

# Smithsonian

December 1990



Coconut Harry Truman,  
a beaming example of  
gifts to Presidents (p. 82)



December 1990

# Smithsonian

Volume 21, Number 9

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By Michael Parfit

## Weaving mysteries that tell of life among the Navajos

*Tony Hillerman's tales span the vast reservation spread across three states in the Southwest; and his heroes are a pair of tribal policemen*

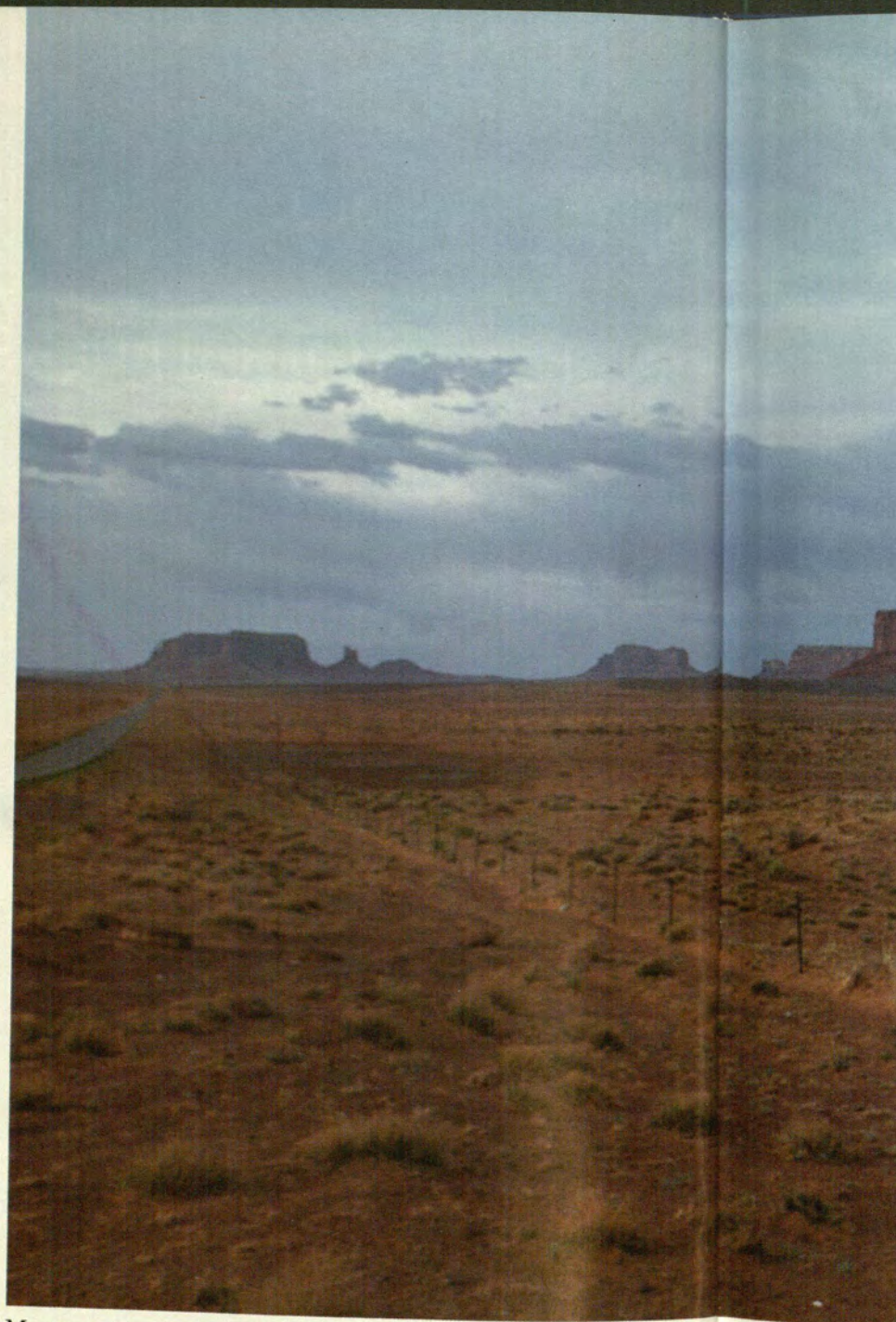
Ronald Horseherder pulled down the neck of his Colorado State University sweatshirt. The scars made by skewers at the Sun Dance shone on his chest: tufts of ruined flesh, blossoms of violence, pain and honor. He let the shirt slip back up and hide them. His eyes were dark and hot, set deep under a cap that said "New Orleans Saints." "I will dance again this summer," he said, with heat. Horseherder is 18 years old.

Tony Hillerman watched him. Hillerman is 65. He is not a Navajo, though some people who read what he writes think he is. He is a white man, a *biligaana*. He once called himself "a broken-down old fat man," one of his few inaccurate descriptions. He is not particularly old; he is not at all broken down.

Hillerman stood with Horseherder on the Sun Dance ground at Big Mountain on the western Navajo reservation in Arizona. Colored rags hung in a dead cottonwood tree, Sun Dance offerings left from last year. Six sweat lodges made humps on the ground, like a herd of huge turtles, sleeping. Farther away was a hogan made of juniper poles chinked with mud, and a heap of Black Mesa coal. Dry wind danced with the dust on the plains below the mountain and made the rags flutter in the cottonwood tree.

