

Chicago Tribune Magazine

TRAVEL

PART 2 • OCTOBER 18 • SECTION 19

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BEAUTY OF
HOPI COUNTRY

By Tony Hillerman

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Pictographs in Canyon de Chelly.

SOUTHWEST PASSAGE7

Not just a unique point on the map, this wonderland has something for everyone.

BY ALFRED BORCOVER

HALLOWED GROUND.....10

The Arizona mesas are still alive with the Hopi spirit.

BY TONY HILLERMAN

SQUARE DEAL14

Scenic canyons, quaint pueblos, historic ruins and atomic-age icons dot the Four Corners region.

BY JAMES COATES

CHANGING CHANNEL20

Now nearing completion, the 'Chunnel' will bring profound changes to England and France.

BY RAY MOSELEY

WELCOME BACK.....24

Hard economic times force Cuba to open its doors—even to Americans.

BY LYNDA GOROV

TRAVEL CALENDAR28

A directory of happenings near and far.

COMPILED BY MARGARET BACKENHEIMER

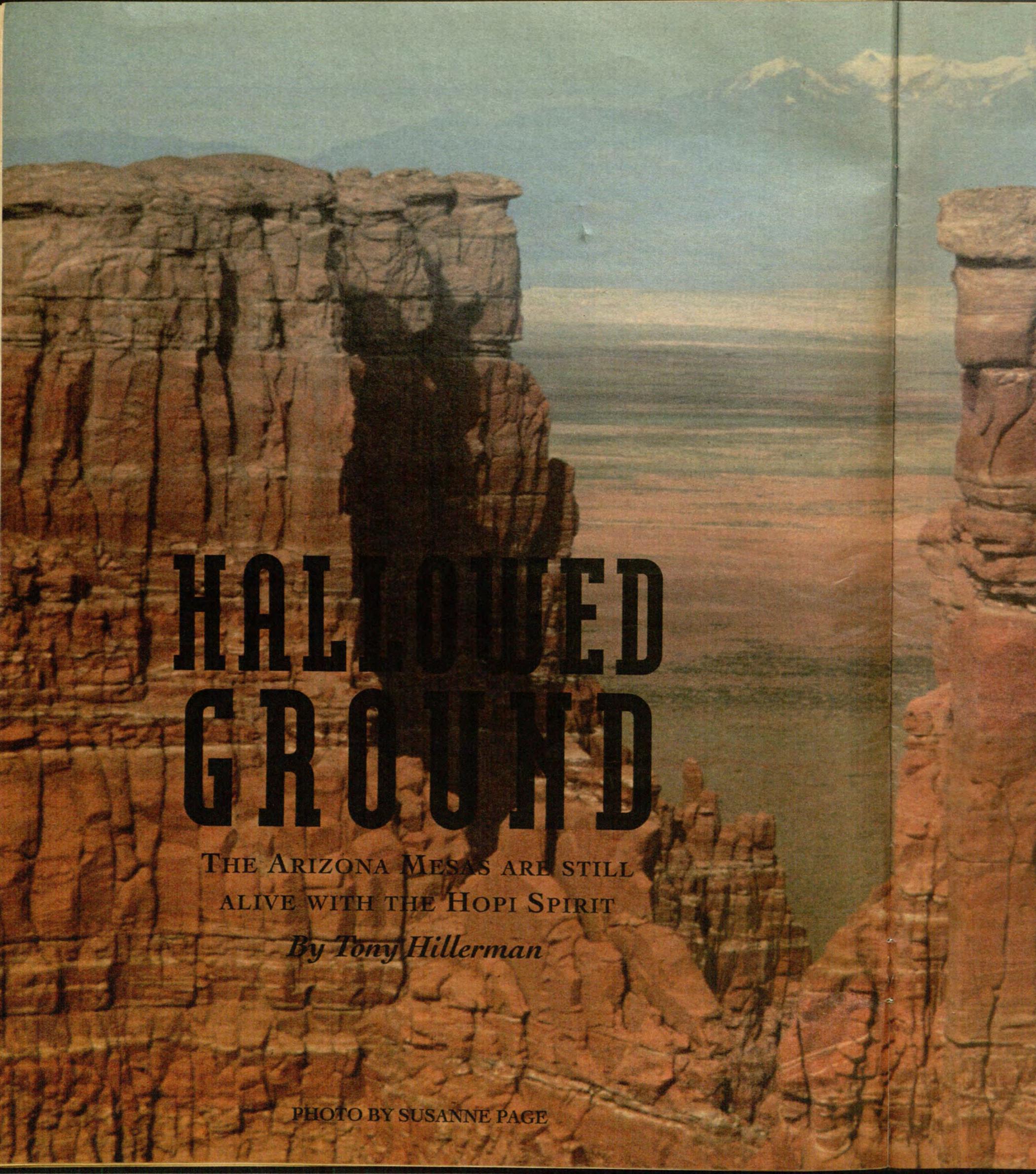
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ON THE COVER: On the Hopi Reservation in Northern Arizona. Photos on cover and above by John Running.

