

# Hosteen Klah

Medicine-man, Weaving Pioneer, and Cultural Preserver

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*Fig. 1. Hosteen Klah with one of his sandpainting weavings*

Hosteen Klah is a fascinating figure from Navajo history that few know about. I chose him as my subject, because the little I did know made me curious. With my location in the Southwest and a relatively unique access to Navajo rugs and culture, I felt that I could research a topic that few others would even consider with the rarity of Native weaving outside the Four Corners area. Hosteen Klah's life began a short time after the United States secured control of the Southwestern territories, but his life was irrevocably affected by the tumultuous Navajo lifestyle clashing with the American Manifest Destiny. This was a chance to delve into not only Navajo history and weaving, but also a portion of the United States' history that rarely gets much merit. Klah's love of learning and cultural preservation, combined with his initiative to challenge artistic norms, made him one of the most unique and interesting characters in recorded Navajo history.

***Writer's note on the use of Navajo vs Navaho:*** Throughout the paper, you will see both variants used. Living in the Southwest, I prefer the spelling, Navajo, but in many older texts Navaho is used. I preserved the spelling in anything directly quoted.

Navajo culture was a product of an ever changing landscape of raiding, trading, and subjugation. Navajo weaving developed and changed out of necessity to adapt to the ever shifting power struggles of the American southwest. Warring natives, Spanish settlers, Mexican Independence, and American influence (and eventual conquest) created an environment rife with contention.

Hosteen Klah was born after the dust had settled under the victorious hooves of the United States. His life came on the heels of a failed American experiment to assimilate the unwelcoming Navajos, along with the humbling of the once proudest and most feared group in the southwest. Weaving developed as an important commodity for the Navajo people as access to traders and tourists became more prominent along with the disappearance of their old raiding ways. Hosteen Klah's importance as a medicine man, combined with his cultural position as *nadle*, loosely translated as "one-who-has-been-changed," gave Klah a unique ability to perform weaving, traditionally a woman's work in Navajo life. Klah not only mastered the arts of medicine and weaving, but he radically altered the course of Navajo weaving culture with his depictions of the sacred sand paintings used by the *Hataalii* (medicine man), inciting fear and anger within a Navajo community that considered it sacrilege. Klah's desire for the preservation of Navajo traditions and knowledge further cemented his status as an important cultural icon for the Navajo people.

Hosteen Klah was born in the December of 1867 at Bear Mountain, near Fort Wingate outside the city of Gallup, New Mexico. Klah's mother was known by many nicknames throughout her life, but Ahson Tsosie (Slim Woman) is the best known. It is Navajo custom to wait until some unique characteristic develops before naming a child, so until Klah was four or five years old, he was simply known as Away Eskay (Baby Boy), a name given to all Navajo male babies before some sort of characteristic develops to suggest a name. It was discovered

that the young boy's dominant hand was his left, so he was given the name "Klah," which simply means "left-handed."

(Newcomb 1964: 77-78).

Klah's mother took part in the "Long Walk" to which the Navajo and some Apache were subjected. For the Navajo people, this was a forced march from their traditional homelands to a reservation chosen by the United States government at the Bosque Redondo.

