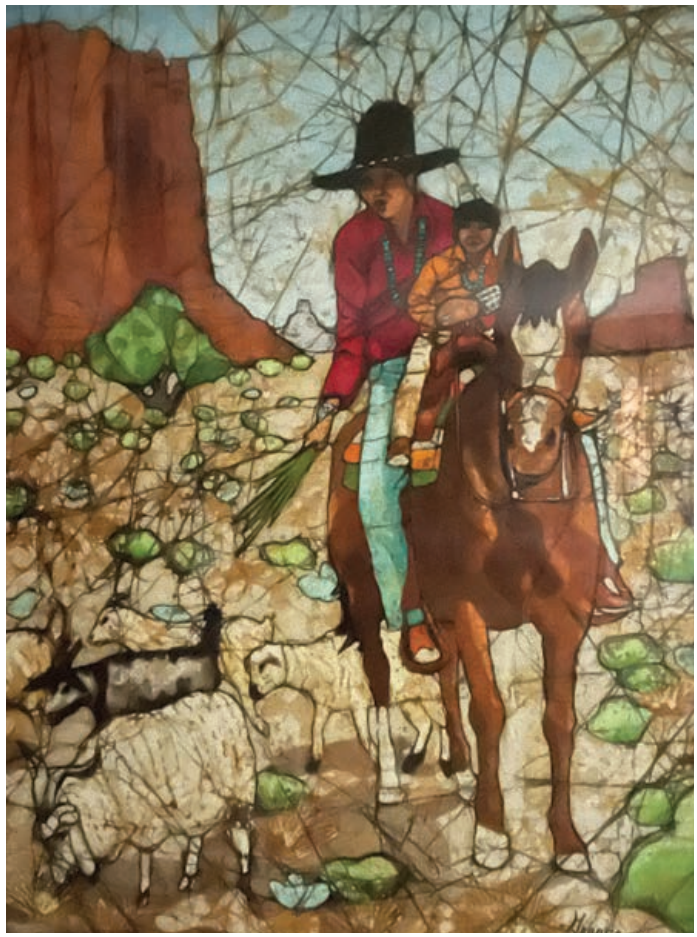
Nurtured By Navajo

Saving America's first domestic sheep.
By Dr. Lyle G. McNeal



BATIK PAINTING BY LYNN GRENCE

Sometimes life takes you on a journey you didn't expect. This is the story of just such a journey, one I didn't predict or plan for. Turned out to be historic, and as I learned, one of service to America's largest tribe of indigenous people, the Diné, as well as to all Americans. I took the journey, which started 53 years ago, when I was professor of animal science and range management at California Polytechnic State University in San Luis Obispo. At the time, I also served as the faculty adviser to the students' "Boots & Spurs Club." My other nonteaching assignments involved student advising, oversight of the university's commercial sheep operation at the Serrano Ranch and managing the student internship program.

During spring break 1972, while taking the Boots & Spurs Club on its annual weeklong livestock field trip to the Salinas Valley, we discovered something unique, something lost to mainstream history. The owner of a horse and sheep ranch had a breed of sheep which wasn't discussed in university animal science courses. These sheep were called "old-type Navajo sheep." He said he had gotten them from the USDA's Southwestern Sheep and Range Experiment Station at Fort Wingate, N.M., during their close-down auction sale in 1966.

ABOVE: Painting by Arizonan and art teacher, Lynn Grence, who spent her childhood surrounded by her family's intense appreciation of southwestern culture.
LEFT: Churro ram.

I'd never heard of old-style Navajo sheep, so upon returning to campus, I dug into further research. Fortunately, I was able to find some published articles from that Fort Wingate experiment station. Most of the articles compared this old-type Navajo sheep to a number of so-called improved or modern breeds. These "Navajo churro" sheep were descendants of the original "churra" sheep that the early Spanish conquistadors—Hernan Cortez, Francisco Coronado and others—brought as a food supply for their North American explorations. In 1598 Juan de Oñate, a conquistador born in what is now Mexico, traveled north. He wanted to establish new communities and Catholic missions and brought 5,000 churras with his expedition to what is now New Mexico. Some of these sheep were given to the Pueblo people, and eventually the Navajo began acquiring more in the 1600s.

During my research, I learned that a Navajo Reservation tribal veterinarian had conducted a census of all livestock on the reservation and in the Four Corners Region (Arizona, Colorado, New Mexico and Utah), and no more than 450 of the original old-type Navajo churro sheep were alive. Modern and contemporary sheep breeds made up the largest part of the Navajo sheep population. I realized that these important historical Navajo sheep were almost extinct.

In the early 1800s, the Navajo churro flocks numbered more than 100,000 head. But in 1863 the U.S. Army, led by Col. Kit Carson, raided the Navajo-sacred land of Dinétah, killed many Navajos, burned their crops and peach orchards, and also killed most of their sheep. The Navajo were rounded up and forced to walk over 300 miles to the prison camp of Bosque Redondo in what was then New Mexico Territory. Fewer than half survived what they called The Long Walk and their three-year internment. Finally, the Navajos were allowed to return to their ancestral land in 1868.

