

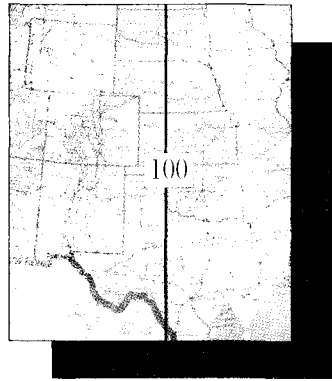
# The Hundredth Meridian

by Chilton Williamson, Jr.

## Navajoland: II

We had gone barely 25 yards when I had a feeling of the woods dissolving around us, and then we were hanging our toes over a bare rock ledge at which the world dropped away. From 20 miles out Black Mesa appeared to float in space like a long dark cloud bisected by a pillar of dust rising half a mile into the desert sky. George watched me for some time before he spoke. "Well?" "Magnificent," I told him.

We descended to a narrow ledge for a closer look at the arch hundreds of feet below through which swallows passed almost quicker than the eye could follow; somewhere the wind-down call of a canyon wren sounded. Then we began to work along the cliff face after Shane, who had disappeared. We found him ten minutes later seated on an outcrop of sandstone rock hugging his bare knees with his wrists and wearing his cap pulled over his eyes. When we sat beside him he pushed back the cap and gave me a challenging look. "What do you think of this country?" Shane demanded. "Beautiful," I said. "I think it's boring," he replied, and commenced staring into the empyrean. George unwrapped a granola bar he had taken from the pack, broke it in two pieces, and offered me one. "What are you looking at?" he asked the boy. "My sheep," Shane answered, without moving his eyes. "Where are they? I don't see any sheep." Using fieldglasses I scanned the plain below for sheep and finally found them, so far out as to be nearly invisible. "That guy," Shane said darkly, "don't know nothing. Otherwise he wouldn't have taken sheep where there ain't no graze." "Where do you take them?" "Somewhere where there's something for them to graze." George pointed out for me his mother-in-law's ranch, directly ahead of us and 1,500 feet below. It was a small house and barn with a couple of big cottonwoods for shade. "Lena says you've had a lot of snakes out here this summer." Shane nodded, and indicated something apparently far in the distance. "It's the witchcrafters' doing," he said. When George made no response to this



I asked, "What witchcrafters?" "Those out there." I followed his extended index finger and made out a ranch adjacent to his grandmother's property. "They make the snakes come to us." In the past week he had killed three or four he had found in the house after finishing his afternoon nap, all of them good sized rattlers. When I mentioned that I am fond of snakes, even rattlers, Shane told me sternly that Navajos are not allowed to pick up, eat, or even look at a snake when it is possible to ignore one. We stood finally and began to traverse the rimrock again, gazing down as we went into the side canyons where hawks soared on the thermals above the interlacing trails the deer had made on their way to water. The deepest of the canyons cut through the cliff into the yellow plain below where it formed a crevasse that Shane said was the home of a giant crab who had lived there for many years. All you saw was the huge claw reaching out of the ravine to grab a sheep, or a man. Shane wanted to climb down and investigate the crevasse but George put him off, saying that the country was too flat and uninteresting, as well as too hot, down there. "I know something else you'd enjoy seeing," he told me suddenly. "That is, assuming we can find it. I've never seen it, myself."

We descended White Mesa on its gentler western edge following the curving road down to Kaibito, past men on horseback moving in and out among the juniper trees, women pushing sheep (now as for the past 400 years woman's work in the land of the Navajos) on foot, and windmills revolving like silver pinwheels above the waterwells where rights-holders loaded the big water cans into pickup trucks. As we drove Shane