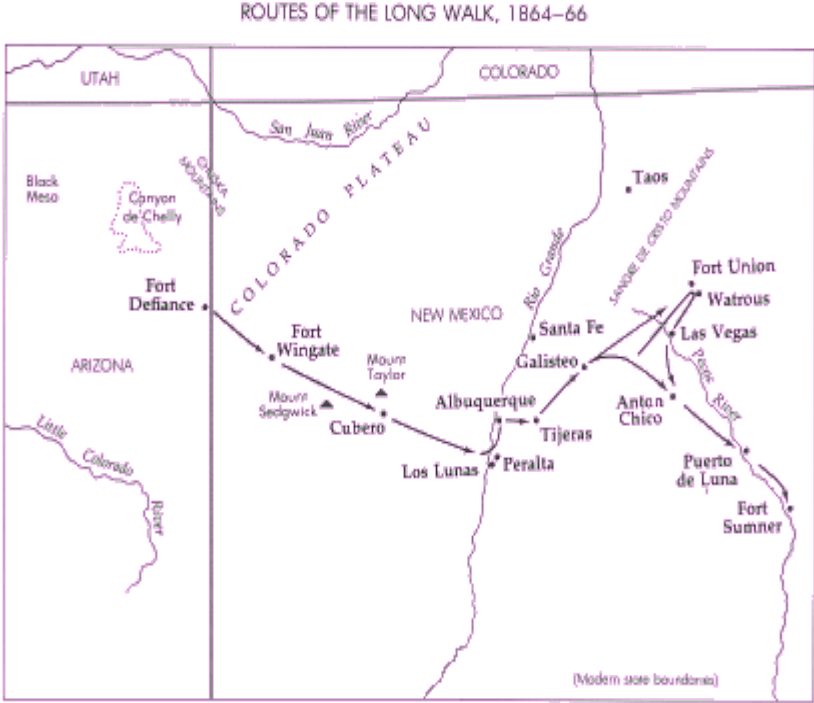


Fig. 2.

The goal was to "civilize" the nomadic peoples and to turn them into an agrarian society to prevent the raiding the Navajo were so famous for. The U.S. decided this was the only course of action after a failed peacekeeping mission into the Navajo territories that ended in the death of Klah's great grandfather, and legendary Navajo figure, Narbona. With the death of their greatest Navajo "leader"<sup>1</sup>, the younger generations of Navajo were angered and insulted. Mistrust of the United States' "peace keeping" efforts led to escalating violence between the Navajo and the Americans. Colonel John Washington, the commander in charge of the

<sup>1</sup> The Navajo had no chieftains or leaders, but they chose the revered Narbona to engage in all discussions about peace treaties with the United States due to his age and past status as a great warrior. Not everyone agreed with him, particularly the younger generations that hadn't had their fill of raiding, so Narbona's treaties held no sway over some, which further incited the United States' wrath. Narbona had to make a second peace treaty with the increasingly irate Americans, but it ended tragically. An argument over a horse led to the Americans firing on the fleeing Navajo, slaying their greatest "leader" in the process. (2006 Sides: 189-191, 272-275)

expedition that led to the bloody end of Narbona, put it bluntly when he said that the Navajo must learn to “cultivate the earth for an honest livelihood, or be destroyed.” (Sides 2006: 248)

Slash and burn strategies, under the lead of Kit Carson, were employed to starve the Navajos into submission. Crops were burned and their sheep were slaughtered, bringing many to the brink of starvation. After their surrender, the Navajo were marched to Fort Sumner in the Bosque Redondo. The walk was harsh and most did not know where they were going or even how far the march would take them. Over 200 Navajo died on the trek, and many more barely got there, with exhaustion and starvation prevalent. The Long Walk and ensuing famine was devastating to Navajo culture for many reasons, but the loss of many of their elders was the most crippling. With no written language, everything was passed down orally and the loss of their eldest meant the loss of much of their history, medicine, and their greatest artists.

The Bosque Redondo was a doomed experiment from the start. The unfamiliar land was barren and difficult to farm. The Navajo themselves were unskilled farmers and after a few years of failed crops, desertions and rampant famine, it became clear to the Americans in charge that it was a lost cause. Multiple treaties were eventually signed and the Navajo were allowed to return to the sacred homeland of the *Dine* (Navajo word for themselves, simply “the people”). The Navajo were a conquered and demoralized group, but their proven aptitude for adaptation showed and they acquiesced to their newly imposed lifestyles and again began to flourish. “They weathered a crisis that proved fatal to many a tribe -- that of final adjustment to the conquering American.” (Amsden 1934: 169)

In 1868, after being relocated to their traditional homeland, the Navajo were given provisions to help them re-acclimate to the loss of their flocks due to the forced slaughter performed as punishment by the United States. The Navajo grew so dependent on sheep for food, clothing, and trade that the livestock reductions that eventually forced their surrender had crippled their means of survival and brought starvation to many. “When the government sheep

finally arrived, and each Navaho man, woman, and child was given two. So Klah, at the age of one year, became a sheep owner.” (Newcomb 1964: 78)

Klah’s childhood was similar to any other Navajo children of a post Bosque Redondo era. He helped with the harvest of the crops, the storage of the corn and beans to hide them from Ute and Apache raiders and aided during the shearing season. The United States set up schools for the Native children to attend with a two-fold goal of acclimation to the American way of life and as protection from the still “savage” tribes that would raid for livestock and people. Klah and his sister never attended; they were needed by the family to help with chores and harvest time. (Newcomb 1964: 84). Klah instead learned the life of a *Hataalii* and a weaver.