"I sit down with my grandmother and say 'Teach me something,'" Ronald Horseherder said. "I want to know who I am and where I come from."

Horseherder was an angry young man; when the old chiefs used to sit around in their parlays with the U.S. Cavalry and say "We won't be able to control our



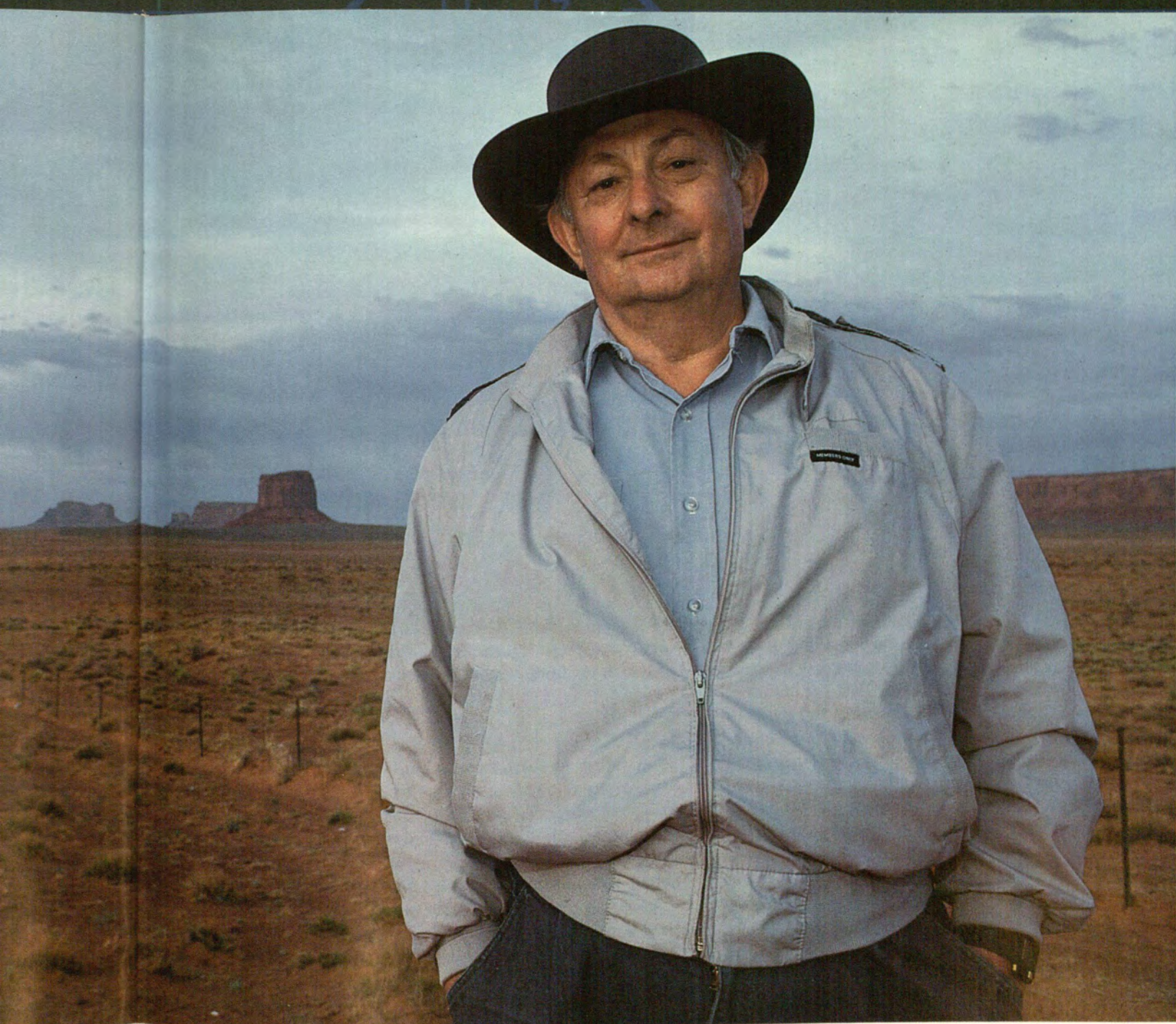
Mystery writer Tony Hillerman sets his stories in landscapes like this one, at Monument Valley, Arizona.

young men," it was young men like Horseherder they were talking about. Horseherder had once said to a Senator: "We will meet again, you and I, and next time you will lose."

But to Horseherder this large, genial *biligaana* was different. They seemed to share an understanding. Perhaps it was because Tony Hillerman, a white man who has become an integral part of the Navajo Nation's enigmatic world, knew where Horseherder was coming from because he had come the same way.

Tony Hillerman is a mystery writer. He engages in





ona.  
But for Hillerman, landscapes include people as well as places, and the people he writes about are Navajos.

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the precise, intellectual and very British profession of posing intricate problems about murder, presented and solved satisfyingly in 80,000 words. He has published 16 books, 11 of them mystery novels, won the coveted Edgar Allan Poe award from the Mystery Writers of America, served as president of that organization, and had his work on the *New York Times* best-seller list three times in the past four years.

But the life in Tony Hillerman's books is the people, landscape, cultures and religions of the dry, wild, 25,000 square miles of desert in and around the Navajo

reservation of New Mexico, Arizona and Utah. In the landscape of his fiction, white people read Zane Grey instead of Agatha Christie, and Indians read legal briefs or tracks in the sand. The form of expression he has chosen is stranger than sorcery here, but within his spare prose Hillerman has caught the nature of both the land and its people so richly that the Navajos have honored him as "special friend" to the *Dineh*, the Navajo people.

