.

### **Sheepwoman**

Grandma Betty believes the land belongs to the animals, not to men with their myriad ambitions. Forage is more than scarce on McCracken Mesa. Grandma Betty's 60 sheep need a lot of acreage per animal, but with churros bred for and acclimated to such scarcity, they survive. She shears her sheep the traditional way, without electric implements. A sheepwoman to the bone, Grandma Betty lives to ranch and ranches to live. It's what she knows, and with the years ticking away, it's also what keeps her going.

There is strength in Grandma Betty that emerges when she is pressed. She led a movement in the West and emerged as a champion fighting against federal overreach and condescending environmental groups which "hitch [their] success to the Navajo" but endorse only those who fall into lockstep with their schemes. Defying time itself, with sinew and soul, she continues to strive for justice for her animals, her people, and her land. ■

*Marjorie Haun is a freelance journalist based in southeastern Utah. She covered the battles of Bears Ears extensively and through the process became a fan of Grandma Betty Jones.*