Klah’s uncle was a *Hataalii*. “The general public calls these individuals medicine men, but the Navajos call them *singers* because the singing that accompanies every important aspect of Navajo ritual is considered one indispensable element.” (Wyman 1983: 16). He was one of the few remaining that knew the Hail Chant. After the Long Walk and devastation at the Bosque Redondo, many of the old *Hataalii* were gone, and along with them, many of the sacred chants were forgotten. Klah was often called upon to join his aged uncle to help in performing the ceremonies for the sick. He was one of the youngest boys to know the entire chant. “He



Fig. 3. A *Hataalii* carefully pouring the colored sand for his drypainting.

could direct the sand-paintings, sing the correct prayer chants and conduct the rites by the time he was ten years old.” (1964 Newcomb: 84-85). Klah was an eager student and would absorb whatever he could learn:

“The religious practice Klah learned centered around ceremonies called ‘chants’ or ‘sings.’ These were curing rites, often several days in length, which incorporated songs, myths, dance, medicinal plants, and ritual procedures, coordinated by a medicine man and his assistants for the benefit of a patient. Central to most rites were the impermanent dry paintings made on the floor of the ceremonial hut from sand, ground stones, and shells in a variety of colors. These sand paintings were often several feet in diameter and served as temporary altars for ritual actions. They were considered accurate depictions of Navajo gods and mythological events.” (Roscoe 1988: 135)

From his aunt he learned herbalism:

“She was a learned herbalist and could give a name to almost everything that grew within her range of travel. She had ways of telling which plants were poisonous, which were food for animals or birds and which could be used by humans for food or medicine. She taught Klah that everything growing had some useful purpose, that even the nightshade, the poison sumac, and the yellow dock could be used for making dye for their blankets. He never forgot her teachings.” (Newcomb 1964: 85)

Due to the increased raiding of the Utes, Klah was sent as a young boy to stay with an Apache uncle for a year or two because his family feared for him. His uncle was a medicine man that knew an Apache variant of the Wind Chant. Despite their tribal differences, the Apache and Navajo languages are from the Athabaskan language group, so Klah had little difficulty understanding him. Klah was again charged with helping with simple rites and chanting. While helping and learning from his uncle, Klah had a fateful accident. The young boy

was riding along a ditch bank where the footing gave way and Klah tumbled down along with his pony. Several broken bones later, Klah would be staying with his uncle longer than expected. His aunt and uncle aided him in whatever way they could, but it was here that a significant discovery would be made. “It was during this period of invalidism that Klah was discovered to be a hermaphrodite.” (1964 Newcomb: 97)<sup>2</sup>. He was, nevertheless, now considered a revered figure among his people.

Klah was considered a *nadle*, among the Navajo, or a *berdache* “the term used by anthropologists for those American Indians, in tribes across the continent, whose lifestyles bridged men’s and women’s social roles.” (1988 Roscoe: 127). This status was favored among the Navajo people, as Klah was capable of combining the aspects of both the feminine and masculine. “He was expected to master all the knowledge, skill and the leadership of a man and also all of the skills, ability and the intuition of a woman. Klah during his lifetime lived up to these expectations in every way.” (1964 Newcomb: 97)

With his unique position, Klah became the most respected *Hataalii* of his time. He mastered at least eight of the complicated and sacred chants, whereas most medicine men could only master one or two in their lifetime. His desire for knowledge led him to all parts of the reservation; if another chanter performed his rites a little differently, Klah was there to learn his customs and ways. Klah spent twenty-six years learning and practicing before he was the leading chanter on a Nightway or Yeibichai (“Grandfather of the Gods”) ceremony. “When he held his first ceremony, he asked all critics to watch for errors. As there were none, he was an accredited Yeibichai chanter.” (Newcomb: 112). At the age of 49, his travels and studies of

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<sup>2</sup> In his article on The American Indian Berdache, Will Roscoe (147) argues that it is unlikely that Klah was actually a hermaphrodite. *Nadle* is a very broad term. Its all-inclusiveness covers hermaphrodites, transvestites, asexual, and homosexual titles. He argues that if Klah were a hermaphrodite, his condition would have been discovered sooner. Klah is also cited to having mentioned infantile emasculation by the Utes to Gladys Reichard and because he would wear both men and women’s clothing. Roscoe also postulates that Klah chose to identify as such to “align himself with the ‘ideal’ *nadle* of mythology.”



other chanters was completed, and he declared that there was nothing left to learn. To celebrate and demonstrate his knowledge, he planned his greatest ceremony.