talked about his horses, and how until the livestock reduction program was implemented to reduce overgrazing on the reservation the family had owned 400 sheep, and how he wanted to live in Phoenix after he finished his summer-time work, which was branding cattle around the reservation. North of the mesa we came to a general store with a gas pump outside it where two roads intersected. George got out and asked directions from an old Indian standing beside a flatbed truck loaded with hay. The Hosteen, or elder, repeated the word "roo-un" several times slowly around the stalk he had been chewing but finally shook his head, so George called Shane from the pickup to interpret. At sight of the boy the old man's face assumed a warmer expression, the skin around his eyes wrinkling further in a slow smile as he listened to him speak. Then he answered briefly in Navajo. "He doesn't know," Shane translated proudly. "He knows, all right," George said as he started the engine, "but he doesn't want to corrupt an innocent boy like the Dude here." When Lena was pregnant with Christopher she had asked her husband to suspend his archaeological explorations until after the baby was born. "I don't know why anybody would want to live out here," Shane observed. "It's totally boring." Inside the store two Indian boys about 17 years old were flirting with the pretty girl who managed the video desk. They had some English and George asked them if they would be willing to guide us to the turnoff to Inscription House Ruin, and direct us verbally from there. We followed the boys in their red sports car on the newly paved road that terminates at the Indian boarding school at Navajo Mountain, past the new medical center built in total isolation in a juniper and cedar forest. Shane was impressed by the car and wondered aloud how the boys had obtained such a splendid machine. Nobody he said in his family would ever buy *him* a car; his grandfather let him have the truck keys sometimes but only when he was drunk. Two or three miles north of the store the boys turned onto a paved apron from which a rutted dirt road moved off among low tree-covered hills. We pulled

in behind them and the boys came back and began giving us directions to the ruin, but their English was so bad that George asked them to jump in the bed of the truck. They climbed up and hung on tight over the rough canted road, and at last the one on the left side yelled "Stop!" through the driver's window. From here, they made us understand, we would have to walk. They were vague about the direction, and finally George told them to get up in the truck again and drove them out to the highway, where he made an impression by giving them six dollars. "They're going back to the store to buy their little honey a pop," George said as we watched the car disappear into a curve. "There's no mutton-gut on *that* Indian, that's for damn sure. Eh, Dude?"

At the trailhead George locked the truck. We slipped water bottles into the day packs and walked to the edge of the reticulated maze of slickrock canyon. The view was a panoramic 180 degrees from White Mesa low on the southwest horizon to the Vermilion Cliffs in the northwest: a maze of deeply carved purple, red, and orange rock that appeared from the surface plateau as a vast, slightly rolling forest of juniper and piñon pine stretching like a blue mat to the edge of the world where the late afternoon sun, an incandescent ball, rested. George looked at his watch. "Let's go for it," he said, and nodded at Shane. "We can count on our genu-wine Indian guide to get us back to the truck before dark." The genu-wine Indian guide went leaping ahead of us over the rocks like a mountain goat. For an instant he stood poised in silhouette on the hump of a petrified sand dune, before he was gone. George called out to him but did not receive an answer. No discernible trail was in sight and we walked about for a while among the hummocks of red dust grown thinly with grass, prickly pear, and Mormon tea, searching for a way down. From the farther reaches of the park an owl called and was answered by another. The opposite wall of the canyon was a sequence of hanging gardens set in tiers: terraces of piñon, juniper, and wildflowers. "I'll have a bad time explaining at home if I lose Shane," George said. "He isn't lost," I told him; "he's an Indian." "Well, if we can't get off this cliff I guess he can't either." We walked on and discovered a row of cairns that marked a trail descending to the floor of a secondary canyon, but saw no ruins there.

Cutting across a peninsula of rock we came to a collapsing hogan built of pine logs, and beyond it a clearly defined footpath. We followed the path and were hailed after a hundred yards by the voice of Shane, who sat on an elevation of rock with his legs stretched out, pressing his hands between his knees. At risk of losing his clients, the genu-wine Indian guide had picked up the trail before he was five minutes from the truck.