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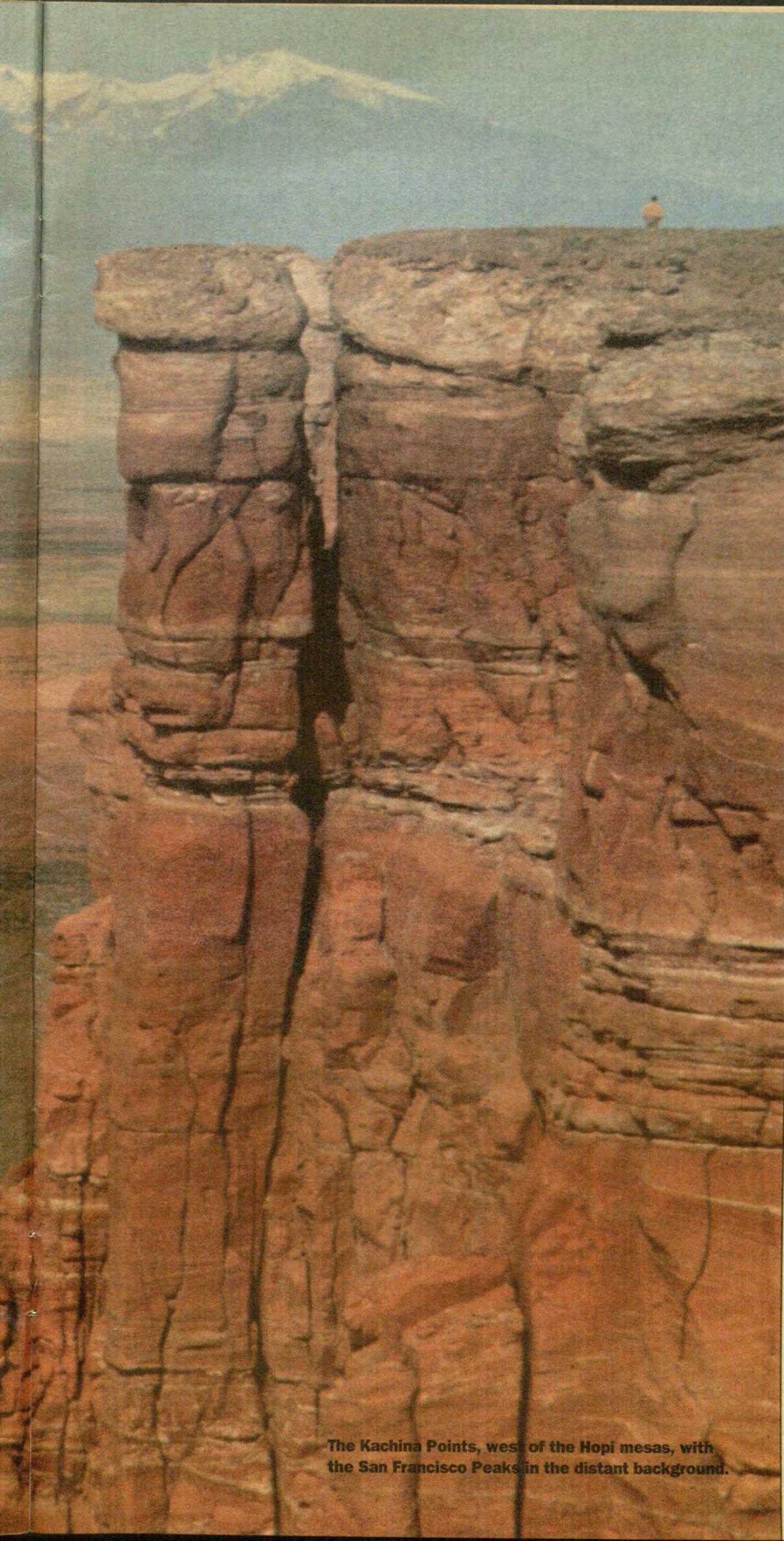


