



## **MYSTERY IN THE DESERT**

by MIKE SULA, *Chicago Reader*

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Millions of people who have never been to Monument Valley still recognize it as the weirdly beautiful desert landscape where John Wayne hounded Chief Scar and his bloodthirsty Comanches after they abducted the virginal Natalie Wood in *The Searchers*. Those who have passed through know it as a stunning natural wonder spanning the Utah-Arizona border. For a price, guides point out familiar locations from *The Searchers* and seven other John Ford films shot among the mesas, buttes, and red rock formations. They stop every so often and give short presentations on the Navajo and a seemingly vanished way of life. A few thousand Navajos still make their homes there in isolated groups of small houses, trailers, and traditional octagonal hogans, but three years ago Jeff Spitz had only a vague awareness of the place as a remote, unpopulated movie set. And he didn't know the Navajo from the Zuni or any other southwestern Native American tribe.

Spitz, an independent filmmaker who lives in Ravenswood with his wife and two children, had been working on an educational video for Spanish-speaking parents when his father-in-law, Ted Amdur, made a mysterious request. An acquaintance of his, "a gentleman he knew," had expressed an interest in working with Spitz on a project: something about some Indians. Amdur was short on specifics, but Spitz passed along some tapes of documentaries he'd made so the man could take a look.

A few weeks later a videotape arrived in the mail. "I was just told that this guy was interested in getting my opinion of this film his dad made," says Spitz. He popped the tape in his VCR and found himself watching a soundless 28-minute color film. Titled *Navaho Boy* and set in a gorgeous desert landscape, it appeared at first to be an ethnographic documentary about a family of Native Americans—not actors—going about their daily business: weaving, brushing their hair, preparing food. Despite its still brilliant color, Spitz suspected the movie was old.

"My first impression of it was 'My God, this is really weird,'" says Spitz. "There was no sound, no titles. No sign of anything you could identify. The people in it were all Indians—no white folks. It looked like it was semiprofessionally done; it was edited, and parts of it were beautifully, beautifully photographed." Without sound it was hard to be sure, but the movie seemed to tell a story. The action centers on a young boy sent away from his family on an overnight journey by donkey. Along the way he experiences visions—enormous costumed dancing figures superimposed on the night sky, possibly representing some supernatural event or psychological conflict. The sun rises and he continues his excursion, arriving at the camp of a medicine man. Together they return to the boy's home, and the medicine man, with the aid of an assistant, uses colored sand to create an intricate design on the ground. An old woman and another young boy sit on the sand, and an elaborate ceremony commences with the medicine man chanting while the woman and boy appear deep in concentration. After the ritual, the film climaxes with the first boy riding back into the desert, scaling a mountain, and raising his arms like a bird, silhouetted



against the sun in some kind of spiritual epiphany. The vivid colors, skillful editing, and a time-lapse sunrise effect indicated that professionals were behind the camera. At times the subjects appeared to be taking direction, and one of the first things that struck Spitz was their ease before the camera. "There's a nice scene of a girl getting her hair done by her grandma," he says. "She looks like she's maybe 12 years old. She looks up in the camera and smiles."

Spitz was intrigued, so a meeting was arranged with his father-in-law's friend, a Barrington developer named Bill Kennedy. Spitz trekked to Kennedy's office and was at first amused to see that the walls were festooned with Indian rugs, oil paintings depicting western scenes, and a large mounted steer's head. He was introduced to a man wearing cowboy boots and a bolo tie. Bill Kennedy, a 58-year-old lifelong Chicago suburbanite, owes his consuming interest in the American west to his father. Robert Kennedy was an entrepreneur and aspiring filmmaker whose own fascination began after he retired from his auto repair business in the late 40s and enrolled in the Brooks Institute of Photography in Santa Barbara, California. Bill Kennedy was a young boy at the time, but he remembers that shortly after his father graduated in the early 50s, he hired his teacher, a filmmaker named Rex Fleming, and the two headed for the reservation to work on the film Spitz had seen, *Navaho Boy: The Monument Valley Story*. Over the next 13 years Robert Kennedy made commercials and educational films, but *Navaho Boy* was special. As a successful businessman, Kennedy was often asked to speak to schools and chambers of commerce. He would show the film and narrate while the projector ran, explaining the ceremony and the lifestyle of the Navajos.

Though Robert Kennedy eventually quit the motion picture business for home building, his passion for the west endured. "We used to go out to Montana and stay at dude ranches," says Bill Kennedy. "I had a lot of chances to meet a lot of Indians and I just always had a great love and admiration for the American Native Indian because of the exposure I had as a kid."

Somewhere along the way Robert Kennedy's copy of *Navaho Boy* was lost. As an adult Bill pestered his father to find another one, but Robert died in 1980 without ever getting around to it. A year after he died Kennedy called the Brooks Institute and they found a copy for him, but by then he had forgotten much of his father's narration. For several years he sat on the tape promising himself he'd do something with it. "I wanted to try and get some sound back to it," he says. "Get some information on it and give it to my kids to tell them their grandfather did it, and just kind of leave it with our family." He knew next to nothing about the people in the film or what their ceremony meant. By this time Kennedy was a board member of the Cowboy Artists of America Museum in Kerrville, Texas, which houses one of the preeminent collections of western realist art. He was acquainted with popular western artists like Ray Swanson and Oreland Joe, who had used Navajos as models. Kennedy sent copies of the film to several artists in the hope that they might be able to interpret the ceremony or at least help identify some of the people. To his surprise a few did know the family. They identified them as the Clys of Monument Valley, Utah. In 1993 painter R. Brownell McGrew wrote a letter to Kennedy identifying the old woman in the sand painting ceremony as Happy Cly, who frequently modeled for artists and photographers. "They weren't sure," says Kennedy. "But they were pretty sure." Nevertheless, the



information was scant and Kennedy had no idea if they were still living in the valley after 40 years.