Tony Hillerman's books are like windows that look out into *Dinetah*, the holy Navajo landscape. "A first-

*Photographs by Terrence Moore*



rate story of suspense and mystery . . . wholly and inseparably intertwined with the culture of the Navajo nation," a *New Yorker* reviewer wrote about *The Ghostway*, published in 1984. The stories are rich in detail: ". . . the yellow of the cottonwood along the dry streambed glittered in the sun. They were the only trees in a tan-gray-silver universe of grass." But the nature of the place is not just backdrop; the cultures and religions of Navajos, and occasionally, other tribes, are central to the plots. In *The Ghostway* a vital clue is hidden in the traditional preparation of a Navajo corpse for burial. *A Thief of Time* is about the illegal hunting of bones and potsherds in Southwest ruins, and about the efforts of anthropologists to trace the history of the vanished Anasazi civilization. Hillerman's most recent book, *Coyote Waits*, takes its title and theme from the Navajo legend of Coyote, who mixes playfulness and evil, and is always poised to prey upon the careless.

Hillerman never points at the Indian way of life as if it were strange. A Hillerman hero is not a visitor—say, a Los Angeles private eye who pursues a criminal to the Southwest and finds himself confronted by customs he thinks bizarre. His main characters are two Navajo cops: Joe Leaphorn, a detective who studied anthropology at Arizona State University; and Jim Chee, a younger patrolman who also studied anthropology and who is now learning from his uncle how to become a Navajo medicine man.

Through Chee and Leaphorn, Hillerman describes the Navajo landscape and religion the way Agatha Christie (*SMITHSONIAN*, September 1990) would write about the English countryside or the Episcopal Church—as a natural part of the environment. The reader lives not as a spectator but as a vicarious participant, so wholly wrapped up in everyday patterns of Navajo existence that sometimes it seems the most bizarre customs are those practiced by *biligaana*.



Laundromat is typical meeting place for Navajos who live in far-flung hogans on reservation landscape.

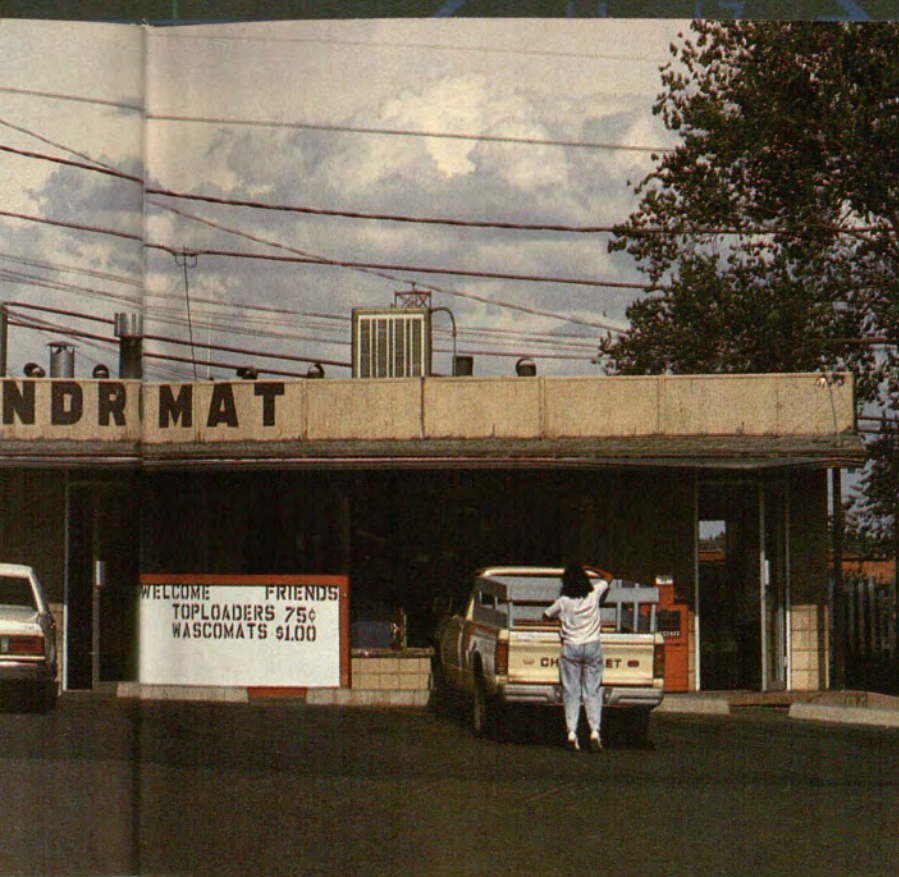
"I'm trying to learn more about white men," Joe Leaphorn says angrily to an ambitious anthropologist who has abandoned love for a historic piece of flint. "You wanted all that worse than you wanted your woman. What else will you give up for it?" Solving another case, Jim Chee "finally fathomed that while his people presume that if they're talking, you are listening, white people require periodic reassurance."