“This fall I will hold the greatest Yeibichai that has ever been held on the Reservation since before the Navajos were taken to the Bosque Redondo, and I will ask everyone to come and criticize. If there is any mistake or omission, I will start studying all over again.” (1964 Newcomb: 117)

Over a thousand Navajos came to watch Klah’s ceremony. Gifts were brought and camps were set up. Preparations for the ceremony were immense and a makeshift village was constructed to accommodate the volume of guests. Navajo, and a handful of “white” traders and friends, from all over the reservation came for varying reasons: some wanted healing, some to critique Klah’s work, and still others came to peddle their wares of silver or horses. Great gatherings like this were a rarity, so most came for the spectacle and socialization. The large ceremony lasted the traditional nine days of a full Yeibichai. The final day consisted of Klah giving away his wealth to all who attended, groups of dancers dressed in costume and ceremonial garbs, singing and a prayer to greet the new day. “It had cost Klah one-third of his wealth, but it had established his standing as the greatest Yeibichai chanter on the Navaho Reservation, and it also had spread his fame to the farthest reaches of Navaho country.” (1964 Newcomb: 139)<sup>3</sup>

Hosteen Klah’s ability as a chanter and sand painter was unparalleled, but his unique *nadle* status gave him another avenue for greatness: weaving. Traditionally considered women’s work in the Navajo culture, weaving is occasionally taken up by men, particularly those

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<sup>3</sup> A Yeibichai ceremony is considered the most arduous and difficult of all chants to perform with complex sand paintings, hundreds of chants to memorize and execute flawlessly, and particular motions/dances. A rough breakdown of what occurs on each of the nine days is cited in the Navajo Ceremonials link in the Works Consulted section at the end of this work.

men that are blessed with gifts of both sexes. Klah learned to weave from his mother and his Hopi grandfather while the other children were at school. One of his chores around the house was to help his mother and sister with weaving so they would have blankets for market. After the Long Walk, Navajo life had drastically changed. Gone were the days of raiding for sheep, horses or even women and children. Weaving was now a primary source of income for a Navajo family.

The combined tragedies of the Long Walk, the Bosque Redondo, and the forced livestock reductions had crippled Navajo weaving. Prior to the Long Walk, Navajo weaving was a craft defined around one's artistic merit. After returning from the Bosque Redondo, it became a commodity. The ever shrewd Navajo responded to this demand with an increasing supply of blankets, many being woven to the specifications of certain industrious traders and the demands of the American public.<sup>4</sup>

The first blanket that Klah had ever completed by himself was in 1893 during the famed Chicago World's Fair.<sup>5</sup> The various regions of the United States and associated territories set up exhibits to show the local arts and culture in a large building called the World's Columbian

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<sup>4</sup> Amsden contends that this period after the Long Walk/Bosque Redondo is the end of the Navajo weaving as an artistically formed craft, and its emergence as a lifeless and commercialized product. Instead of weavers creating blankets with artistic integrity, they are meeting the demands of traders who want rugs to look a certain way for their clientele in the east. Here we see the transition from blanket to rug. The art itself greatly suffers, as cheaper supplies and pre-made designs done by a trader, not the true artists, are given to the Navajo weavers to produce a rug with "proper barbaric appeal" for the white tourists. Amsden's vitriol for this period in Navajo weaving is evident in his amusing diatribe on the subject (170), but as Reichard lays it out so clearly on the noticed increase of sandpainting weavings after Klah's success: "Then, too, the dollar, dangling at the end of a string pulled ever shorter and shorter, has the same effect on the Navajo as upon ourselves. It supersedes all other values, be they social, moral or spiritual." (1936 Reichard: 161)

<sup>5</sup> The Coolidges say, "in 1892, Hosteen Tla [Klah] essayed his first weaving." in secret. The purpose was to copy a "very perfect and ancient" blanket found by an explorer. The Coolidges contend that Klah wove the rug in just half a day. (106). Newcomb disagrees with much of their information stating that she believed that "Dan Coolidge's interpreter did not give him the correct interpretation." It is impossible to weave a rug in half a day, and no novice could attempt the intricate designs. Klah had already been known as a weaver, so there was no need to do it in secret. This may have been his first solo weaving, but there is no definitive evidence. (114)

Exposition. The territory of New Mexico wished to show the native crafts of the Navajo and the Pueblo. The man responsible for setting up the New Mexico exhibits didn't wish to "bother" with female weavers, so he found a handful of male Pueblo weavers, a female Pueblo potter (he could not find any men capable of pottery) and he "looked for a male weaver -- apparently unaware that such a man would have to be, in Navajo terms, a *nadle*." (1988 Roscoe 136).