He wanted someone who worked in film to take a look at Navaho Boy and give some advice on what could be done with it. But the little information he had didn't seem of much use to the people he interviewed, who "didn't even talk the talk, let alone walk the talk," he says. "They said 'We can give you some narration and do some music behind it and you'll have something you can adapt to it.' But I wanted to be able to figure out what it meant. Every time I went up the ladder I got a bad feeling from the people I was being told to talk to. Until I met Jeff. When Jeff saw it he said there was more to it than we understand and that we should go back and try to find the people and uncover more about it." "I said the film had a lot of beautiful qualities but more than anything the people in it are comfortable on camera," says Spitz. "They look like they've done this before. If any of them are still alive you might have a real interesting documentary." At the time he didn't put much stock in McGrew's letter. "When I read that I thought it was nuts," he says. "What's a 'Happy Cly'? I was totally skeptical of the whole thing and I just dismissed it." Spitz says Kennedy wanted to return the film to the Navajos themselves. Maybe there was a museum or a school that could use it for educational purposes. Kennedy hired Spitz to do three months of research and come back with recommendations on what could be done with Navaho Boy. "I left there thinking, 'Well, if nothing else I'll learn something,'" he says. He played the tape over and over, focusing on a few characters—the old woman, the smiling girl, the eponymous Navajo boy, a mother holding a baby, and the medicine man and his assistant. "I sort of fantasized, 'Who are they? Can they be found?' Then I thought, 'This is silly. You're wasting time.' I thought that people died young on reservations and this was made a long time ago."

Spitz started reading up on healing ceremonies, some of which can last for days. Navajo creation stories outline a grand order by which people live their lives. If that order is somehow violated, illness results. Order is reestablished, and illness can be cured, by making offerings and summoning the Yé'ii-or Navajo deities—through songs, prayers, and sand paintings. "I bought some books about Navajo sand paintings and religion and quickly discovered that you could spend the rest of your life and never understand all of the intricacies and philosophical textures and meanings of what the medicine man does. Even if you could understand it after reading, you could never understand it as a Navajo would. That kind of bugged me. Who am I explaining this to? If he wants me to give it back to the Navajos, they don't want my explanation for their ceremony. They don't want to hear my voice. I was intrigued by the challenge, but I also started to worry that I might not really have the perspective or the cultural experience to deal with this stuff. I could only deal with it as an outsider, like a curator picking up an artifact. But how else do you learn anything but by getting in there and trying?"

Spitz, who grew up in Hollywood, made his first film in high school when his best friend announced that he'd obtained a Super-8 camera and projector from "a dead guy."

"He said, 'Yeah, one of my dad's friends cacked and my dad took me over to his house and said I could have anything he left behind,'" recalls Spitz. "We made parodies of our ultraliberal Beverly Hills High School feel-good classroom exercises, where we would all sit on the floor in circles



and do these interpersonal communications skills. We weren't really sophisticated satirists, but when we showed our classmates they were in stitches. People just busted up and wanted us to play it over and over again. It was such a turn-on to make something and see that impact on people so immediately." Spitz went on to Berkeley, where he played football, but he left school during his junior year. "I knew I wanted to get involved in film. I just wasn't sure which area of the business I wanted to be in." Back in LA he spent a lot of time at a health club where one of his regular racquetball partners was game-show impresario Chuck Barris, celebrated host of The Gong Show. "The joke between my brother and best friend and I was that we could play Chuck Barris whenever we wanted because he was always looking for exercise, but we would never lose because he was so awful. He would hustle his ass off and we would just kill him."

Spitz struck up another friendship at the club, this one with a man in his 70s named Byron Roberts, who happened to be a Hollywood line producer. Roberts took him under his wing and began teaching him the business. One day "Chuck called him up and said, 'Byron, I want you to be the producer of my movie,'" says Spitz. "Byron said, 'Fine, but only if Jeff can be my legs. I'm an old fart and I need a kid that can run around for me.'" In 1979, at the age of 20, Spitz found himself working as the locations manager for The Gong Show Movie.

"It was supposed to be a dark comedy about how this guy invents a silly game show for people to display their goofy and dubious talents on national TV and how it turns his life around, shakes him up, and winds up ruining everything because everywhere he goes people pester him and want to show him their stupid little tricks. He loses his privacy, his family, his girlfriend, and finally feels like he's losing his mind-basically Chuck's story during the 70s." Spitz finished his undergraduate degree at UCLA while working for various production companies and becoming thoroughly disillusioned with his hometown. "I kind of decided I didn't want to stay out there," he says. "You see an incredible amount of energy and money and manpower poured down the drain of the most god-awful, stupid, and ultimately worthless entertainment. If you have any ambition that points you in the direction of doing something substantive, it's hard to continue on that path and think that if you're good maybe someday you might be able to make mindless entertainment too. I guess that bothered me. "All the people I met in Hollywood that I admired were always much older and they all came from Brooklyn or Chicago. They had real experiences and something of a foundation. They had a grounding and real relationships and I couldn't see any of that taking place in Hollywood. It just seemed too phony. It seemed like if you're going to work in the studio system you're going to be living in a walled city. And the walls are there to keep people out. I really wanted to have a real life and experiences with all kinds of people. I wanted to look into the gritty realities of urban life. So I applied to graduate schools because I wanted to get out of there."

In 1983 Spitz heard a Paul Harvey radio broadcast about four black college classmates from Chicago-one of whom turned out to be the new mayor, Harold Washington-who had made a pact to support one another through thick and thin until they became successful. Spitz was taken with their story and began researching their backgrounds, thinking it might translate into a documentary. He was particularly captivated by the history of their alma mater, Roosevelt University. To Spitz it seemed like a racially integrated academic utopia in the midst of a city



that was a "throwback to Selma, Alabama." Spitz was considering a graduate English program at the University of Chicago, and on his first visit to the city Washington helped clinch the decision. "I went to a little neighborhood forum and watched him glad-hand these white north-siders. He charmed the hell out of these little old ladies and enchanted me to no end. I thought, this is too good to be true. He's funny, charming, smart, eloquent, but he can also be fierce and antagonistic. On top of all that he was a student council president at an integrated school in a segregated city 40 years ago and nobody knows or cares. So I was really turned on to this after I saw him perform, and I decided to come here and go to school and meet him and these other guys and make this documentary."

He enrolled at the U. of C. and started on his research. After two years, his old friend Barris coughed up a grant of \$10,000 and Spitz found other funders as well. Six months later he turned out a half-hour documentary on Roosevelt that aired on Channel Seven and won a local Emmy. His next project profiled nonprofit housing organizations, and after that came From the Bottom Up, about "people trying to improve the blighted areas they live in," says Spitz. "I wanted to make another film about people who felt like they were starting something that was really important. I met people like that; they themselves were really interesting and they told great stories. It's that kind of people's history that comes from the bottom up that's really valuable, that you can't find in books. That project really set me on a course. It opened up all kinds of doors and I wound up doing more of these stories about this kind of activism." He also began working for his subjects, making promotional videos. "When you have a story to tell and need a way to tell it to funders and others who can get involved, that's basically what I've been doing."