Tony Hillerman never shows anger. He is friendly, genial and alert, like a big old retired watchdog. "There is no meanness or smallness in Tony," says a friend, Norman Zollinger, an Albuquerque author. But Hillerman's books contain a tension beyond the puzzle play of crime and resolution. They are about country people and poverty, second-class citizens in a rich nation, Westerners oppressed by the Easterners who make the rules. They are about poor rural people who nevertheless make a successful culture of their own out of determination, tradition and a supple approach to modern times.

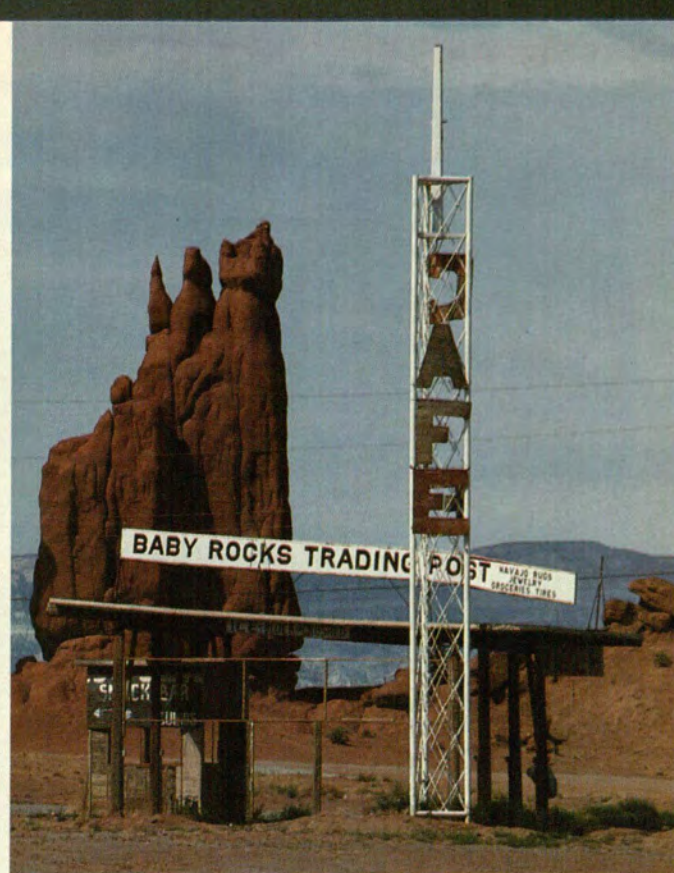
Hillerman doesn't just understand this kind of tension; he has lived it. "If I ever write an autobiography," he told me once, "I'll spend a lot of time explaining a kind of *us* and *them* attitude."

Hillerman grew up in the tiny settlement of Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, about 70 miles southeast of Oklahoma City. His family was poor: he lived in a home his father put together out of two oilfield shotgun houses.





A laundromat like this one provides the locale for a shooting that starts off Hillerman's *The Ghostway*.



Café sign at Baby Rocks Trading Post has reversed "C" so drivers can get the message coming either way.

Water came from a plunger bucket in the well; two buckets got it muddy. *Us* was the country kids of the little community; *them* was the city kids of the nearby town of Konowa.

"They were the town boys, who wore belt pants and low-cut shoes, knew how to shoot pool and use the telephone, and had indoor plumbing," Hillerman said affably. "We wore work shoes and bib overalls. I was 21 years old before I made my first telephone call. We felt we could fight better than they could; then when we fought them we lost."

Hillerman went to school at a Catholic boarding school for Potawatomi Indian girls. (The nuns kept him and his friends on the outside, too. "The nuns forgave us for not being Potawatomies," he once told a reporter, "but they never forgave us for not being girls.") "If you grow up identifying with a certain kind of people," he said genially, "the exotic people are not going to be the Potawatomies. It'll be the English teacher who went to Choate and never thought of a hungry day. It's not the Navajos; they're just like the people I grew up with."

Hillerman's route into the world of letters was not college prep. As soon as he was old enough he enlisted

*Michael Parfit is a freelance writer and a frequent contributor to SMITHSONIAN. He enjoys reading Tony Hillerman mysteries at his home in rural Montana.*

in the Army and went off to World War II. He fought in France, but he wrote home to his mother about the beauty of the countryside and how peaceful everything was behind the lines. "He wrote fiction," says his brother, Barney, a photographer from Oklahoma City. Tony won a Bronze Star and a Silver Star, and then something blew up under him in Alsace. "I don't remember going up, but I remember coming down, thinking: This is going to hurt."

When he came down, both legs were broken, and he could not see. He was picked up by a stretcher crew. The lead stretcher-bearer was blown up, and Hillerman took another short flight. Two friends came and got him on another stretcher and accidentally dropped him in a stream. He survived that, too. After months of daily poker games in the hospital, he returned to the United States on a hospital ship, with almost \$90 in winnings, a cane and a patch over his left eye. At home was a message to call a feature writer from the *Daily Oklahoman* who had written about Hillerman's Silver Star. She had read the letters he'd sent to his mother, and she just wanted to tell him she thought he was a good writer.

"Having somebody tell me they thought I was good at something was an important moment," he said agreeably. "I decided to study journalism." He spent a career in journalism, working for United Press and several newspapers, including the *Santa Fe New Mexi-*





Gas station at Teec Nos Pos Trading Post is in Arizona, near the New Mexico border. The reservation, which straddles both states, also extends north, up into Utah.

can, and retiring in 1986 as a professor of journalism at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque.