HALLOWED GROUND

THE ARIZONA MESAS ARE STILL
ALIVE WITH THE HOPI SPIRIT

By Tony Hillerman

PHOTO BY SUSANNE PAGE



The Kachina Points, west of the Hopi mesas, with the San Francisco Peaks in the distant background.

TO APPRECIATE THE STRANGENESS OF the Hopi migrations, go to Walpi sometime in March, stand on the lofty parapet of First Mesa and look out at the high desert of northern Arizona that surrounds you. An icy wind wails in from the west, blowing past the snowfields on the San Francisco Peaks. It whips pant legs around chilly ankles and drives sand against numbed cheeks. Six hundred feet below the tips of your boots, the wind obscures the tableland east of Wepo Wash with a shifting screen of dust. A school bus creeps along Ariz. Hwy. 264 below this great cliff, its headlights on as if light is proof against dust as well as darkness.

Along the horizon to the south, the shapes of Egloffstein Butte, Barrel Butte, Roundtop and Montezuma's Chair rise above the yellow-gray sandstorm, dark-blue forms outlined against a dirty sky. Behind them, the ragged line of volcano throats, ash cones and basalt thumbs that my map calls the Hopi Buttes straggle southward across the Painted Desert toward Holbrook and Winslow.

From Walpi at this time of the year, you see a thousand square miles with not a spot of green or hint of fertility. The sun slants through the haze and gives the landscape a dismal other cast. At Walpi, spring is not the season to inspire a thousand poets with its sensual promise. Spring at the Hopi mesas promises nothing but desolation.

Yet this barren-looking, almost waterless Hopi country was the goal of scores of migrations, drawing groups of people from all directions as a magnet pulls iron filings across glass. The Snake Clan was the first to arrive at First Mesa, almost a thousand years ago.

Then came the Cane-Flute Society of the Horn Clan, and then the Bear Clan. By 1275 A.D., anthropologists estimate, there were 35 little villages on and around the three mesas. Within the next half century, while the last of the great stone towns that the Anasazis built across the Southwest were being abandoned, the population of the Hopi mesas was swelled by waves of new migrations.

Why did they come here?

Hopi lore teaches that this ragged south end of Black Mesa is *Tuwanasavi*—the Center of the Universe, and according to early Hopi mythology, each clan came here only after completing a cycle of migration that took it to the four ends of the continent. Those travels were made at the explicit instruction of Masauwu, whom the Creator had made the deity and guardian of this Fourth World of the Hopis.