Spitz began his research into Navaho Boy in the spring of '97 by calling the Brooks Institute to learn more about Robert Kennedy's teacher and collaborator. Rex Fleming, a legendary figure at Brooks, started the school's motion picture department and taught hundreds of people how to make movies. Spitz located Fleming's daughter, who told him that her father always wanted to be a big-time Hollywood director like John Ford and often drove out to the Navajo reservation to take photographs or shoot movies. She said he'd once made an educational film on hygiene for the tribal government, and had even filmed some of the Navajo Nation's early elections. But the project closest to his heart had always been Navaho Boy. Like Kennedy, he'd screen it whenever he was asked to address community groups or schoolchildren. After he and Kennedy parted ways, Fleming wrote a script, hired a narrator, and completed the film. It was shot on Kodachrome, an amateur film stock noted for its stability, which explained why its vivid colors hadn't faded over the years. Fleming's stepson still had his father's copy, complete with the narrated sound track and titles that credited Rex Fleming as director, Robert Kennedy as producer, and both as cinematographers. The actors weren't identified.

The sound track shed some light on what the filmmakers were trying to accomplish. With narration, Navaho Boy describes a family's simple, pastoral life disturbed by a medical emergency. The action begins when the young boy-here named "Red Boy"-returns home to discover that his grandmother has fallen ill. Because all the men are away, he is sent off across the "Great Valley" to fetch Ketso the medicine man, a long and dangerous journey and a test of Red Boy's mettle. According to the narrator, no Navajo in his right mind travels so far after dark



because that "is the time for the Great Gods"-the Yé'ii. As he approaches the "Valley of the Yé'ii," the gods appear in the sky and his courage falters as they torment him. But he hears the voices of his fathers calling to him: "You must be a man, not a coyote that slinks in the brush." He prays and sings for protection, then soldiers on, arriving safely at Ketso's camp in the morning.

Because Red Boy's grandmother and younger brother are suffering from a respiratory illness, Ketso and his assistant prepare for a particular "sing," or ceremony, called a Windway. They gather sacred plants and create the image of the "Yé'ii of the Winds," with sacred sand ground by Red Boy's grandmother. The painting is blessed with corn pollen and the two patients strip to the waist. As they sit on the image of the Yé'ii, they think positive thoughts while Ketso chants, hoping to attract the god's attention so that he will heal them. After the sing is over, "the sand painting is destroyed, as the sun must never set on a completed creation." The sand is scattered "to the four winds" and eagles in the sky "assure Red Boy that the gods are pleased and his grandmother will be well." Grateful, he "feels a great desire for the nearness of his gods," and scales the cliff, offering his thanks.

"It's a white guy narrating a story about Indians," says Spitz. "The difference is that it's from their point of view and it's really trying to say what they're thinking and what's happening in their world. It's stilted, clumsy, and embarrassing, but my opinion of it is that in the 50s it was progressive." Spitz, who usually speaks of his own work with a Scout-like earnestness, was unprepared for the reaction he got from some scholarly authorities when he showed them Navaho Boy. "I had been doing a lot of research and I asked a lot of people about this sort of stuff. I also read a lot and I had heard that healing ceremonies for native people are kind of private. I'd read in some places that they're not supposed to be photographed. I thought, 'Well, what do you do if you find one? What if there's one floating around out there?'" Hoping to learn more, he made an appointment with the director of the Newberry Library's D'Arcy McNickle Center for American Indian History. Spitz says at first the meeting went well. He developed an amiable rapport with the director, a Native American, and he set up a small video recorder to document the man's comments as he watched Navaho Boy. He seemed fascinated by the film. During the portion of the film that shows the Windway ceremony, a curious librarian, an Anglo, came to the door and watched for a few minutes. "I didn't know who he was," says Spitz. "But he grabbed his heart and said, 'Oh my god. They must have paid these people a lot of money to do that. This is too much for me.' He dropped his hands and walked away in disgust." Spitz says that by the time the film was over the director had undergone a total transformation in attitude and told him in no uncertain terms to get out. "He said, 'I don't want to have to talk to you anymore. And don't ever try being sneaky around an Indian again.'" Baffled, Spitz begged for an explanation and offered the tape he had just recorded. He was told to "go talk to a Navajo about it." Spitz sought out the librarian who interrupted the screening but he also refused to talk. "I said, 'Come on, this is a research institution. I need some answers or some help. I'm not going until you talk to me.' After he realized I wasn't going to leave, he said, 'There are a lot of films out there like this. That ceremony belongs to that family. It's a private matter. It was never intended to be seen by the public and it ought to be burned.' I left there shaking, I was so freaked out."



At first Spitz believed that he had been set up by Kennedy. "I was so stunned that this guy, who seemed to be so into western history and heritage and Indian cultures and stuff, would hire a total greenhorn in this field," he says. "Then I thought, 'Oh, this explains it. He couldn't get anybody who was knowledgeable about Navajo culture to take on something like this.'"

But when it turned out that Kennedy was just as dumbfounded, Spitz decided to press on. "Here was a guy whose intentions I believe were very honorable trying to figure out what to do with his dad's old film. And I have a long track record doing films I think have some social merit. I've been doing it for 15 years and these guys are treating me like a fucking grave robber. I couldn't believe it. I determined that I was going to make this thing work and I was going to rub their noses in it."

The Newberry director Spitz met with now works for a prominent Native American museum in another city and would not speak on the record about the encounter. John Aubrey, who has an interest in Native American culture and was the librarian present, says his memory of the incident is foggy. "I think this is something you should not do for exploitation," he says. "I would say now and probably would have said then that this is a private family thing and is not for public consumption. Whether it should be burned or not is beside the point, but I don't think it is for public viewing because it represents a very sacred ceremony for the Navajo."

"I guess this comes with the territory," says Spitz. "White people who consider themselves accepted within a culture become its most aggressive defenders and yet its most proprietary stakeholders. Whites who become aware of it—the ones who have their radar up for the pot stealers—they just don't trust anybody." After the incident at the Newberry, Spitz sought advice from a film historian he knew who told him that there is indeed a long history of such anthropological films. Delving into his friend's archives he turned up a handful of movies that featured Navajo sand paintings. Most of the films he found dull or outright racist. None were as beautifully shot as *Navaho Boy*, and none had a focus as specific as the family in Kennedy's film. One thing they did have in common was that they never identified their subjects by name. "Since the guy said that ceremony belongs to the family, I started thinking if they really exist somewhere it would be really something to try and bring back their family images to them," says Spitz. But the film was close to 50 years old. Who knew if anyone in the family were still alive, let alone still living in Monument Valley?