Hillerman looks and talks like a man who would have gone quietly off into an old age of trout fishing and genial rumination. He isn't, and he didn't. By the time he retired, he was already a success at his next career: novelist.

It was not, however, an easy breakthrough. His first manuscript about Navajo cops on the reservation, *The Blessing Way*, based on one of the major Navajo rituals, completely missed in its first encounter with *them*. "I think you should take out the Indian stuff," his agent said, but he persisted and found an editor who was interested. The novel was published in 1970. After a tough trip through the amazing landscape of publishing, Hillerman made enough of a truce with *them* to end up with three best-sellers and a new agent who had attended Princeton. But that hadn't changed his attitude.

Hillerman lives in a comfortable suburban home in Albuquerque that does not reflect the abundance of money his recent success has generated—a \$400,000 advance for one book, for instance. ("All that money's kind of embarrassing," he said cheerfully. "Sometimes I think I need to buy something really extravagant, just to prove it's not Monopoly money.") A couple of days before we talked to Ronald Horseherder at Big Mountain, Hillerman, his brother Barney and I had left Albuquerque, westbound for the reservation.

The trip was like a journey through Hillerman's

past and present, mingled with bits of his fiction. As we drove into the dry landscape of his books, it became apparent how at home he was here, too. This was where the part of the world called *us* lived.

We drove west, into the long, level tablelands, red cliffs and outbreaks of lava, toward Grants. We passed Budville, where in real life a couple had run a well-known bar until they were shot during a robbery. Hillerman described the mystery in detail, lingering on the crime and the subsequent arrest of the wrong man. Every once in a while he and Barney would get going about the past and Hillerman would unconsciously fire off a sentence that could begin any novel: "Weren't we hauling that damned airplane in the car when we ran into the mule?" He conversed mostly in stories; as we passed Grants and headed for Gallup he explained how a lake called Ambrosia was named—not because of the sweet, healing qualities of its waters, but because a man named Ambrosio had been found floating in it, dead.

We passed Window Rock, where Joe Leaphorn works out of tribal police headquarters, a big block of a building downhill from the natural arch that gives the place its name. The fenced yards around the houses were dusty. "Navajos don't plant flower beds and lawns," Hillerman said affably. "Whatever's around is what nature left there." Hillerman, in one of those odd juxtapositions of modern Navajo Nation culture, served as grand marshal of the Navajo Nation Tribal Fair parade in Window Rock in 1987. "They



wanted me to ride a horse," he said. "I told them to find one in the same condition I'm in." So he rode in a big old convertible.

We crossed the high country of the Defiance Plateau on Navajo Route 3 and headed across Wepo Wash, where a pilot running drugs crashes his Cessna against a rock, setting off a hunt for murderers and cocaine in *The Dark Wind*. Researching the story, Hillerman asked a friend to fly the route of the plane, right up to the point of impact. Then he put Wepo Wash somewhere else. "Needed it farther west," he said. Hillerman loves the names of the reservation, places like Dinnehotso, Teec Nos Pos and Lukachukai, and occasionally he shuffles them around to suit his narrative. "Burnt Water," he said. "Isn't that a great name for a place in dry country? I moved it because I liked the name, and I regret it. I still get letters."

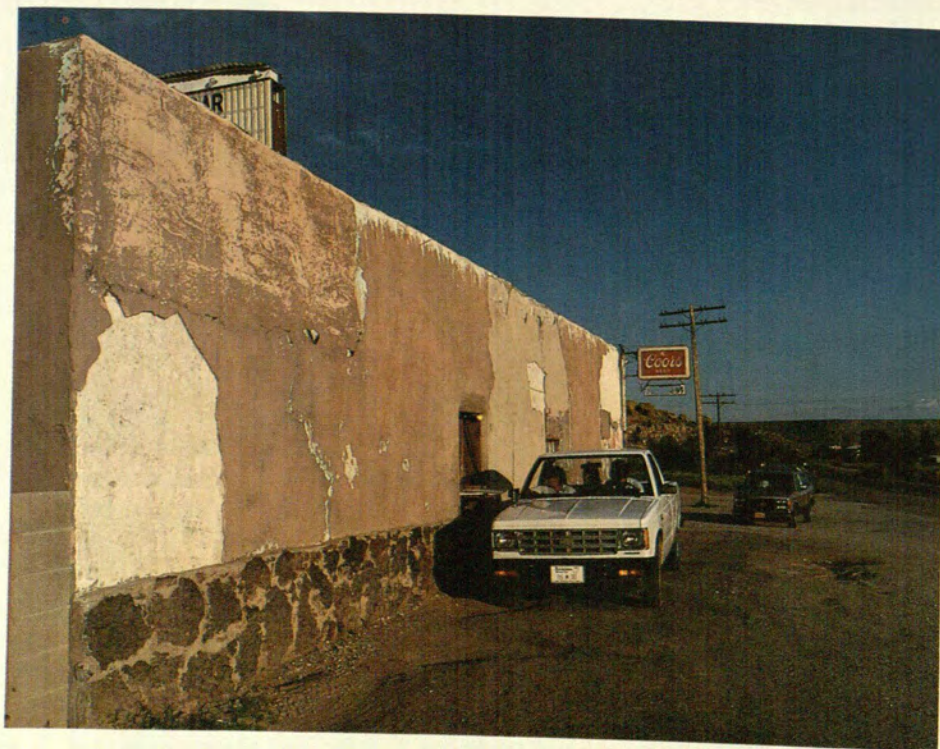
We stopped at Monument Valley for photographs. Hillerman got out of the car and stood looking at the great calm monoliths of red stone. "It just moves the spirit to see this," he said. The grandeur of this country runs through his books as a powerful undercurrent, about the same way it moves through the lives of Navajos: seldom dramatized, always present. Hillerman obviously finds the Navajo relationship to the land to be personally satisfying: "... that the only goal for man was beauty," he wrote in one book, "and that beauty was found only in harmony, and that this harmony of nature was a matter of dazzling complexity."

