



Film Exposes Family, Land History

By Matt Kelley, Associated Press Writer

WASHINGTON (AP) - The film gathered dust for decades, a silent, 28-minute documentary titled "Navaho Boy: The Monument Valley Story," about a Navajo family whose home was the backdrop for one of John Wayne's most famous Westerns.

Years later, filmmakers traveled to the land of otherworldly stone promontories on the Arizona-Utah line to locate the people and stories behind the blurry, Technicolor images. They found Elsie Mae Cly Begay, matriarch of a family still strong in its Navajo traditions but sickened by uranium mining's radioactive legacy and grieving over a brother adopted away by white missionaries 40 years before.

The film's return set off a chain of events that led to the brother's reunion with the family he had never known - as well as the discovery that the traditional dwelling where Begay lived for years was dangerously radioactive.

Now the Cly family is chronicled in another documentary, "The Return of Navajo Boy" being shown at independent film festivals and on public television stations across the country.

"Things happened because of the camera coming back into their lives," director Jeff Spitz said after a screening at the Smithsonian Institution last week. "It led to the recapture of a lot of family history, the expression of a lot of pain, and the return of Elsie's brother, who many people thought was a myth."

The Cly family - pronounced "klah," it's an English rendition of a Navajo term meaning "left-handed" - has lived for generations in Monument Valley, a stretch of high desert studded with rock formations that look like huge mittens and chimney spires.

The white photographers and filmmakers who came to the exotic landscape in the mid-1900s took thousands of pictures of the family's daily life: herding sheep, weaving rugs, wrapping their long hair into the traditional Navajo bun at the back of the neck.

One of the visitors was Robert Kennedy, a Chicago businessman whose midlife crisis found him trying his hand at moviemaking. Kennedy shot "Navajo Boy," depicting events in the Cly family's life as well as a traditional healing ceremony performed for Elsie Zina Cly, Begay's mother.

Kennedy's son, Bill Kennedy, started trying to find his father's film subjects in the 1980s, and hooked up with Spitz in 1997, when they first traveled to the Navajo reservation.



A better-known visitor to the Cly's was director John Ford, who used Monument Valley as a dramatic backdrop for his classic 1956 Western, "The Searchers" starring John Wayne. Some Cly relatives even worked as extras, playing some of the "Comanches" who had kidnapped the niece of Wayne's character, played by Natalie Wood.

Wayne also stopped by the Cly home one day. Spotting an infant boy - Elsie Zina Cly's son - he asked the child's name. When told the boy did not yet have a name, the actor suggested one that stuck: John Wayne Cly.

The lung ailment that prompted the healing ceremony took Elsie Zina Cly's life sometime after that. Records of that time are hard to come by, and the Cly siblings do not have birth certificates, but little John Wayne was only about 2 years old. A missionary couple adopted the boy, telling the family they would return him in four years. They never did.

John Wayne Cly grew up in New Mexico with other Indian foster brothers and sisters. In the movie, he tells of watching cars on the highway and dreaming that his Navajo family would pull up and take him away. Or John Wayne himself would show up and take him to the relatives he pined for.

"All my life I felt I never fit in with anyone," he said.

About three years ago, he read a newspaper article about the Chicago filmmakers who had found the family that were the subjects of an amateur documentary, and how one of them was Bernie Cly, Begay's brother and a former uranium miner seeking compensation from the government. John Wayne Cly had found his family.

The documentary captures John Wayne Cly's reunion, his nervous approach to the family he had not seen in 40 years and the fierce, wailing hug from Begay, his long-lost sister.

"I hope I'm not a disappointment to you," John Wayne Cly says during the reunion.

He has not been, Begay said. The siblings now visit frequently, and John Wayne Cly, now in his mid-40s, is starting to learn the Navajo language that he had lost but that his siblings prefer.

John Wayne Cly's siblings recently held a traditional Navajo ceremony for him - the Blessing Way, a ritual for someone who has returned after a long journey.

Filmmakers were not the only outsiders who came to Monument Valley in the 1940s and '50s.

The vast Navajo reservation, spanning parts of New Mexico, Arizona and Utah, holds extensive deposits of uranium. As the Cold War nuclear arms race heated up, mining



companies dug hundreds of shafts and open pits in the area to extract the valuable and deadly mineral.

The mines provided plentiful jobs and the unseen danger of radiation. By the late 1970s, the mines were closing and many miners were dying of lung cancer, emphysema or other radiation-related ailments.

Whole communities were affected, too. Children played in the rocks left over from the mining and milling. Miners brought home yellow uranium dust on their clothes. The mines helped speed the flow of radioactivity into drinking water supplies. People used stones striped with yellow uranium ore to build homes.

"It (radioactivity) is everywhere," Begay said in Navajo, with Indian Health Service official Rosetta Tracy translating. "It's in the air. It's in the ground. It's in the water."

People kept getting sick, often with lung problems like the one that felled Begay's mother.

Under pressure from Navajo and other uranium miners, Congress in 1990 passed the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act, giving \$100,000 payments for a list of ailments.

Navajo miners have criticized the law, saying its requirements are too strict. Bernie Cly, for example, had part of a lung removed because of cancer but had his compensation claim denied because he had smoked tobacco during traditional ceremonies.

Congress changed the law this year to remove many of those impediments and increase compensation to \$150,000. Bernie Cly's compensation application was finally approved.

Earlier this year, the Environmental Protection Agency tested radioactivity levels in Begay's hogan - a traditional Navajo dwelling where Begay and her family had lived for years.

The hogan's stone floor has the telltale yellowish stripes of uranium ore. Radiation levels inside, the EPA found, are up to 100 times acceptable levels. The agency told Begay to keep out of the hogan and agreed to help the family tear down the structure and rebuild without radioactive materials.

Begay and Spitz say they hope "The Return of Navajo Boy" will aid efforts to expand compensation and cleanup.