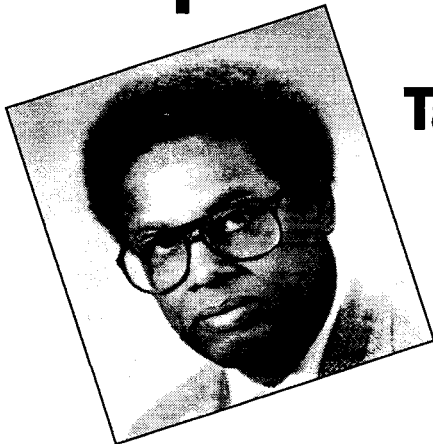
The trail down was blocked by a balky whiteface cow who stood chewing the cud before turning reluctantly and trotting on ahead of us, her bag swinging. A hogan with its brush corral stood in tall grass at the head of the canyon beneath ancient cottonwoods that boiled slowly on a breeze easing between the livid rock walls against which the foliage showed an amazing green. Navajo Creek in this season of the year was several inches of brackish water idling between loose banks 15 and 20 feet tall on its way to rendezvous with the Colorado River at Glen Canyon, 60 or 70 miles distant by line of sight. The trail followed through high sagebrush above the creek, allowing us a forced march across the sand beneath cottonwood groves piling like emerald thunderheads into the stark blue sky that made a perfectly fitted roof over Navajo Canyon. Side canyons ran in from left and right; we found horses, a mule, and a donkey in the mouth of one of these, but no ruins. Shane left on a tangent to investigate the condition of these lonely specimens of "those that men live by," and caught up with us to report that they looked well fed and in good health. Evening was near; we had just agreed to turn back at the next canyon when George and I saw it simultaneously: a line of fitted wall a hundred or more feet above the canyon floor, unmistakably the work of human hands though isolated in a wilderness of desert rock. We moved forward again at an increased pace in the lengthening shades of the great cottonwoods. The trail led steeply down into the creek and up the far bank to the base of a tall red cliff, where it clung precariously for another hundred yards before deadheading at a holed chickenwire fence with a sign hung on it that said "Keep Out." We squeezed through the largest hole, climbed up 30 or 40 feet hand over hand, and stood panting on the floor of one of those spectral villages with which the Spanish explorers had almost no contact and that were hardly known by

white men until the Macom Expedition of 1859 and those of John Wesley Powell in 1869 and 1871 reported seeing strange rock structures built by human beings in humanly inaccessible places. Probably the majority of these with their troves of relics are undiscovered to this day. The painted pictographs and the petroglyphs tapped or scraped into the desert varnish on remote canyon walls are undomesticated ghosts: to you and only you, perhaps, they make their first—and possibly last—apparition.

Carbon from ancient smokes blackened the ceiling of the cave in patches where the rock surface had not flaked with time, and on the walls above the low simple buildings white prints left by shy hands gave mute greeting across the centuries. To the left of the sequence of footholds cut into the rock and just within the overhang, Shane discovered two potholes that George guessed might have served as the water source for the pueblo. We crossed the circle of flat rock, in which postholes had been carefully cut, that was the floor of the kiva and walked the narrow space between the housefronts and the rocky lip above a potsherd accumulation of anciently-flung houseware. The houses themselves were built of adobe brick reinforced by sticks of brush and roofed with thicker sticks supported by poles. I picked up one of the loose bricks to examine it. Although that brick had been baked around the time that Dante was writing *The Divine Comedy*, the grass used in its construction looked no older than last year's straw. Around the houses and inside them tiny corncocks lay scattered, harvested seven or eight centuries before by the Basketmakers, as the Anasazi are also called: sophisticated agriculturalists for their day, as well as accomplished masons and designers. "Let's go now," Shane suggested. "I don't want to be haunted."

We reached the truck at dark and sat on the tailgate to drink the last of the water and watch Venus arise in the pale ecliptic of the vanished sun. "Are you going out with the sheep in the morning?" George asked. "Not if I can help it," Shane said. "I suppose you're going to need a ceremony to purify you of where you've been today." "I don't need no ceremony." Shane's voice in the darkness was scornful. "Why don't you?" "Because I'm modern," Shane answered serenely.

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