Through word of mouth, he learned of Hosteen Klah's ability and invited him to attend. Klah was excited to go for he had not really travelled outside his homelands and never to this distance. The blanket was deliberately woven at a slow pace so the weaving process would last through the summer of the World's Fair. At the Fair's conclusion, he was allowed to keep the blanket which he gifted to his sister, and she, in turn, gifted to her daughter, Mrs. Jim. (1964 Newcomb: 113)<sup>6</sup>

Navajo blankets were very popular with the Americans even when the Navajo were at their most despised. Lieutenant James Simpson was the first man responsible for mapping the Navajo country. He detested the Southwest and didn't care for the people living there. "It seems anomalous to me that a nation living in such miserably constructed mud lodges should, at the same time, be capable of making probably, the best blankets in the world!" (2006 Sides: 294). Now that peace had been made with the Navajos, access to their goods was more readily available, and demand for their unmatched craft had risen dramatically.

Klah's weaving talents became known, and in 1915, he was asked to copy a weaving from an older fragment found in the Chaco Canyon by the Hyde Expedition. The finished rug

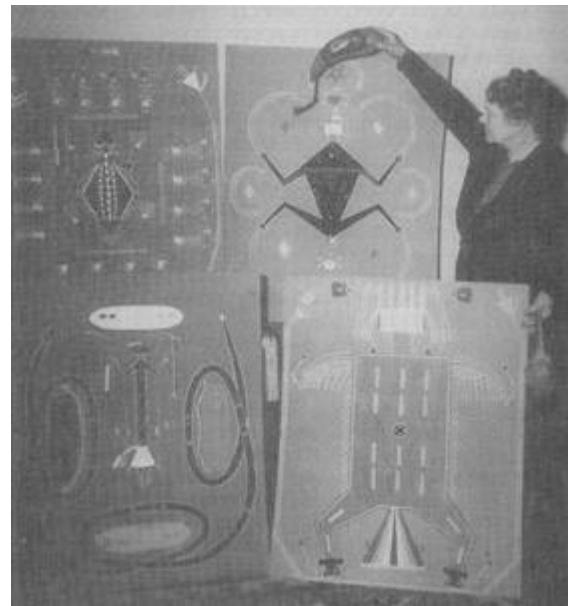
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<sup>6</sup> Sides has an interesting anecdote from the 1893 Chicago World's Fair. While wandering the exhibit halls, the Navajo delegation stumbled upon a Canadian pavilion where another group of natives was exhibiting. These were the Athapaskans, who were not the least bit excited to see the Navajos. Both groups were surprised that they could completely understand each other despite their geological differences. The Athapaskans stated, "We split up a long time ago, and it is said that if we ever saw each other again, the world would be destroyed." Unnerved, neither group sought the other out for the remainder of the Fair. (281)

was nine by eleven feet and in various shades of red, green, blue, and natural tones.<sup>7</sup> The very next year Klah created a rug that caused a commotion among the *Hataalii* and other Navajo. He wove a blanket featuring Yeibichai dancers. Others demanded Klah hold an “evil-expelling” rite and destroy the blanket. The furor would not die down until the rug was off the reservation. (1964 Newcomb: 114-115).

Klah befriended the owners of the local trading post, Arthur and Franc Newcomb. The Newcomb Trading Post was one of many trading posts on the reservation where many of the local Navajo would go for provisions or tourists would come for Navajo crafts. Franc Newcomb, in particular, became great friends with Klah.

Newcomb knew of the loss of much of the Navajo culture, in particular their medicinal rites, and she wanted a way to record and preserve them. She was allowed to sit in on many of Klah’s chants and she mentally recorded notes about everything she saw. The delicately and precisely formed sandpaintings were of particular interest to her. As photography and writing utensils were not allowed, she tried to commit the intricate designs and patterns to her memory so she could later transcribe them.