After the Long Walk, each Navajo was given two sheep to restart their traditional flocks. Many of these were churro from contracted Spanish sheep ranchers in New Mexico. Over the next few decades the Navajo flocks increased. With the excellent quality of wool from the

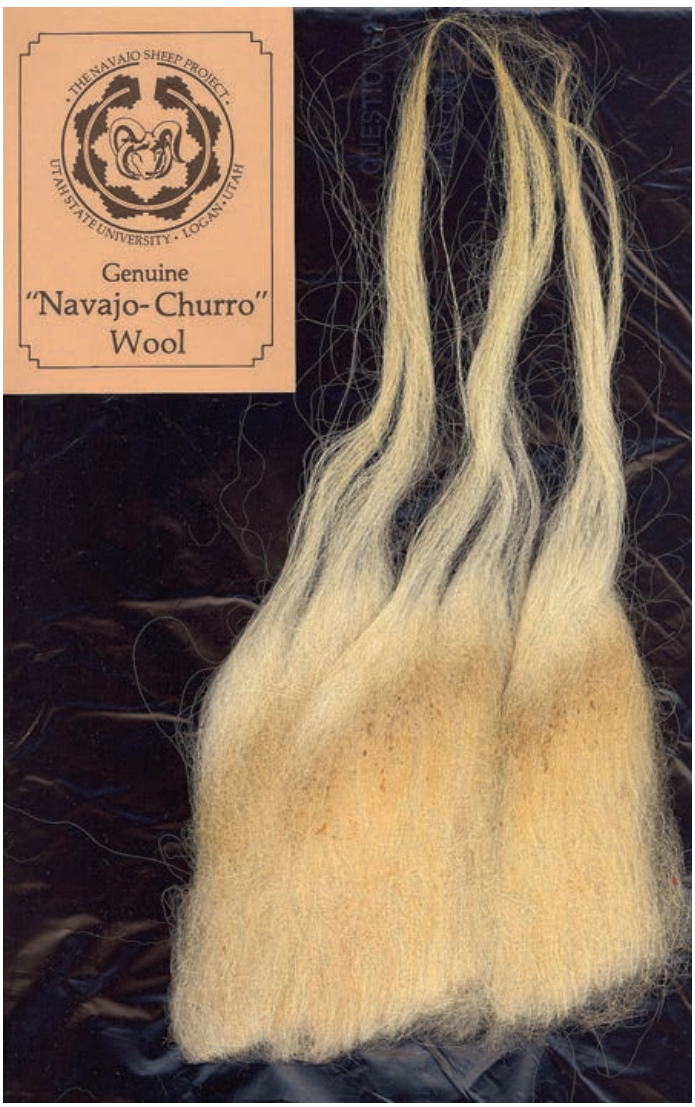
churros talented Diné weavers created some of their most valuable tapestries.

Some Navajo families along with some churro sheep escaped Kit Carson's terrible scorched-earth campaign and survived the extermination. Later, government agents sought to replace the churro sheep by introducing the Merino, the Rambouillet, and many other contemporary European breeds. The "improved breeds" were supposed to produce larger meat carcasses and finer fleeces, but these crosses had difficulty adapting to the arid southwestern rangeland. Their fleeces also did not meet the needs of Navajo weavers as well as churros did.

PHOTOS COURTESY DR. LYLE G. MCNEAL

CLOCKWISE FROM ABOVE: Rose Owens, wheel rim weaver near Pinon in 1978. ➤Dr. McNeal by abandoned hogan near Aneth, Utah, on the Navajo Reservation close to the Four Corners in 1977. ➤An old Navajo wagon on the reservation in the 1920s. ➤Navajo churro wool sample.

The churro sheep faced another threat of extinction when in 1933 the commissioner of the relatively new Bureau of Indian Affairs, John Collier, concluded that the Navajos had far too many sheep and were damaging reservation rangelands by overgrazing. He assigned Edward R. Fryer to be superintendent of the Navajo stock reduction effort. His efforts were not welcomed by livestock owners, who were mostly Navajo matriarchs. Apart from the cited overgrazing, a major objective of the livestock reduction was to reduce silt deposits from Navajo lands in the Colorado River. It was feared the silt would impact the new engineering feat being built on the lower Colorado—Hoover Dam.



Initially the stock reduction focused mostly on goats. Small payments were promised to owners, but in 1934 in more remote areas it proved impossible to get goats and sheep to the railroad for shipment back East. So it was decided to kill the goats, as well as churros and churro-like sheep. Some flocks were just run off steep mesas and killed that way. Herding flocks into box canyons also made it easy for government officials to shoot the sheep and goats. Navajos with flocks within a reasonable distance of the railroad were asked to bring

RIGHT: Lone Navajo sheep grazes on open range in Monument Valley on the Arizona-Utah border.

BELOW: Dr. McNeal in 2018 at the South Farm hay barn at USU near Wellsville, Utah.

OPPOSITE: Nellie Pino with her Yei bei chei rug style in Pine Hill, N.M., in 1989.

their sheep and goats to an assigned dipping vat, and then animals were removed from the Navajo flocks.