Clan legends and the diggings of anthropologists have revealed some aspects of the final stages of some of those mythic journeys. The Sidecorn, Sand, Tobacco and Rabbit Clans came from the south—from Homolovi near modern Winslow, Ariz., and from Casa Grande and points farther south in Mexico. The Fire, Water and Coyote Clans arrived from the opposite direction, abandoning the high stone houses in the cliffs at Betatakin and Keet Seel near the Arizona-Utah border and moving south. The Snake Clan came from the northeast, leaving the cliff houses at Hovenweep in Utah. So did the Bear, Bluebird and Spruce, who left their clan marks

(Continued on page 12)

Tony Hillerman, who writes about the Navajo tribal police, is the Grand Master of the Mystery Writers of America.



Photo by SUSANNE PAGE

The Hopi village of Walpi, on the southern tip of First Mesa, in northern Arizona.

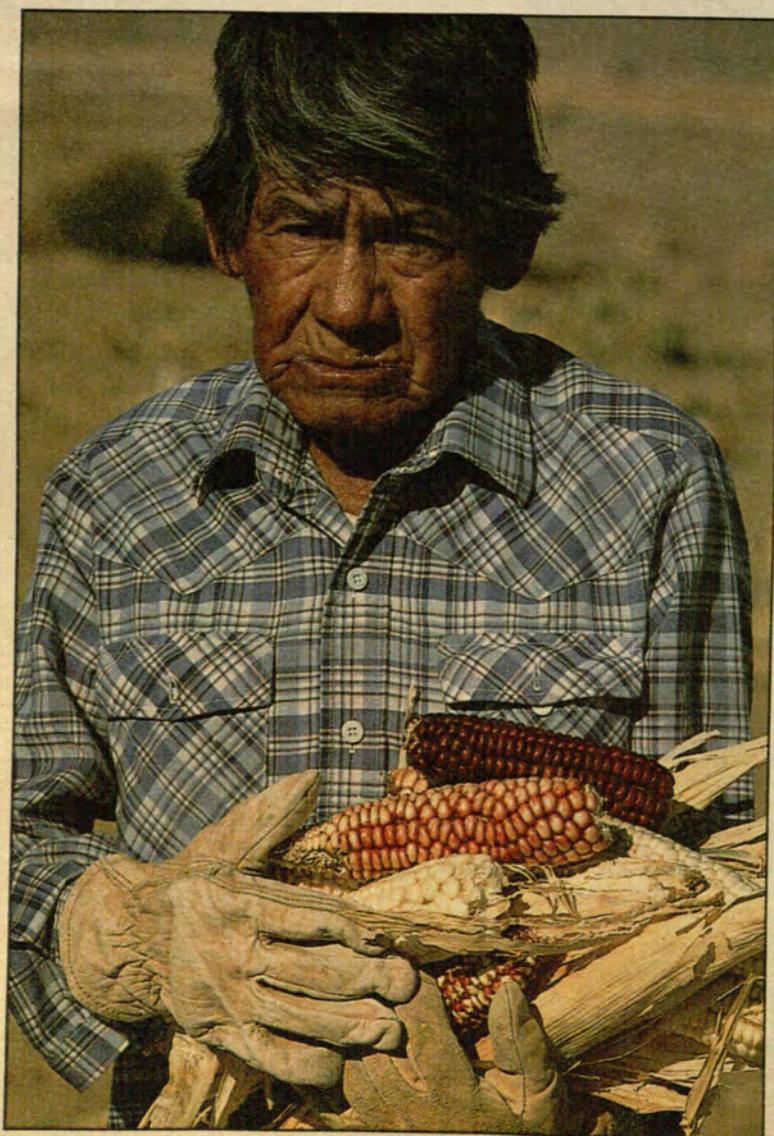


Photo by JOHN RUNNING

Hopi elder Victor Masayesva with ears of Hopi corn.

Hopi

Continued

cut in the stone near the great ceremonial structures called *kivas* at Mesa Verde in Colorado, and the Flute Clan, whose locust sign can still be seen on the walls of Canyon de Chelly. Still others came from Chaco Canyon and the Salmon Ruins in New Mexico and from a dozen others of the west's ghost towns of stone.