*Fig. 4. Franc Johnson Newcomb lecturing from her large sandpaintings.*

Sandpaintings are to be temporary, used only during the ceremony, then immediately destroyed and cleansed. “So important is the transitoriness of the sandpainting that it is used for only the shortest possible amount of time...The first thing done with it when finished -- it is

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<sup>7</sup> Newcomb sites this rug in her biography of Klah (1964) as believing it is still in the Boston museum, but I could find no record or images of the rug. (115)

sprinkled with cornmeal, and the Singer walks on it -- ruins it." (1936 Reichard: 158). Recording the sacred drawings of the gods was sacrilegious to the general Navajo community, but the ever progressive Klah offered Newcomb his help in creating accurate reproductions after seeing her struggle with her first attempts. Klah was a proponent of the preservation of a culture that had suffered great losses just before his birth. He knew of the importance for future generations to have access to their ancestral heritage, and with his help and Newcomb's dedication, her collection of watercolor sandpaintings grew to nearly five hundred strong. (1964 Newcomb:126)

It was during one of these collaborative sessions that Newcomb asked Klah why he did not weave a rug with a ceremonial design. "He said that the sacred symbols should not be put into a rug that would be placed on the floor and walked on day after day. I assured him that a blanket of this type would never be used on the floor but would be hung on the wall of some museum." (1964 Newcomb: 157). Klah gave the matter some thought, and after seeing no misfortune come to Franc Newcomb for her paintings of the sacred designs, he agreed. He had achieved the highest status of the Hataalii and knew nothing would happen to him.

Klah's first design was to be "The Whirling Log Painting," a sandpainting in the Yeibichai ceremony. The looms his family used for weaving were not big enough. He needed to erect a loom large enough for a twelve foot by twelve foot square piece, so wood was brought from the mountain. The rug itself needed the right materials:

"Klah insisted that the rug have a background of native tan wool that was not dyed. A rug of this size would require twenty pounds of raw wool, and as this tan color was only found on the underside of the brown sheep, it did not seem possible to collect this much. Arthur and Klah motored to every trading post on our side of the Reservation, buying a few pounds of tan wool at each until they had the right amount." (1964 Newcomb: 157).

Natural dyes of indigo, cochineal, and goldenrod were procured, while Klah's mother began spinning the wool into the finest yarns. Klah began work on his first ceremonial tapestry and while not working on it, a canvas was fashioned to cover it.

"Many of the other Navahos in our valley were critical of this project as they thought the making of an accurate sand painting in permanent form would bring disaster to the entire tribe. But Klah was too powerful in medicine-man status for them to say anything to him, so they voiced their complaints to Arthur, who became really worried for fear some fanatic would slash the rug and destroy the loom before the work could be completed. He hired a man to stay with Klah and guard the loom at night, but Klah was never worried. He chanted his prayers and said that nothing would happen -- nothing did!" (1964 Newcomb: 158).

While the tapestry was still on the loom, a woman named Mrs. Gillette, who was looking for rare and unique Navajo work, was shown the Whirling Log design Klah was creating. She agreed to buy the rug right on the spot. The rug was sold under the agreement that Gillette could have the rug after it was shown at the Navaho Ceremonial in Gallup. That September, the rug won the blue ribbon for rugs of its type. After taking the rug home, Mrs. Gillette was so excited about the piece, that she immediately commissioned Klah for two more pieces to complete a collection of sandpaintings she had seen in a ceremony. Klah was now a weaver of ceremonial rugs. (1964 Newcomb: 159)

Before Mrs. Gillette's order for the weaving of two more sandpainting rugs had arrived, Klah had already begun a second work. This was to be a depiction of a sandpainting belonging to the Hail Chant. While on display in Gallup, this piece was purchased by a woman that would become very important to Klah and the future of Navajo culture. This woman was Mary Cabot Wheelwright of Boston. She was intrigued by Navajo religion and wanted Klah to teach her more. Wheelwright went on tours through the reservation and visited many times to witness ceremonies and learn from the Navajo. Klah also permitted her to record the spoken word of

his ceremonial chants. “It was not long before they determined to create a permanent record of Klah’s and other singers’ ritual knowledge.” (Wheelwright Museum. History)

Word of Klah’s prowess as a weaver had gotten around and orders were coming in for tapestries at a rate that Klah could not fill. “He decided to hold the full nine-day Yeibichai ceremony over his two nieces, invoking the protection of the immortals for their future activities.” (1964 Newcomb: 162). He gave his loom and a second duplicate he had made to each of his nieces, Mrs. Sam and Mrs. Jim.<sup>8</sup> Klah then had a loom large enough to hold a rug fifteen feet by fifteen feet made for himself.

