

CENTURY

A Southwest Journal of Observation and Opinion

DECEMBER Sixteenth, Nineteen Eighty One

\$1.00



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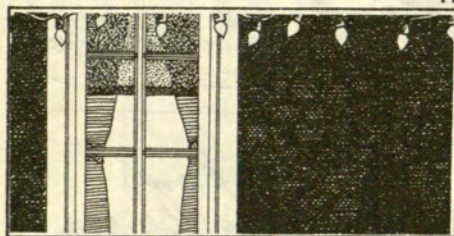
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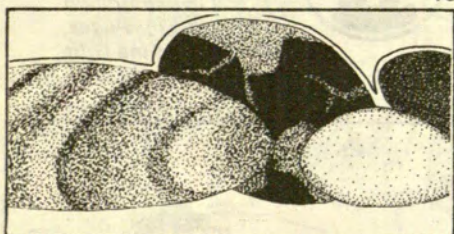
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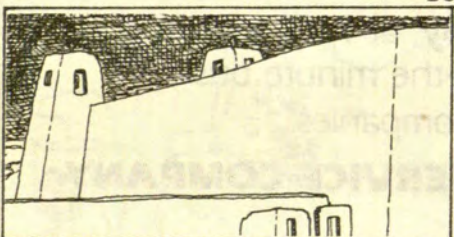
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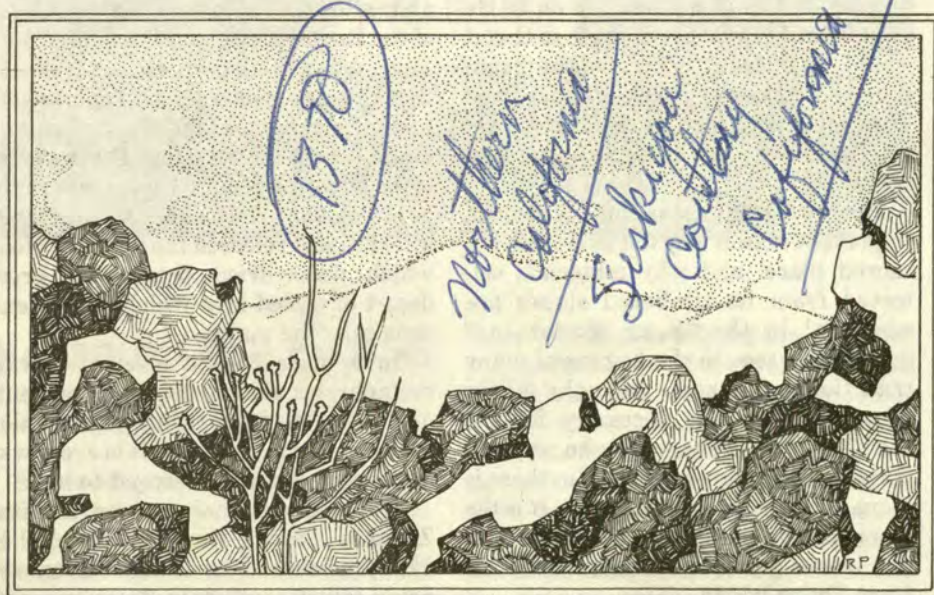
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ESSAYS AND OBSERVATIONS



The Truer Sound of Oku Pin and Dzil Dotlizi

by TONY HILLERMAN

A friend and I are hunting cottontails in the foothills of the Sandias—but not very successfully. Of the two of us, he is the hunter and I am the talker, and on this particular late autumn afternoon his mind is more concerned with mythology than rabbits. He had spent two hours that morning with a travel agent planning a trip to the Mediterranean—to Greece, Crete, Israel, Lebanon, and Turkey. Next summer he'll visit all those places named in the legends which helped man civilize himself. He'll stand on Mount Sinai, where God's fiery finger wrote in stone, and climb Mount Parnassus, where the Oracle spoke to the Greeks, and visit perhaps the Caucasus, where Prometheus was tormented by the gods, and Mount Olympus, from which Zeus himself meddled in the affairs of mortals.

The prospect of this pilgrimage to the misty mountains where God explained

himself to men has distracted my friend beyond any hope of finding rabbits. Instead we sit on a granite boulder, stare westward toward the sunset outlining Mount Taylor on the horizon, and talk of Greek mythology.

Perhaps you have long since recognized the irony in this—this business of sitting on one of New Mexico's magic mountains, admiring the sunset behind another one, while dreaming of visiting the same sort of landmarks half a world away. But the average American, the average southwesterner, the average New Mexican, is more likely to know mythology imported from the old world than he is to know the metaphysics which surrounds him.

My friend is an easterner (Houston being East by New Mexico standards) and learned what eastern schools thought he should know of human culture. They taught him of Hector, Odysseus, Mercury, and Medusa. But he's never heard of Changing Woman, Spider Grandmother, the Water Strider, the Twin War Gods, or Born for Water, nor of the landmarks where they taught their lessons to listening man. Neither had I, for that matter, until I bought a little Navajo yei rug from a Santo Domingo peddler for \$40 plus a glass of

beer. Over that beer in La Fonda bar I first heard that Sandia Mountain is really Oku-Pin and that it is every bit as much a landmark of man's thirst to understand what is beyond understanding as is any Mediterranean mountain.

Perhaps eastern schools cannot be faulted for teaching of immigrant spirits and overlooking the powers that haunt an American West which is, after all, almost as distant. But our western schools ignore them too. And it has always seemed to me that we westerners should spend less time teaching our young the intellectual baggage Europeans unloaded at Plymouth Rock and a little more helping them understand what they see from their classroom windows.