The complex landscape Hillerman admires includes people; it is not a coffee-table collection of scenic wonders. In *Dance Hall of the Dead* he writes about the rising sun striking both the Zuni Buttes and the yellow water tower at Black Rock. And when we drove past a wonderful formation of stone called Baby Rocks that looked like thousands of small red teeth, he loved both the stone and an old sign nearby. On the see-through sign the letter "C" was on the opposite side in the word "CAFE" so the word would look approximately right from either the east or west side (p. 95).

"I forget my social security number," he said. "I forget my wife's name. I forget my address. But I'll remember the café at Baby Rocks where the guy tried to compromise and please people coming from both directions."

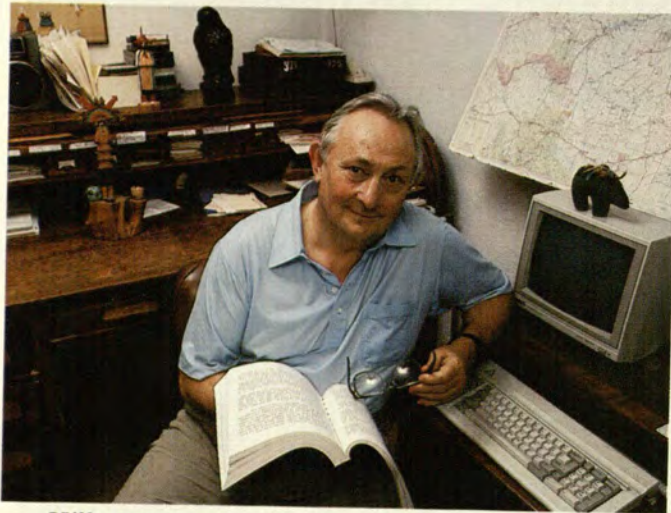
We crossed onto the Hopi reservation and dropped in at the Hopi Junior-Senior High School. There an English teacher had invited his kids to discuss *Talking God*, a book that involves the Smithsonian Institution, ancestral bones and a religious mask. The kids had decided that the book, like most of the mysteries, was deficient in romance.

("Well," Hillerman told me later in defense, "when I started writing these things I was raising six kids." If he has loosened up a little now that all the kids are grown, it's hard to tell; recently a friend read a new Hillerman book and said, "My God, he's moving toward eroticism: he's got them shaking hands.")

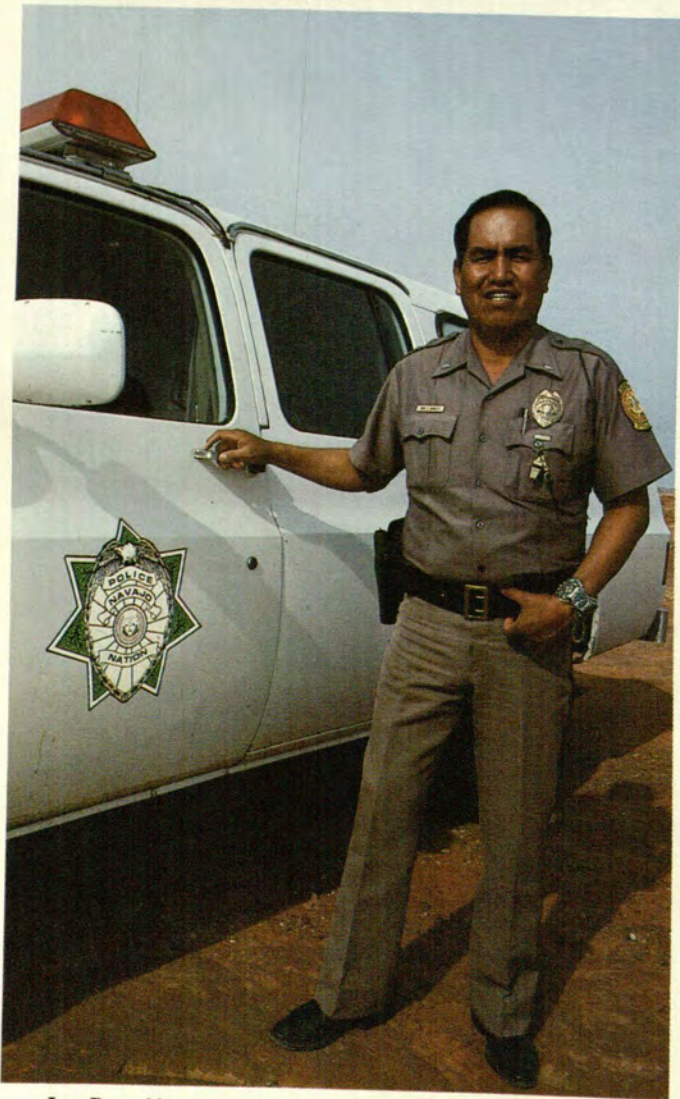


Bar in Budville, Arizona, was the scene of a real-life robbery and shooting. Hillerman knew the details of the crime, although it was not one of his invention.