A few days later he was nosing around the American Indian Gift Store on Wilson Avenue near Ashland when he picked up a book of photographs titled *The Vanishing Indian: Ray Manley: A Portfolio*. He cracked the cover and was astonished to find a photograph of Red Boy's grandparents on the dedication page. The inscription, given in English, German, and Japanese, read: "A Dedication to Happy and Willie Cly...a part of the Navajo clan living deep in Monument Valley. They unhesitatingly modeled for the varied photographers who needed to add human interest to their photographs. They have, no doubt, graced more magazines and calendars than famous movie stars." Spitz immediately located Manley in Tucson, where he ran tours into Monument Valley. Manley said that Willie and Happy Cly had died long before but their grandchildren still lived in remote parts of the valley. They spoke mostly Navajo but their



grandchildren spoke English. None had telephones, but Manley suggested Spitz might reach Happy Cly's grandson Stanley Blackwater at a place called Goulding's, where he worked as a tour guide and where other family members picked up their mail.

Numbering close to 200,000, Navajos make up the largest Indian tribe in the country. The Navajo Nation is a self-governing entity whose land covers about 25,000 square miles at the Four Corners, the junction of New Mexico, Arizona, Utah, and Colorado. Monument Valley, whose surreal topography was created by the uplift and erosion of massive layers of soft sandstone and shale deposits, stretches along the Arizona-Utah border in the northwest corner of the reservation. Navajos first moved into the area in the 1800s and were well established by the turn of the century. In 1958 the Navajo Nation designated almost 30,000 acres on the south side of the Arizona-Utah border as a park, encompassing some of the valley's more famous geological features. Today about four to five thousand Navajos live in the larger valley. Beyond the boundaries of the park, the valley is one of the more remote and least populated regions of the Navajo Nation. It's poorly represented in the tribal government and more economically depressed than most places on the reservation. Analogous to the poorest counties of Mississippi or West Virginia, it also contains one of the most heavily toured and photographed spots in the Four Corners area.

The largest employer in Monument Valley, Goulding's Lodge, is located a few miles off reservation land in Utah. It's a motel, museum, tour operation, and something of a memorial to the valley and the man who put it on the white man's map. In 1923 a tougher-than-leather Durango sheep rancher named Harry Goulding and his young wife, Leone-or 'Mike' as he called her-pitched their tents there and began trading coffee, flour, and other staples with the Navajo in exchange for jewelry, sheep, and their exquisite handwoven rugs. Deeply in love with the land and the Navajo, Goulding became a booster for the area, promoting its breathtaking beauty, natural resources, and people to whoever would listen. He courted artists, journalists, photographers, archaeologists, road builders, politicians, mining companies, and the Atomic Energy Commission. He even claimed to have blustered his way onto the United Artists lot and personally persuaded John Ford to film Stagecoach there in 1938. Harry and Mike eventually built more permanent lodgings to accommodate an ever increasing number of guests.

Goulding sold his trading post and left Monument Valley in 1962. He died in 1981. Though Goulding's arrival coincided with changes in the tribe's way of life-changes that had many negative consequences-he always claimed that everything he did in the valley was for the benefit of the Navajos, and his legacy is impressive. He helped bring badly needed dollars to the area, as well as roads, a hospital, and jobs. He had many friends among the Navajos, and there's no question that these relationships were mutually, if not equally, profitable.

After talking to Manley, Spitz called Goulding's, now owned by the descendants of another old trading family. Stanley Blackwater wasn't in, but Spitz was told that if he showed up, there would be plenty of time to talk on one of his three-hour tours. Spitz made two sets of stills from Navaho Boy, one to show around and another to give away if he met people who recognized themselves or their relatives.



He flew to Albuquerque, then drove six hours to Monument Valley. "It was pitch-black in the middle of the desert," says Spitz. "I pulled in around midnight and I could tell from the starlight that I was in a real special place because you could see the outlines of these mesas and buttes and rock formations." He checked into Goulding's but in the morning was dismayed to learn that he'd arrived on Blackwater's day off. Spitz managed to reach him by phone, but he seemed unimpressed with the stranger's outlandish story and wouldn't meet with him that day. "He said, 'I got some things I got to do. I'll be back tomorrow,' recalls Spitz. "So I had a day to kill in Monument Valley." Spitz showed the photos to some women working in the lodge. "I said, 'Recognize any of these folks? They're all older now but I would like to know if any of them are still around. I'd love to meet these people.' They were charmed right off the bat. 'You brought pictures here?' they said. 'This is where everyone comes to take pictures.'" The women recognized the photogenic young girl and her sister. "'That one's Elsie Mae,' they said. 'She sells jewelry down by the junction.'" The other they called Ruthie. He was told to come back to the restaurant that evening to meet Ruthie's daughters.

Spitz met a lot of people that day, wandering with his photos, an experience he describes in terms of alternating surges of elation and frustration. Some people seemed delighted with the images, others nonplussed or guarded. A few who claimed to recognize the subjects gave him leads to dead ends; people who might have helped were not around, or if they were knew nothing. One man identified Red Boy as someone named David Stanley, who'd died from cancer five years earlier. He said another boy in the photos, Hoskie Yazzie, was also dead, hit by a bus.

Spitz says he began to get the feeling that some people were trying to "shine me on," contributing to an apprehension he was already struggling to overcome. "I heard that if someone was deceased that Navajos don't like to see pictures of them," he says. "I didn't know if that was true but I'd heard it. I'd also heard that some people might assume that I was a cop or that I was doing some sort of investigative work, which would engender a lot of disgust right off the bat."

That evening he returned to the restaurant to meet Ruthie's daughters. The women confirmed the identity of their mother and Aunt Elsie and invited Spitz to Ruthie's house the next day, drawing him a map. Relieved to be making progress, he met Ruthie and her husband the next morning. At first, Spitz says, the woman didn't say anything but seemed pleased with the photos. Then "she flipped past one and her face kind of blanched," he says. "I had just taken out my yellow tablet and she said, 'What are you doing?' I said, 'I'm just writing some notes down so I don't forget anything.' She said, 'No, don't write anything about me,' and she got up and walked away."

Ruthie's daughters told Spitz that the woman in the photo was their grandmother, Elsie Zina. "They said, 'Don't worry. This is really hard for my mom because when she was a little girl her mom died and she's had a hard life. But for us, what you're doing is very nice, because we've never seen our grandma's face.'" They identified a few other people, but they didn't recognize Red Boy, nor had they ever heard of David Stanley or Hoskie Yazzie. They urged Spitz to speak with their Aunt Elsie, who could frequently be found selling jewelry at her son's stand. "They said, 'Some people here don't like to talk much. They're just shy and they don't want to talk about the past. But Elsie is different. She'll talk to you.'"