Klah watched over his nieces as they wove to make sure there were no errors in the sacred designs, “and when the rugs were finished, he sang the Hozhonie [“good luck”] prayers over the girls to banish all evil influences. But even with all of this ceremonial protection, there were older Navahos who expected the girls to be afflicted with blindness because of gazing too long at the sacred symbols or perhaps to become paralyzed in their arms for weaving these symbols into a rug.” (1964 Newcomb: 162). Years passed, and neither girl suffered from any ailments, so other weavers began weaving “figure blankets” in the Yei (roughly “god or spirit”) designs, but exact copies of the sandpaintings were still not done by anyone outside Klah’s family. (1964 Newcomb: 162)<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>8</sup> Klah’s sister had two daughters, Gladys and Irene. The two daughters married two brothers named Sam and Jim Manuelito, so daughters came to be known as Mrs. Sam and Mrs. Jim, respectively. The brothers were grandsons to Manuelito, who was the son-in-law of the great Narbona, Klah’s great-grandfather. (1983 Wyman: 265)

<sup>9</sup> The Coolidges note, “There are two schools of ceremonial blanket-makers -- those who endeavor to make each rug a perfect replica of a sand-painting and so avoid the anger of the gods, and those who purposely change the details of the design in order to escape the curse.” While individual figures and parts of sandpaintings have been woven before, Klah was the first to weave the sandpainting designs with perfection. Most others choose the intentional error or weaving of incomplete designs to avoid offending the gods. Even then a medicine-man must perform ceremonies to expel evil and avoid being cursed. Hosteen Klah was “the first man to dare the wrath of the gods.” (105) Klah was able to perform both the weaving and the ceremonies on himself as a *nadle*.

In 1931, a devastating event for Klah and Navajo culture occurred. Klah's understudy, Beaal Begay, died suddenly and unexpectedly. This was a tremendous loss to Klah, as Begay was perfecting much of Yeibichai ceremony and relieving the elder Klah of many of the tasks involved. Klah felt he was too old to begin teaching another student and was greatly saddened by the death. Mary Wheelwright came to visit shortly after Begay's death. "She asked Klah what he thought would happen to his ceremony and all of his paraphernalia and he said he did not know. Then she asked if he would be willing to have it stored in a place where everyone could see it and study its use if they wished. Klah was much pleased with this idea." (1964 Newcomb: 187).

Wheelwright began construction on a museum in Santa Fe, New Mexico. "The structure itself was fashioned as nearly like a Yeibichai ceremonial hogan as the architect could plan it and still have it large enough to display the sand paintings, rugs, tapestries, cases of ceremonial articles, clothing, jewelry, and everything pertaining to Navaho life and religion." (1964 Newcomb: 213)

Unfortunately, Klah did not live to see the completed museum. In late February 1937, Klah came down with pneumonia, from which he did not recover.

"He then asked for his family to gather around him, and slowly, with many pauses for breath, he told them what he wanted done with his medicine bundles, sacred paraphernalia, and property. He asked Arthur to see that he had a "white" burial and asked his relatives to say the traditional prayers and chants for his departing spirit. His voice finally faded and he sank into a coma from which he did not wake." (1964 Newcomb: 209)



Hosteen Klah died on the second of March, 1937.<sup>10</sup> His family and friends held a burial for him and four of his relatives camped out at the burial site chanting prayers to accompany his spirit along the Rainbow Trail. Mary Wheelwright requested that his body be disinterred to the agreement of Klah's family and his body was moved to a knoll beside the newly constructed museum. Native plants that Klah used in his ceremonies were then planted around his final resting place.

There was a final weaving that was two thirds done when Klah passed. His family finished the weaving and sold it to pay for the funeral costs. Klah's various articles were collected for storage at the museum along with many of Franc Newcomb's watercolor sandpaintings. Over the years many sacred artifacts and ceremonial items belonging to other medicine men were donated to the museum and today it stands as a place to preserve and display Navajo crafts and items of cultural relevance so that the future generations may experience and learn from it.