Two things which New Mexicans can hardly avoid seeing are Mount Taylor and Sandia Mountain, the first the cloud-capped landmark on Albuquerque's western horizon and the second looming directly over the city's Northeast Heights. We tend to know a little about them. Mostly physical stuff. Mount Taylor is an old volcano which put on a spectacular show in the Pleistocene age, built an ash-and-cinder cone to an awesome 16,000 feet into the stratosphere, and then gradually eroded down (despite subsequent eruptions) to its present graceful shape. Sandia Mountain is a different breed of cat. It was formed by an immense, slow-moving upheaval (more correctly, downheaval) of the earth's crust which saw the earth's surface over which the Rio Grande now runs sink more than two miles, creating pressures which forced the adjoining crust upward. A good many New Mexico school kids can tell you that the same fossil-rich limestone found almost two miles high atop Sandia Crest can also be found by drilling two miles deep under the riverbed.

But they never heard of Oku-Pin, Spider Grandmother's Turtle Mountain.

Turtle Mountain, in the Tiwa version of the Book of Genesis, was the central enigma. The people had emerged through the sipapu into a world of unaccustomed brightness. Spider Grandmother was there to teach them, first how to shade their eyes until they became used to sunlight, and then the how and why and where of living on this planet. As part of these instructions they were told they should find a mountain which would remind them of a turtle and live always in sight of it. But these people were new to this world and had never seen a turtle. What should they

look for? Something on its back, they were told, would remind them of the mole, an animal they knew from the underworld. And so the Tiwas did their mythic wandering looking for their Garden of Eden, until finally only one man and one woman survived. To make a long and complex legend shorter, they saw a tortoise on the bank of the Rio Grande, recognized in the pattern on the shell the same design made by the paw-print of the mole, and saw looming above them the turtle-shell shape of Sandia Mountain.

There is much more significance to Turtle Mountain than this quick little sketch of a legend suggests. And for the Northern Pueblos it is the Mountain of the South, with more stories and more meaning. And the same is true of Mount Taylor. It, too, is magic for more cultures than one.

Spider Grandmother called it Black Mountain and warned her people that it marked the western edge of lands hospitable to them. Beyond it lay the desert. Beyond it lay danger. Beyond it corn would not grow. One of the Twin War Gods would live upon its peak to turn them back if they ventured that far west.

But when I look at Mount Taylor I think of it as the Turquoise Mountain of the Navajos. The great poetry of their Blessing Way Ceremonial gives us its story. It had existed as an idea of a mountain in the dim and misty Third World. When the Water Monster was punishing the Dine'e for Coyote's misconduct by destroying that world by

flood, First Man collected the materials from that mountain (and three others) and brought it along with him in his escape to the Fourth World (the Glittering World, the Earth Surface World). From these materials he built the four mountains which would mark the margins of Dinétah, the land where the Dine'e should live. Where Mount Taylor stands, First Man spread a turquoise blanket and built a mountain on it. He pinned the blanket to the earth so that it would not fly away, decorated the mountain with turquoise jewels, and assigned Turquoise Girl (one of the Navajo yei spirits) to live on its peak as a guardian spirit.

For the Navajo clans this is the most important reason why the mountain is a sacred place, and why materials collected from its timbered slopes are essential in the "Four Mountains" bundle one sees in the hogans of many traditional Navajos, and why herbs grown upon it are necessary for the "Jish" of Navajo shamans who perform certain curing ceremonials. But there is more to the mountain than that. It is the home of a hundred legends. For example, it was here that the odyssey of the Hero Twins began.

First Man had heard a voice crying from the clouds over Gobernador Knob. He had climbed the old volcano core and found an infant female. He and First Woman had adopted the child as their own. They called her White Shell Girl and then (after her puberty ceremony) Changing Woman. She was to create the first four Navajo clans from the skin of

her breasts and become the teacher and lawgiver of the Dine'e, teaching them the Navajo way. More than that, she would be the mother of their mythic heroes—the Hector, Ajax, Achilles, and Odysseus of Dinétah.

Changing Woman slept one day beside the San Juan River and was visited in her sleep by river mist and sunlight. She bore two sons of this union and called them Monster Slayer (Slayer of the Enemy Gods) and Born for Water. They obtained magic weapons from the Sun and set out on a series of epic adventures to cleanse the land of monsters and make it safe for humans. Their adventures began on Mount Taylor, where the boys confronted Horned Monster, and killed it, and released the rivers of blood which, when dried, became the great desert of cooled lava which New Mexicans call "the malpais."

On a more cosmic level of Navajo metaphysics, this old volcano represents one of the cardinal points of the union between earth and sky. It is in every way a spiritual landmark second to none.

And yet our maps name it after Zachary Taylor, the undistinguished 12th president of the United States, who never saw the mountain. They ignore its real name, which is Dził Dótlizí, the Turquoise Mountain, where the Blessing Way Ceremonial tells us Turquoise Girl lives "in a house made of morning light, a house made of rain clouds, a house made of early mist, a house made of dawn."

I hold no briefs against the Greeks. Olympus, too, must be a beautiful mountain. I have never seen it, but Homer tells us in *The Odyssey* that "it is neither shaken by winds nor does snow come near it, but clear weather spreads cloudless about it, and a white radiance stretches above it." Somehow to my western desert ear the Navajo poetry has a truer sound, and it seems to me that Navajo philosophy has as much to teach us as have the words of the Oracle. Jason pursued the Golden Fleece, but Born for Water spared the life of Hunger, the last of the monsters, because without Hunger man cannot enjoy his food.

Tony Hillerman is a professor of journalism at the University of New Mexico. The author of 11 mystery novels, Hillerman is a winner of the Edgar Allan Poe Award of the Mystery Writers of America. A new novel, *The Dark Wind*, will be published by Harper & Row next March.



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