Lorenzo Begay's jewelry stand sits along "the mall," a row of fry-bread stands, souvenir sellers, and tour operators near the entrance to the tribal park. His mother wasn't around when Spitz came looking for her, but Lorenzo said she'd be back soon. When Spitz recalls that conversation, as with all conversations he's had with Navajos, he lapses into an approximation of their accent and speech pattern, lowering his voice and speaking in short phrases with carefully enunciated, economically chosen words. "I showed him a picture of his mom. He goes, 'Yep, that's my mom.' "I said, 'Do you think I could meet her?' "He said, 'Yeah.' "I said, 'When?' "He said, 'I don't know.' "Do you think she'll be back later?' "Yeah.' "How much later?' "I don't know." Spitz retired to a cafe on the mall and ordered a mutton sandwich while he waited. As he was eating, a young girl came in and asked if her father could see the photos. A man in his 50s entered the restaurant and began flipping through the pictures. When he reached the shot of the "Navaho Boy," Spitz told him he'd heard it was David Stanley and that he'd been dead for some time. "He said, 'Nope!' "Well, who is it?" "He said, 'My cousin, Jimmy T. Cly.'" The man looked at the other pictures and stopped at the one Spitz had been told was Hoskie Yazzie, asking, "Who do they say that is?" Spitz repeated what he'd been told. "Nope!" "Well, who do you say it is?" said Spitz. "That's me," said the man. "Bernie Cly."

He offered to take Spitz in his truck to meet Jimmy Cly. During that drive, which traversed some of the farthest reaches of the valley, Bernie said he didn't remember making Navaho Boy but he talked freely about his life. Like many Navajos, he'd gone to work in the uranium mines that proliferated on and around the reservation after World War II. And like many who'd never been told of the otherwise well documented dangers associated with blasting and picking radioactive metals from the earth, he'd taken sick, and "coughed up a piece of lung." Bernie told Spitz that most of the Cly family no longer practiced traditional healing ceremonies such as the one in Navaho Boy, and that many of them had become Christians after an uncle developed a lung disease and came under the sway of a preacher. After driving around for an hour without locating Jimmy Cly, Bernie gave up and dropped Spitz off back at the mall, where Lorenzo Begay was waiting to take him to meet his mother.

Elsie Mae Begay (formerly Cly), a grandmother in her 60s, lives in a drywall hogan at the base of the gigantic Oljato Mesa on the Utah side of Monument Valley. Now separated from her husband, she works in day care and helps out at Lorenzo's jewelry stand. Her home sits directly under the abandoned Skyline uranium mine. Behind the hogan, a large white streak staining the cliff directs the eye to the pile of rubble in her backyard-tailings, or waste left over after the valuable ore has been taken to the mill for processing. Over the next two hours Elsie pondered the photos Spitz had brought and told him much of the Cly family history. Like her brother Bernie, she didn't remember the filming of Navaho Boy, but then people were always taking pictures of her family. When her mother died she'd gone to live with her grandparents Happy and Willie, who she said were famous from all the pictures they'd been in. She showed Spitz a photo album containing several postcards that featured her grandparents and some other older relatives. She bought them at Goulding's where many are still being sold today.

Elsie told Spitz that Happy's and Willie's images had been in countless magazines and calendars and that her family knew John Ford from his many visits to the valley. John Wayne had even



named her baby brother: One day during a John Ford shoot, she said, the actor visited the family's hogan and asked for the infant's name. Upon learning he didn't have one yet Wayne gamely suggested his own. The family stuck with it. From one of Spitz's photos, Elsie identified her mother, Elsie Zina, holding the baby John Wayne Cly. But there was a sad twist to the tale. Elsie hadn't seen her brother in more than 40 years. In the mid-50s, shortly after Elsie Zina died from one of the respiratory ailments an alarming number of Navajos had begun to develop, Christian missionaries "adopted" the baby, promising the overburdened Happy that they'd care for him. They took him away, saying they'd return him when he was old enough to go to school. They never came back.

Though Elsie seemed somewhat blasé about the modeling the Cly's had done, Spitz briefly wondered if he was hearing a bunch of tall tales reserved for tourists. Nevertheless he proposed to return with a copy of Navaho Boy and a camera crew. He had an inkling that the family had an even more interesting story to tell than the one about Navaho Boy. "One of the first things that came out of Elsie's mouth was, 'I worked for Harry Goulding as a housekeeper. I made beds. I did laundry,'" Spitz recalls. "I wasn't really sure what she was trying to get at, but if I read anything into it, it was that 'my life was not just posing for pictures.'"

Back in Chicago, Spitz reported to Kennedy. He was able to identify nearly everyone in the film. He suggested that if Kennedy wanted to give something back to the Navajos, he could personally return his father's film to the Cly's. The symmetry of Kennedy handing back the images his father took would be delicious. Spitz could record these moments, ask the Cly's what the old film meant to them, let them talk about their lives, then combine the interviews with footage from the old film into a new film. Spitz had heard about the impending opening of a Navajo museum and thought perhaps they could donate the film to it. Kennedy was game and agreed to pay for the production work. Meanwhile Spitz narrowed his research and discovered that what Elsie had told him about the family's celebrity was true. In fact, as long as Harry Goulding brought visitors to Monument Valley, they had painted, photographed, and filmed the Cly's. The Navajos were suspicious of Goulding at first, and without willing trading partners he'd have been out of business. Hosteen Cly, Elsie's great-grandfather, was one of the first Navajos to befriend him and he never forgot it. From then on, whenever someone wanted pictures of Indians, Goulding brought them to the Cly's, and he made sure they received some payment in the form of money, food, or supplies.

'Cly' is Goulding's English bastardization of their original Navajo name Nishtlhaaí, meaning "left-handed." Elsie told Spitz that during the hard winter months the trader often looked in on the family, bringing food and supplies. Bernie recalled long, hot days herding sheep, when Goulding would stop by with a can of peaches or beans for him. "He was like family," Elsie said. Spitz describes the long friendship as "a reciprocal, interdependent relationship where Harry always had the upper hand," and likens Goulding's role in the valley to that of a plantation owner or a benevolent dictator. "Nothing happened in the valley without Harry Goulding knowing about it," he says. "He ran everything."