I look down from Walpi into a March dust storm remembering that these earliest Hopis were born and raised as dry-land farmers. So was I. I know that such farmers yearn for deep, loamy soil, flat fields, dependable water and humid springs that germinate seed and stimulate optimism. I have seen some of these features in the places the Hopis abandoned to come here—in the San Juan River Valley, at Mesa Verde, along the Salt River. Here I see stone and sand. Even my father, whose September disappointment always changed to high hopes by planting time, would have been a year-round pessimist here.

Yet tomorrow or perhaps next week and certainly no later than early April, the word will come to Walpi and to Polacca and to Hano and across the Hopi country from Hotevilla to Keams Canyon that the Bear Clan is planting its cornfields. The Bear Clan is first because it was given this role of leadership in the Fourth World when the Fire Clan

declined the honor. And when the Bear Clan has planted, all the farmers will plant in some 3,000 acres of scattered little plots and patches on the mesa tops, along the dry washes and even in the fields cleared from the sagebrush flats.

From where I stand, almost at the tip of First Mesa, the fields are too far below to identify the stones (the Hopis call them *kalalni*) that tell to which clan the Bear Clan has assigned each piece of land. Most of the *kalalni* are gone, stolen by white people who collect such things. They are no longer needed anyway.

The Water Clan has planted the field directly south of the tip of First Mesa since about the 14th Century, and corn patches just northeast have been the responsibility of the Snake and Coyote Clans for just as long.

Kalalni stones can be stolen, the clan symbols cut into them defaced, but with the Hopi, memory endures. Everyone knows that the plots beyond the Coyote Field belong to the Deer, Parrot, Badger and Mustard Clans, and beyond, across an expanse of stone too sterile even for Hopi faith, is a field of the Sand Clan. That's the way it was established by the chiefs when the clans were first accepted into the First Mesa villages. That's the way it will be until this Fourth World ends.

Even without faith, we can understand the migration of the Israelite tribes across the Sinai Desert; the Jordan River valley was indeed the land of milk and honey promised by

God. But the patch of land below the cliff at First Mesa by itself could not have drawn the Badger Clan. Before that clan came here, it had grown its corn in the rich, damp soil beside the San Juan River.

So the question remains, to which every Hopi I have ever asked has known the answer. And no matter the generation, the clan or the college education, the certainty of that answer never wavers. From humankind's earliest days, it was the Life Plan of the Creator that the Hopis would migrate in all directions across the continent, be drawn together again here at the Center of the Universe and live here in the Hopi way until the Fifth World begins. That is the prophecy. That is the answer.

George Nasaofotie illustrates the answer for me with the rubber tip of his cane. He sits in a straight-backed chair outside the door of his home across from the kiva at Shungopavi, his grandchildren chattering at a respectful distance. While he talks of the migrations of his Bluebird Clan, his cane tip makes a map in the dust by his shoe. It is not an exact map with a dot at the place where it all began and X's at each of the stopping places. Such maps are made by anthropologists and historians. This map marks a journey of the soul.

Of course specific places are involved. Nasaofotie's ancestors reached their final destination on

Second Mesa after an interval spent at Mesa Verde. He once made a sentimental journey there, looked it all over and found among the petroglyphs left by the cliff dwellers the symbol of his Bluebird Clan. "That was a good place," Nasaofotie says. "Green fields. Running streams. Water to irrigate with." His cane tip moves in the dust, illustrating the works his forefather built to divert rainwater onto their fields. Nasaofotie and I have been comparing memories of dry-land farming in years of drought, of summers when the parish priest at Sacred Heart, Okla., held rosary services to ask for rain and when the venerable men of the Shungopavi kiva made a special trip to the shrines of the San Francisco Peaks to plant their prayer plumes. In the wake of such recollections, Nasaofotie's talk of the lush climate of Mesa Verde takes on a wistful sound.