Hillerman goes over manuscript in his study, where he keeps a reservation map propped on his computer.



Lt. Ben Shirley, Navajo tribal policeman stationed at Tuba City, testifies Hillerman's stories are accurate.

Many of the students had written alternative endings for the books, some solving the romance problem—“While aboard the plane, Janet became personal, she didn't mean to, but she did.” Hillerman wrote a long note back, which was posted on the wall under a headline: “LETTER FROM HILLERMAN.” “Where were you guys when I needed you!!!?” he had written amiably. He praised their alternative endings and went on: “I grew up way out in the country like you. . . . It never occurred to me that just regular people like me could write books. But you know better. You can do whatever you want to do.”

On five minutes' notice the school's 450 students poured into an auditorium and listened to Hillerman for half an hour, then mobbed him for autographs. It took him 15 minutes to get from the auditorium to the car, signing cheerfully all the way. “My class was pleased,” the English teacher said. “They took a break from Hawthorne to read Hillerman.”

At the far western side of the Navajo reservation is the town of Tuba City, Arizona. We got there late one afternoon. Tuba City is full of the curiosities of modern Indian life: there's a McDonald's just across the street from the old Tuba City Trading Post, not far from a bootlegger's shack. The mascot at Grey Hills High School, where most of the kids are Indian, is a knight in armor, and students are summoned from class by the chimes of Big Ben.

*“You can feel the goodness flow out of the songs”*

We arrived in Tuba City just in time for Hillerman to watch a group of Navajo, Hopi and Plains Indian high school students dance to a drum in the banquet room of a modern restaurant built as an octagon, like a hogan. Hillerman danced briefly and then listened intently to a remarkable 21-year-old Navajo named Irvin Tso (p. 102), who had begun learning to be a medicine man at the age of 5.

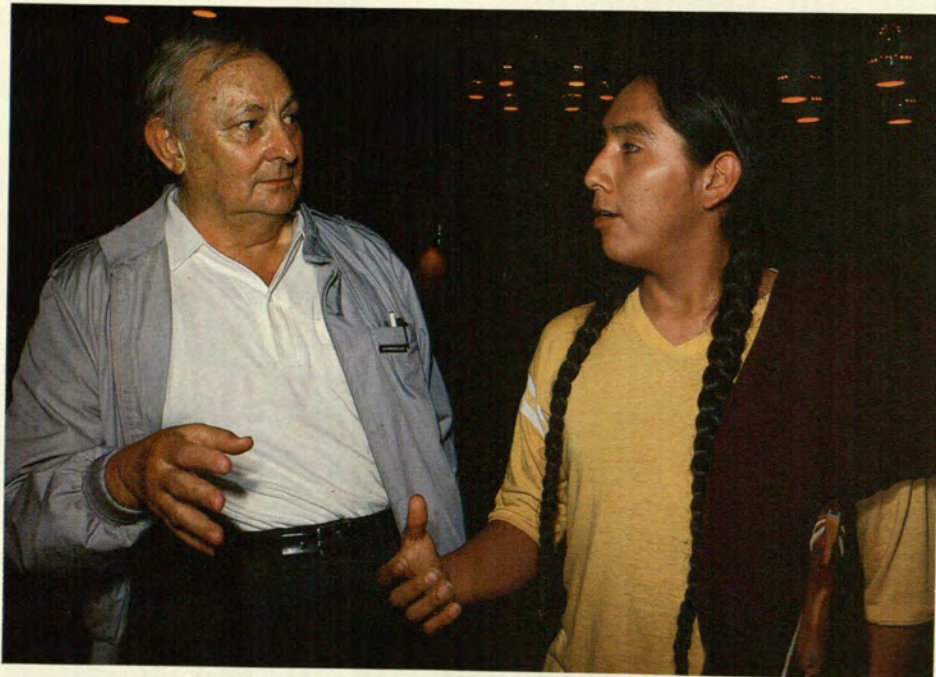
Tso was tall, slender and serious. He wore long braids and tiny earrings. He had just flown home from Ft. Lauderdale, where he had worked in a TV commercial for Levi's.

“Do you have a feeling when the healing is working?” Hillerman asked.

“I sense it when the patient is feeling it,” Tso said. “I can think about it: This patient is going to be well. You can feel the goodness flow out of the songs.”

Tso was at ease with all the crazy juxtapositions of the Navajo life. Besides singing the songs of healing for the people of his tribe, he was also auditioning for a role in the movie that Robert Redford is making of one of Hillerman's books, *The Dark Wind*. Like Hillerman, Tso had learned how to live in the world by riding it bareback.





Hillerman talks of healing with Irvin Tso, 21, who has been studying to become a Navajo medicine man—as has the Hillerman hero Jim Chee, a tribal policeman.

The movie was one of the most frequent topics of questions the next day, when Hillerman lectured at Grey Hills. Can we be in it? Are you going to be in it? Can they change it around? His answers were "Maybe," "No" and "When you sell a car to a used-car dealer he can take the bumper off if he wants to." Later he was more charitable: "You do a watercolor, then here comes a sculptor." The movie is scheduled to be released in 1991.