On his own time, Spitz scoured libraries and film archives, examining the faces of unidentified Indians and eventually assembling a trove of images of the Clys. In the 40s and 50s they had become unwitting icons of the west. They turned up on postcards and calendars, in textbooks, in articles in *Life* and *Arizona Highways*, and in travel brochures that are still sold from racks in airports in Albuquerque and Phoenix.

In 1952, Kerr-McGee-later noted for owning the Oklahoma plutonium plant where whistleblower Karen Silkwood worked-produced a sinister promotional film touting the safety and benefits of uranium mining on the reservation called *A Navajo Journey*. The narrator proclaims that the Navajos' "hearts are as big as the land on which they live" and that "family life is undisturbed if not uninterrupted," while at the same time "the hills resound with the whir of modern machinery." Happy and Willie Cly play starring roles, weaving, bathing, tending corn, and lending credibility to the canard that the nascent mining industry brought Navajos nothing worse than good jobs.

A few years later the Clys appeared on a Warner Brothers television show about the making of *The Searchers*. Spitz hunted down footage of them in John Ford's home movies. They also modeled for photographers like Josef Muench and Ray Manley. A photograph of the Clys by Ralph H. Anderson hangs in the Museum of New Mexico and family members modeled for paintings by R. Brownell McGrew that today sell for tens of thousands of dollars.

When Happy Cly died in 1960, *Time* ran a tribute calling her "the most photographed woman in America." Spitz even found a piece of doggerel in an old issue of *Arizona Highways* titled "At the Grave of the Old Navajo," about the family patriarch: "I stood at the grave of Hosteen Cly / Old Left Hand-the Navajo- / And watched the monumental buttes / Take fire in the afterglow." But those were rare instances of attribution. The Clys were almost never identified by name and they rarely saw their own images when they were published. In June of '97, wary of the sensitivities surrounding the Windway ceremony and concerned about the possibility of giving offense, Spitz and Kennedy traveled to Window Rock, Arizona, the capital of the Navajo Nation, and met with the tribal president and other officials, essentially seeking permission to go forward with a documentary. "They were eager to see it," says Spitz. "I guess no one had ever brought any of these things back. They were all made for white audiences. They were delighted, cordial, kind-180 degrees from what you'd expect." Spitz and Kennedy were invited to return that fall and present *Navaho Boy* and the work in progress at the opening of the Navajo Nation Museum. After the meeting they drove to Monument Valley, showing the film to Elsie, Jimmy, and Bernie Cly and other family members, and filming their reactions. Kennedy describes the experience as "eerie" at first. "I could see when I was introducing myself that they looked at me like, 'What is he doing here? What are they gonna do to exploit us now?' Unfortunately I could understand why. For whole generations they've been exploited by the white man. So what the hell was the difference with this?"

But Spitz says showing the film brought the barriers down. "It didn't have sound," he says. "So they didn't have to deal with the white man's interpretation of it." He frequently employs the phrase "the gift of memory" to describe returning the film to the family. The Clys let loose a



torrent of recollections. "You can imagine what pictures mean to this family when they come out of nowhere," he says. "And the impact of a motion picture with really beautiful photography? When these beautiful images of yourself and your loved ones come back to you and someone says 'This is yours,' you get the idea of what this means."

In September of '97, Spitz and Kennedy returned to Window Rock for the opening of the Navajo Nation Museum, where they presented a 13-minute film incorporating footage from Navaho Boy with Spitz's narration, describing the film's history and its return to the Cly family. A gift from Kennedy to the museum, *The Return of Navajo Boy: An Introduction*, was designed to serve both as a companion to *Navaho Boy* and as a promotional piece that the museum could use to encourage others to return cultural material and artifacts to the tribe. "We were all excited because we were going to see the family again," says Spitz. "And it felt really good. I felt we made a respectable piece: how this film may be the first of many things that come back. How this one artifact had a life beyond itself and how this family that is still very much alive has an evolving story in its own right."

At the last minute Spitz was alarmed to learn of a potential controversy. During the Windway ceremony, Happy Cly appears bare breasted. Elsie prepared anyone who might be offended by introducing the film and describing what was to come. "A white man recorded *Navaho Boy* years ago," she said. "It was rediscovered and returned to us. I like that. It shows our traditional ways. Today we are losing our old ways. Our grandparents miss them. Our younger generation doesn't know the old ways. I want to preserve the old ways. We are making a film now. It is for our family's future." Spitz needn't have worried. The screening went off without a hitch. Recalling that the Clys stopped practicing traditional medicine around the time Bernie and his uncle got sick, Spitz began to imagine a longer documentary with the Clys: "I wanted to follow the story line that was given to me about how uranium had affected them and what it was doing to their traditional belief system."

Spitz had helped Kennedy understand *Navaho Boy*, then helped him return it to the tribe and the Clys. Now he was ready to expand the project into a full-length documentary and try to get it on public television. "The last thing I wanted to do was what every other white person had ever done, which was their own story from their own point of view about people they had 'discovered.' What I did in the beginning turned out to be the very same thing. I knew it could not be a white guy going down there discovering the people in his dad's film. It was clear to me that they had a great story to tell and the catalyst was the pictures that had been taken of them and were now coming back." Spitz was confident that as the story unfolded he would be able to interest funders. He turned to Kennedy. "I told him from the get go that I would find other funding to support this," he says. "Foundations had supported me in the past and they were likely to support this. I told him that I needed to go back and develop a demo that could be shown to funders and broadcasters and he was up for that. I figured that would be the last of his contributions."

He planned to allow the Clys to tell their own story by interpreting the old photographs and films-including *Navaho Boy*-that outsiders took and used for their own purposes. "This place



was always being billed as the land that time forgot," he says. "The strange irony between that and this family's experience is that they were constantly facing tourists. And when they weren't doing that, the men were mining uranium. None of that stuff ever came out, and they always wanted to tell their story, but no one ever gave them the chance." He went back to the reservation for a third visit in October. He spent some time with Bernie and heard more about working in the uranium mine, Bernie's illness, and his subsequent efforts to collect a settlement. Bernie's tale is typical of those of hundreds of Navajo uranium miners and their families who are seeking reparations from the federal government through the Radiation Exposure Compensation Act. Passed in 1990, RECA was designed to help not only sick miners and their families, but atomic test down-winders and on-site military personnel who were exposed to radiation as a result of the frequently duplicitous activities of the Atomic Energy Commission during the cold war. Navajo miners and their widows, who were largely poor, illiterate non-English speakers, have had particular difficulties securing settlements.

