

By Richard J. Anderson

In 1970 I was a young missionary serving in a remote area of the Navajo Nation in the southwestern United States. The past year had been filled with new and exciting gospel experiences. My love of the desert lands and the Navajo people had grown immensely. The beauty of the Southwest quickly touched my soul. I knew that this was where the Lord had called me.

One night my companion and I returned home to find a note on our door from the man at the trading post. The note said the mission president had called and had asked us to call him back, so we immediately went over to the trading post and returned his call. The president informed us that we were to open an area that had not had missionaries for over seven years. I asked where we would live. He said we would need to find a place.

That posed a challenge. The desert land—dotted with Navajo hogans

SACRAMENT MEETING IN A HOGAN

As missionaries, we barely had a place to live. How would we find somewhere to meet for church?

(circular homes made of rock or timbers and mud) often miles apart—would not easily yield a place for us to stay. This was to be a full act of faith.

Finding a Home

Since we didn't yet have a new home, we continued to live in our old area with the new elders who had

been called to work there. When we weren't teaching the people, we traveled around our new area in search of a place to live. Our new field of labor was about 25 miles away from our old area. We drove a pickup truck that bounced along the washboard dirt roads as we sang "Ye Elders of Israel" and "Scatter Sunshine."

We became somewhat discouraged with our inability to find a place to live. After prayer and fasting, we finally asked the man who operated the trading post in our new area if he knew of anywhere we could set up our missionary home. He told us that there was an abandoned hogan close to the trading post. We followed his directions to the place and found an old, partially collapsed hogan with rocks caving in on the side. It needed work, but we were young and excited to be on the Lord's errand, so we determined to make this our home.

PHOTOGRAPH BY CLAUDIO VENTRELLA / ISTOCK / THINKSTOCK

First, however, we needed the community's acceptance. We knew that to the Navajo, hogans were not just homes; they also had spiritual significance. With that in mind, we asked the people in the area how they felt about our living in this hogan. We received a most gracious welcome.

We then came to another decision: this was to be not only our home but also the Lord's house where we could meet for Sunday services.

Building a Chapel

We wanted to make our church house special. This was to become a sacred place. We dug a deep hole where we could mix mud to reattach the stones to each other and build up the broken wall. The trader, not a member of the Church, donated white lime and white cement with which we painted the circular interior mud walls.

Then came the problem of furniture. The mission supplied two beds and

some pots and pans, but we would need different furniture for church meetings. We began gathering chairs from wherever we could find them and amassed a collection of every kind of chair one might imagine—some wood and some metal, all very old and rickety. We found some old lumber lying by the roadside and fashioned it into a pulpit and a sacrament table. The sacrament table was about a foot tall, since that was all the lumber we could find.





This Navajo hogan is similar to the one that the author and his companion used as a home and that became a dedicated meetinghouse for the growing Navajo membership.

At one point we heard that one of the two non-LDS churches in the area was getting a new piano, so we asked the reverend of that congregation what they were going to do with their old piano. When he said he had no plans, we asked if he would consider giving it to us, and he answered, “That would be a good thing to do.” We hauled the piano to our hogan.

With instructions from our mission president, we dedicated the hogan for Sunday worship services. Each Sunday, we created a chapel out of our living quarters by piling one bed on top of the other, stacking all of our belongings on the beds, and draping old white sheets from the ceiling to the floor to hide all those items. We covered the sacrament table with white cloth and set up two rows of chairs that looked like an antique store collection.

Building a Congregation of Saints

At first, my companion and I would say all the prayers, lead the music, bless and pass the sacrament, and give the talks. I served in that area long enough to see many baptisms.

Soon members learned to give simple, sincere talks in our meetings. A young man, having recently received the Aaronic Priesthood and been ordained to the office of priest, began to help bless the sacrament.

Sundays became a new, glorious experience to me. In that humble place, we offered up our sacraments and worship on His holy day (see D&C 59:9–12). We experienced what Isaiah proclaimed:

“If thou turn away . . . from doing thy pleasure on my holy day; and call the sabbath a delight, the holy of the Lord, honourable; and shalt honour him, . . .

“Then shalt thou delight thyself in the Lord; and I will cause thee to ride upon the high places of the earth, and feed thee with the heritage of Jacob thy father” (Isaiah 58:13, 14).

We indeed rode upon a “high place” in the desert.

What started with two members and a few investigators grew into a Sunday worship group of more than 30 loving Saints. They were drawn in by the restored gospel of Jesus Christ,

the fellowship of other worshippers, and the Holy Spirit that was ever present in our chapel. We were living the message given by the Lord in April 1829: “Verily, verily, I say unto you, as I said unto my disciples, where two or three are gathered together in my name, as touching one thing, behold, there will I be in the midst of them—even so am I in the midst of you” (D&C 6:32). This hogan became hallowed ground, a sacred place to me.

Many years later I was called to serve as the president of a mission that covered the same ground. The places I knew were now gone. The hogan—our old rock church—no longer stood. But what will stand forever is my never-ending gratitude and respect for those humble Saints and investigators. They came to a different kind of church edifice and found the Lord’s Church in Sabbath worship amidst red mud and Navajo stone. There we learned much about true Sunday worship. I still seek such spiritual experiences each Sunday and find them wherever I am. ■

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