Hillerman was also questioned, shyly, about another theme that runs through his books: the role of witches in Navajo culture. Both Hillerman and Leaphorn are skeptical of the reality of witches: in the books, skinwalkers (witches that appear as animals) and other supernatural beings turn out to be crooks using superstitions to their own ends. But on the reservation Hillerman's attitude was ambivalent: he told an eerie skinwalker story himself, and listened without comment when, during our trip to Big Mountain, Ronald Horseherder described a woman who lived far up a red-rock canyon and left the tracks of a coyote where she walked.

After speeches at the school, and before driving to Big Mountain, Hillerman went down to the police station, a simple concrete-block building with white four-wheel-drive vans parked out back. Inside, blue-and-orange walls led to a drunk tank and cells where several men were doing short time in orange coveralls, and to a large conference room whose high walls were lined with the insignias of the many other government agencies the tribal police must work with. Hillerman

had been here several years before. "Looks the same," he said. "Same Wanted poster, only they made the guy look older."

Hillerman's Navajo police are often confronted with situations peculiar to their culture: they must be aware of the intricacies of clan structures, for instance, and some find help in troubled times from the tribe's medicine men. When I visited the Tuba City police station earlier in the month, I had found that the descriptions rang true.

"The stories are accurate," said Lt. Ben Shirley, who had a straight back and a formal manner. "It fits right in: the traditional cultures, the values."

To Shirley and many of the officers, one of the most difficult parts of the job is handling a corpse; the ghost of a person who dies "unprepared" haunts anyone who comes in contact with such a corpse. Hillerman reminds his readers of this in one book by having a Hopi policeman, unburdened by that particular belief, offer to handle a corpse so Jim Chee doesn't have to trouble his mind.

"When it is time to pick up a dead body," Shirley said, "it is difficult. The majority of the time there is no choice but to go through with it. Later I will consult with a medicine man, a priest or somebody. I will seek spiritual direction, to get strength again."

In Hillerman's books Navajo tracking abilities are a bit like the landscape: unremarked but natural to the scene. But just as some Navajo officers don't even speak the Navajo language, some can't tell tennis shoes from boots in the sand. "Just because you're an Indian



doesn't mean you're a good tracker," said Sgt. Larry Yazzie at Tuba City. Shirley had said that Yazzie was one of his best. Yazzie argued that it depended on the way you were brought up.

"We have been raised in open country," Yazzie said. "That way we learn to observe. I was raised as a shepherd, and you do so much of it from day to day—you have to learn to recognize the footprint of each sheep in your flock." Although these days the tracks of malefactors are photographed and put in the files, the trackers themselves remember footprints like faces. "When you say 'Lost Boys' [a loose Tuba City gang]," Yazzie said, "footprints start coming to mind."

Harriet Brown, a secretary in the Criminal Investigations Section, was listening to our conversation. She had one thing to say about the veracity of Hillerman's books: "In those books they have the sheriff and the FBI and everybody else. But it's usually the Navajo

police officer who figures out everything. And that's the way it is."

"I don't have any models for Chee or Leaphorn," Hillerman said, so I hadn't expected to come across a tall man with a "lanky, rawboned look," who enjoyed, as Hillerman wrote about Leaphorn, "the mild and abstract pleasure which the precise application of logic always brought to him." But when I was in Window Rock I had met a Navajo newspaper reporter whose life reminded me of Leaphorn's. Her name was Betty Reid. Like Leaphorn, she was skeptical about some parts of Navajo tradition; like Leaphorn her job cut across traditional beliefs—the closest Navajo word to "reporter," she said, was "gossiper." "If you are a traditional Navajo, that life is satisfying," she said. "If you are like me, with feet in both worlds, it is very different. It is sad to know Coyote is not really out there. It is sad that scientists say it is not true that people

Desert sand and scrub are typical Navajo landscape, made dramatic by outcrops like Ship Rock (opposite).





came from the bottom of the world through a reed.”

To Betty Reid romantic notions of the way Navajos live were fanciful constructions by *them*. The frustration in her voice reminded me of Leaphorn's anger at the anthropologist. “There's no romance to being a Navajo cop,” she said. “There's no romance to the witchery that happens out there. There's no romance to the Blessing Way. Even in the Blessing Way, you see a lot of mysticism, but actually, you're trying to heal yourself, and it's not nice to be ill. If you grew up in this life, it's a very tough life.”

For Ronald Horseherder it has been a tough life, and now he faces tough decisions. Late in the evening after our trip to Big Mountain, Horseherder went looking for Tony Hillerman. He needed advice. He found Hillerman leaving a Sing Dance at the school. “I haven't decided,” Horseherder said, with fervor, “whether to stay with my grandmother or go to college.”

Hillerman was unambiguous. He knew you have to confront *them* on their own ground. He still knows where he stands: in four days of traveling Hillerman had said only one thing to me that was not amiable. “Nothing bristles my hair more,” he had said, “than the damn ruling class.”

Now the two men, the *biligaana* and the Navajo, walked together through the tall darkness of the Western night, curious allies in a long conflict. “You can have a lot more impact,” Hillerman said, “if you go on to college and go into politics.”

They walked a little farther and it seemed as if Hillerman was explaining the theme of his work, talking to all the Navajos he knows and writes about, who walk in beauty with the Earth and who ride modern life bareback, picking up what they need and remembering tracks.

“You have what it takes,” Tony Hillerman said.

The town of Shiprock, New Mexico, known for this landmark, is also known now as home base for Jim Chee.