Fig. 5. Hosteen Klah, 1937 Nightsky from the Shooting Way. His final weaving completed by his nieces.

Mrs. Sam and Mrs. Jim both continued to weave after Klah's death. According to evidence Wyman (266) received, Mrs. Sam continued to weave sandpainting tapestries along with her daughter, Ruby. Mrs. Jim returned to the traditional Two Gray Hills style. Mrs. Sam's work regularly received blue ribbons in Gallup. "A correspondent in Farmington, New Mexico, in

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<sup>10</sup> Klah's listed death date is February 27th on virtually every source I can find. Franc Newcomb never lists the exact day that he dies in Klah's biography, only the day he gets pneumonia. A cursory reading shows that he lives a couple more days in her version of the story, and as she was by his bedside at the time of death, there shouldn't be any speculation. Upon further discoveries, I found a brief type-written letter by Newcomb entitled *Hosteen Klah: Medicine-man and Weaver* which was possibly part of an earlier draft of the biography she would eventually write. Here she clearly states that he dies on March 2nd. (Newcomb: web)

February of 1979 said, 'Mrs. Manuelito [Mrs. Sam] can no longer talk, a condition her neighbors say was brought about because she dared to weave these sacred designs.' (1983 Wyman: 266)

Though Hosteen Klah never married or had children, his legacy will live on. Klah's mastery of all things *Hataalii* made him a powerful and respected figure in the community; his status as a *nadle* brought him great power, but his controversial weavings made him a pioneer. He certainly was not the first to weave sacred images into a rug, however, he was considered the best. Weaving the precise patterns required to perfectly replicate a ceremonial sandpainting took dedication and strength to defy the Navajo taboo. Klah's influence inspired others to begin weaving the sacred ceremonial figures into rugs. His was a life dedicated to the pursuit of knowledge and the perfection of one's craft, but his greatest achievement will be one of cultural preservation. He embodied the Navajo spirit of adaptation and he forged relationships with other like-minded individuals to prevent the loss of tradition and to further develop the future generations by giving them access to a cultural history that might otherwise never be remembered. Fortunately, a portion of his knowledge was recorded and stored by his friends and family and kept at the Wheelwright Museum in Santa Fe, where Hosteen Klah keeps sharing and teaching in spirit.

Brian Benzel has been working in the rug industry since early 2000 at Serafian's Oriental Rugs in Albuquerque, New Mexico. It first began as a part time job while pursuing a degree in Applied Mathematics with a minor in Physics from the University of New Mexico, but soon after receiving his degree, he decided that rug cleaning sounded like much more fun. Since beginning his career at Serafian's Oriental Rugs, he has helped the cleaning operation grow from washing half a dozen rugs in a week to the 2015 move into an 11,000 square foot facility to accommodate the growing spatial needs for Serafian's cleaning pursuits. He has helped refine the evolution of equipment and methods employed. Brian is involved in all facets of the business, including retail sales, rug cleaning, rug repair, along with financial management and decisions. Brian's desire to learn all aspects of the business has lead him to join in many rug cleaning conventions to explore the many different techniques employed in an industry with no definitive science and methodology.

Notable educational accreditations:

Ausehrelan Cleaning System at the School of Surface Technologies in Berthoud, CO

Master Rug Cleaner program at Oriental Rug Cleaning Company in Dallas, TX

Introduction to Rug Repair at Robert Mann Oriental Rugs in Denver, CO

Intermediate Rug Repair at Robert Mann Oriental Rugs

Navajo Rug Repair at Robert Mann Oriental Rugs

Dying for Rug Repairs at Robert Mann Oriental Rugs

Spot Dying for Oriental Rugs at the School of Surface Technologies

Wool Safe certification

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## **Images:**

**Fig. 1.** From: <<http://santafeselection.com/blog/2013/02/02/against-all-odds-the-birth-of-a-national-treasure/klah-and-textile>> accessed October 2015

**Fig. 2.** From: <<http://www.irwinator.com/126/wdoc65.htm>> accessed October 2015

**Fig. 3.** From: <<http://navajopeople.org/navajo-sand-painting.htm>> accessed October 2015

**Fig . 4.** From: <<http://www.francnewcomb.org/page-5/>> accessed October 2015

**Fig. 5.** From: <<https://www.ohio.edu/museum/collect/weavings.html>> accessed October 2015