Spitz also interviewed Elsie on camera in the John Ford Room at Goulding's, which is filled with photographs and mementos of the many films that were staged in Monument Valley. He hoped he could elicit her memories of the various Ford productions that came to the area during her childhood. But in response to a question about John Wayne, the actor, she burst into tears and repeated the tale of her missing brother, John Wayne Cly, showing Spitz a picture on the wall of the baby sitting next to Happy Cly. "I was looking for a thread I could follow," says Spitz. "But this happened 40 years ago or more and it was the farthest thing from my mind. I thought, 'God, if we could find him...don't get distracted.'" Spitz tried to stay focused on the family's relationship with uranium.

During the early years of World War II, vanadium, an element used to make steel alloys, was mined at a few places on the Navajo reservation. After Hiroshima the government became more interested in vanadium-bearing ore because it also contained uranium. According to a biography, *Tall Sheep: Harry Goulding, Monument Valley Trader* by Samuel Moon, the trader brought an executive of the Vanadium Corporation of America into the valley because "I wanted whatever I could get opened up so that the Navajos would still be working in here after the war, and they wouldn't have to sit here and starve." Goulding said that he discovered eight uranium deposits himself and he sent word out to the Navajos that if they found any yellow rocks they should bring them directly to him. In the same book, a disgruntled Navajo named Luke Yazzie tells the story of discovering a vein of the rocks and leading Goulding to it with the promise of royalties he never received. The deposit was developed as Monument No. 2, a hugely profitable mine for VCA. According to another account, Goulding rewarded Luke Yazzie with a cigar.

After the war, uranium mining boomed across the Colorado Plateau, with companies such as Kerr-McGee, Union Carbide Nuclear, and the Climax Uranium Company staking claims and building processing mills. Many of the richest deposits were found on the reservation. Eventually a law was passed promising individual Navajos a share of royalties for mines they discovered. Goulding began distributing Geiger counters to the Navajos and touting the patriotic work being done on the reservation. An article he wrote for *Popular Mechanics* ran with a photo of him instructing Willie Cly in the use of a Geiger counter. Navajos began driving pickup trucks and



working hourly mining jobs as they shifted into a wage economy. But they hardly prospered by leasing their land to the mining companies. The tribe collected a fraction of what the companies raked in, and individual Navajos saw relatively few benefits. And there was a terrible price to be paid. In time, miners began to suffer from respiratory illnesses, particularly a rapidly developing and deadly form of lung cancer brought on by exposure to radon gas, which built up in the mines. The hazards of uranium mining were well documented by the time it began on the reservation and the Atomic Energy Commission could easily have prevented many deaths by requiring the companies to ventilate the mines. Lone voices who tried to implement safety measures were stifled as such considerations were subsumed in the overarching goal of winning the cold war. According to former congressman and secretary of the interior Stewart Udall and other advocates for the rights of uranium miners, the AEC, as the sole purchaser of uranium, even subverted health studies supposedly undertaken to help the miners by instructing public health workers not to let on about the dangers as they collected blood and sputum samples. The mining companies didn't want to scare off their workers and the AEC didn't want its supply of metal interrupted. Over the decades, the government frequently tried to excuse its inaction by claiming it was waiting for the results of these long-term studies before implementing safety measures.

At first Bernie Cly didn't say much to Spitz about his health problems. He only talked about his Uncle Hubert's lung disease and his miraculous recovery at the hands of the preacher. Spitz learned from family members-and eventually dragged it out of Bernie-that in fact he'd had half of his own right lung surgically removed in Albuquerque sometime in the 70s. There was also a lawyer who took on his case in 1995 and filed a claim under RECA, but it didn't get far and the Cly's couldn't recall his name. Spitz asked around and discovered that Bernie's lawyer was none other than Stewart Udall, who filed the 1979 class action lawsuit against the government that was the impetus of the grassroots crusade for RECA's passage.

Udall dug into his files and remembered that Bernie Cly had had a strong case: he'd gotten sick enough from working long enough in dirty enough conditions that he should have received compensation. The catch was that Bernie was subject to Justice Department "smoking penalties." In processing claims the government looked through old health records taken at the mines by mostly white, non-Navajo-speaking health workers. If they found evidence that a sick miner was a smoker, he had to prove that he had been exposed to radon at levels two and a half times higher than a nonsmoker in order to receive a settlement. Records indicated that on six different occasions Cly told health workers that he never smoked. They said that once, in 1970, he said he'd smoked one to ten cigarettes a day since the age of 20.

Bernie Cly says that's a lie-he never smoked white man's tobacco. Like many Navajos he smoked mountain tobacco occasionally as part of traditional ceremonies and the questioner misrepresented that. That one blemish on his health record was enough to disqualify his claim under RECA guidelines. Udall has been working toward getting legislation passed that would liberalize RECA to provide relief for Bernie and hundreds of other miners who have been shut out by the Justice Department's strict interpretation of the act. According to the Justice



Department, 491 Navajo uranium miners' claims have been approved, 527 have been denied, and 48 others are still pending.

Udall recently filed a claim for Bernie, which he hopes will be accepted under a recent relaxation of the regulations. A more radical change in RECA that would eliminate the smoking penalty altogether has passed in the Senate and is currently sitting in the House. Udall expects it to become law within the year. Miners or their families who win claims under the act collect \$100,000. The mining has taken its toll on the Navajos' land as well. The last records Spitz had found for the operation of the mine behind Elsie's hogan were from 1966, and on his first visits to the valley its mouth had remained wide-open. He'd contacted an official in the tribal government whose job it was to locate and seal abandoned mines. That person told Spitz that Skyline was a high priority in terms of contamination but low priority because of the small population in the area. Spitz asked to be notified when the mine would be sealed so he could film it, but when he returned later with Bernie, the entrance was walled up with cinder blocks, months ahead of schedule.

The recently sealed mine, the stain on the rock wall below it, and the pile of rubble at the foot of the cliff are clues that the area where the Clys live is hot. How hot is the question. In 1997 the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency visited Monument Valley as part of its Navajo Abandoned Uranium Mines Project, a joint effort with the Navajo Nation to identify old mines and other potential sources of radiation contamination. A survey team flew its helicopter to Monument Valley High School and explained the effort to an assembly of students. Over the next year they conducted an aerial radiological mapping of the region and analyses of 29 water sources in the valley.