Before 1933 Navajo sheep numbered over two million head, but by the end of the stock reduction in the mid-1940s the sheep population was less than 860,000. The "scrub churro" as they were often called, were the main focus of removal, which finally tapered down by 1948. Slightly over 1.6 million sheep and goats were exterminated during this terrible era, which for the Navajo was truly an "American Holocaust" of their sacred churro.

USDA Southwestern Range and Sheep Breeding Laboratory

Yet during this time period of the stock reduction, the USDA initiated its first western U.S. Range and Sheep Laboratory at Fort Wingate, N.M., in 1934. It was established by Congress to be a "permanent" facility for and on behalf of the Navajo people. Its first major objective was to determine the type of sheep best suited to the needs of the Navajo and their range conditions. Secondly, it was to develop a breed of sheep to conduct maximum production experiments in range and flock management, and to hold field days for regional residents. This laboratory had more than 19,000 acres of native land to conduct its research with the original Navajo churro sheep, along with more contemporary breeds. After 30 years of operation, the USDA closed the laboratory and auctioned off its sheep. It was at this auction sale that the Salinas, Calif., rancher acquired a large number of the remaining churros. He wanted to raise four-horned rams for trophy hunters. Many of his clients came from Hollywood where one of his son's worked as a stuntman.

The major trait that makes the Navajo churro valuable to the Diné is its unique double-coated fleece. It consists of three fiber types: a fine true wool undercoat that makes up the majority of fibers; a coarse longhaired outercoat that can reach lengths of over 13 inches a year; and a minor but brittle fiber that can't be dyed, called kemp. Thus the Navajo churro needs to be shorn at least twice a year.

These sheep are also resistant to foot rot and most internal parasites, while being very prolific and good milkers. I've known some Navajos who milked their sheep and made cheese from it. I conducted milking research comparing the Navajo churro to other breeds, and the churro is an excellent milker—we even made a delicious Aggie Ice Cream from the milk.

During that field trip with my Cal Poly Boots & Spurs Club, I first learned about how culturally sacred these sheep are to the Navajo, particularly to the matriarchal artisan weavers on the Reservation. That 1972 field trip, along with personal research I did over the next few years, lit the fire in my soul to rescue and save these important sheep from near extinction. In 1977, I approached that rancher near Salinas to see if he would be willing to donate a few of his original old-type sheep to start a rescue, rebreeding, and future deployment to the Navajo. He agreed and let me select six breeding ewes and two four-horned rams, one white and one black. I provided grazing land at the old Cal Poly Poultry Farm.

The Search on the Navajo Reservation Begins

That fall of 1977, while on sabbatical leave, I would take a Navajo or Anglo student who knew the difficult Navajo language with me down to the Navajo Reservation to search in the remote areas for churro. Following my return to Cal Poly State University in summer 1978, I received a call from Utah State University's Animal, Dairy and Veterinary Science Department. I was offered a teaching/research/extension position, which included my being sheep and wool specialist. I told the administrators I would only accept the job if they would permit me to bring along the Navajo sheep project and the flock that had grown to 37 head from the original eight. The department head agreed and offered a site to maintain the flock as well. By 1982 we started returning sheep to the Navajo matriarch shepherdesses and weavers. Over 20 years after the start of the Navajo Sheep Project we had more than 530 head, and each year we deployed these original sheep back to the Navajos, an annual deployment which has continued.

Four years after we started returning churros, several representatives from the Navajo, the Hispanics and Anglo sheep enterprises met to establish the Navajo-Churro Sheep Association. Today it has around 6,000 registered sheep.

The trail of my life to save and bring back this historic and culturally sacred breed of sheep was not an easy one for me to tread. I've had a couple of near-death health experiences while working on the Nava-

jo Reservation, such as when my Navajo helper and I contacted the hantavirus during that outbreak in 1993. I was treated in a Gallup, N.M., Catholic hospital and my young Navajo assistant in the Indian Health Service hospital in Gallup. I survived, but after I was released from the hospital I was told my Navajo assistant had passed away. I was shocked and saddened, but in the spring of 1994 I continued with my work.

Both Navajo and Hispanic sheep producers asked me to provide educational workshops and to set up on-site flock visits to teach them more about sheep and wool. This

resulted in a number of trips for several years, along with hands-on fieldwork with the sheep. The nonprofit Navajo Sheep Project at Utah State University was established so the project could be funded by private donors and grants from foundations. It helped 234 undergraduate students working with the sheep cover their college expenses. Over the tenure of the NSP we have delivered more than 1,200 breeding ewes and rams to the Navajo people, and numerous sheep to the Hispanics of Ganados del Valle and Tierra Wools in the Chama Valley of New Mexico.

The churro changed my life, and despite its setbacks the journey has been richly rewarding, enabling me to serve in the field of animal agriculture, enlightening students, ranchers, and Navajo shepherds and artisan weavers. After all the Navajo and their so-called old-style sheep have suffered, the churro is once again firmly established in their American story. ■

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