"Why did your people leave such a good place?" I ask. "And why did the Hopis leave Canyon de Chelly and Tsigi Canyon and the Salt River and all those fertile places?"

The answer is given without hesitation. "This is where we were to come," Nasaofotie says. He glances at me to make sure that I understand it, that it was not a matter of human will but of destiny. "That was the prophecy," he explains.

The prophecy is the answer. To which Nasaofotie adds a further ex-

planation. When people emerged from the *sipapuni*, they were given a choice of sustenance. "The Navajo chose the long ear of the yellow corn because it was soft and easy to shell and easy to grind, but the Hopi chose the shortest, hardest ear. It was tough. It would survive."

THAT STORY REPRESENTS BOTH poetic metaphor and reality. Hopi corn is indeed small, hard and durable—the product of a thousand years of desert evolution. The kernels are planted extremely deep and sprout in a thick cluster. When the summer rains are late, the Hopi farmer keeps thinning out the weaker plants, leaving the stronger stalks to survive until rain finally falls. More significantly, the choice of the short ear represents a choice of values, the acceptance of the hard life, the rejection of material values. The hard corn of the Hopis represents endurance and acceptance of God's will.

Three of those short ears of corn, tied end to end so that they hang horizontally and parallel to one another, decorate a wall in the house of Taylor Wazri. A member of the Sidecorn Clan, he was the oldest man in Shungopavi and probably in Arizona. He was born in 1874, 106 years to the day before I visited him. On the wall near the corn symbol of

his clan is a photograph of himself in the ceremonial attire of the Two Horn Society. The photograph was probably taken before 1907, when the Hopis stopped allowing such pictures to be taken. In it Wazri appears to be in his middle 30s.

I ask Wazri if he can recall a year when the rains failed completely and the corn shriveled in the fields. Seated beside his wood stove winding yarn onto a spindle, he answers ambiguously, speaking through Elgean Joshevama, a man from Oraibi who has come along to interpret:

"A long time ago when people were moving toward the Center, they needed food, so they stopped. It was morning. The clans that were traveling together met. The Sand, the Sidecorn, the Tobacco, the Water and the Sun Clans were there. The Sand Clan spread out the drift sand, and the Sidecorn Clan planted the seeds, and the Tobacco Clan conducted the communal smoke, and the Water Clan brought the rain, and the Sun Clan produced heat and sunlight."

Wazri stops and listens with approval as Joshevama translates for me. Then he continues: "Right away, someone smelled something, and a little girl was sent to see what it was. She found melons already ripening, beans forming on the plants, peach trees already blooming, corn already in the ear—and that was by noon of the very same day. By evening they had ripe peaches and corn to be picked and melons to be eaten. That is the lesson of the power of everyone working together, doing what we were told to do."

Later I ask a similar question of Stanley Honanie, a college graduate about 75 years younger than Wazri who belongs to the Cloud Clan: "In times of drought, did the Hopis conduct special ceremonies to pray for rain as we had done when I was a boy?" Honanie shakes his head. "It doesn't work that way," he says. After a pause and some thought, he adds, "Our entire life is prayer."

Then I remember a late-summer day on First Mesa. A ceremony calling for rain had just ended, and the *kachinas*—male dancers representing benevolent spirits—were leaving the Hopi villages for their homes under the San Francisco Peaks. Looking out from Walpi, I could see the desert dappled with blue cloud shadows. Far to the northwest, over the cliffs where the Bear Clan collects its ceremonial eagles, a great black storm dominated the horizon. Much closer, another thunderhead towered into the stratosphere over Blue Point on Padilla Mesa. Another drifted across Tover Mesa, bombarding Roundtop Butte with lightning, and still another was trailing a curtain of rain across Second Mesa. The old streets of Walpi were still dry and dusty, but thunder rumbled in the sky. The promise of rain was everywhere, and the smell of rain filled your nostrils and your mind.

"Our life is a prayer," Honanie is saying again. "If we live it properly, it will always rain." ■

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