When Spitz heard about these tests he began calling Patti Collins, the EPA's project manager and principal investigator for the study, trying to determine the health risk posed to Elsie's water supply—a pump several miles from her hogan, where she and more than 200 other community members retrieve their water in large plastic barrels. Two years went by and Spitz never received an answer. Last month the results of those tests were finally released to the Oljato Chapter House, the seat of tribal government in Monument Valley. The EPA tested three particular water sources near the Cly family: Monument Valley High School, a windmill where Lorenzo Begay gets his water, and Sand Spring, a natural water source where Navajos drive their sheep to drink and where families go to swim. According to the EPA's risk assessment, the high school and Sand Spring present "some risk" of contamination from lead—a by-product of uranium decay. The windmill is also in the EPA's "some risk" category for noncancerous afflictions. What those may be is not specified in the test results.

Patti Collins says that her team is in the process of helping tribal representatives interpret the highly technical data. Collins was immortalized last year as the only nonfictional character in mystery writer Tony Hillerman's 16th novel, *Hunting Badger*, a book Spitz got for Christmas this year. She's characterized as a no-nonsense straight talker, who jumps to the aid of the Navajo Tribal Police, offering the use of her radiation-detecting helicopter to identify an abandoned mine where some casino heist fugitives are hiding.



The situation is fictional. In real life Collins is a fluent speaker of government bureaucratese. "We're presenting information back to the chapters with respect to the risk posed of using those water sources," she says. "Because of the way toxicology works, there is no water you'd find anywhere that would pose zero risk. Sometimes the risk ends up being so low that most people wouldn't consider it to be any risk at all. But we did not want to pose a value judgment on the water saying 'You should drink this or you shouldn't.'" Would she drink it?

"Would I drink it?" she repeats. "Uh...sure. I don't personally like water treated with chlorine, but as far as whether I would be concerned that it would be harmful to me, I try to explain it in terms of if it were a regulated water source-most of these aren't-would the water source be out of compliance with regulations? And they're not." Collins says that it will be several months before results are in for the water supply Elsie shares with the rest of the community (which may be connected to the water supply for Goulding's as well). Spitz says Collins told him the water supply was never tested at all. "It wasn't included in their survey," says the Oljato Chapter House's James Adakai. "Testing local water supplies should be a priority. We thought it was involved in the survey. Now they're saying they did not get permission in the community, which doesn't make sense to us at all."

There's a magenta blob on the EPA's aerial survey map of Monument Valley indicating that the helicopter detected radiation in the vicinity of the mine above Elsie's hogan. Collins confirms that the radiation in this case comes from the debris piled at the base of the mesa. "Radiation contours" such as this are used to pinpoint mines and other sources of radiation but they can't determine health hazards.

Doug Brugge, an environmental scientist and assistant professor at the Tufts University medical school, grew up on the reservation, where his father, an anthropologist, did his fieldwork. He's worked closely with Navajo uranium miners and says risk assessment studies such as the EPA's have to be followed up by more intensive ones. "Radiation is much more capable of damage when it's been internalized," he says. "You need all kinds of information about what people are doing in that area before you get a sense of is this or is this not a risk. What about a child that goes out there, sits and lays on the ground, gets dirt on his hand, ingests some of it, and does that with some regularity?" Collins said that ground surveys are now being conducted at the request of individual chapter houses. In fact, Elsie told Spitz that last week a man from the EPA came out and tested the hogan she just moved into and found that its "numbers were low." He also tested the hogan next door, where she lived for three years with her aunt and told her it's "very hot."

Though Spitz wrote innumerable proposals to potential funders for the documentary, all were rejected, and he continued to work without a budget. In April 1998 he asked Kennedy to fund a return trip. He wanted to film a rally for Navajo uranium miners in Window Rock and also to obtain formal permission from the Clys for their participation in the film. The family asked two things of Spitz before signing releases: any footage of Navaho Boy's Windway ceremony could not show Happy Cly unclothed, and part of the film should address the dangers of uranium mining. They were in business. The uranium miners' rally in Window Rock that April was a big event, attended not only by the miners and their families and advocates like Udall, but politicians



and reporters as well. Bernie Cly showed Congressman Bill Redmond the surgical scar that stretched around his rib cage and gave an impassioned speech to the crowd: "Sometimes we use smoke for our traditional ceremonies. The government penalizes us for our traditions when they reject our claims. Our film will expose this injustice."

Bernie was interviewed by a reporter from the Gallup Independent, who also interviewed Spitz and wrote a story about the return of Navaho Boy to the Clys and the documentary in progress.

Back in Chicago, the day after the story ran, Spitz received a tearful call from Elsie's niece Violet, the only family member with a telephone. She was sobbing for joy: Elsie's brother, the long-lost John Wayne Cly, had seen the article and made contact. He was living in Zuni, New Mexico, just four hours away and had already driven to her home in Window Rock to meet her. Window Rock is about a three-hour drive from Monument Valley, and Violet hadn't told any of the other family members yet. What should she do? Spitz never imagined the story of the stolen baby would have a happy ending. He was even more flabbergasted that Violet had delayed the family's reunion so that he could get to Monument Valley in time to film it. "She didn't want to spoil whatever we might do with the film," he says. A reunion was planned. He'd have to scramble to find the money, but he said he'd get there in two weeks. Desperate, he turned to Kennedy.

"I told Bill, 'If you want your dad's film to be useful to people, you couldn't ask for a greater use than this. You've given this guy his identity back as a result of the return of Navaho Boy. Now the return of the Navajo boy is literal.' Kennedy fronted the money and Spitz began to assemble two camera crews; one for the Clys in Monument Valley and one for John Wayne Cly in Zuni.

John Wayne Cly was raised by a white woman in a Christian mission home near Continental Divide, New Mexico. His foster family included two brothers and two sisters, also Navajos. It was not uncommon for children to leave their parents for boarding schools off the reservation, but John Wayne Cly isn't sure why he wasn't returned to his family as promised. For a time at least, Happy Cly knew her grandson's whereabouts, but the information died with her. In a letter to the mission kept from John Wayne but tracked down by Spitz, Happy Cly wrote,

"When I get real well I want John Wayne back." "I lost my culture, my language, my way of life," John Wayne Cly told Spitz's camera. As a boy he used to sit by the side of the road and count cars. "I would wonder if my family or any relatives would go cruising by and see me sitting there. And one time I wondered whether John Wayne himself would come cruising by so that I could ask him to take me back." Another letter obtained by Spitz might explain why the mission didn't want to let an orphan with Hollywood connections go. "Thank you for writing me about my little Navajo namesake," it read. "I'm glad to know that he is being cared for along with other Navajo children. I hope the check enclosed will be of help. Best of luck. Sincerely, John Wayne."

After he left the mission home, Cly built his own life, mining uranium, then making jewelry and driving a bus for itinerant firefighters during forest fire season. He married a Zuni woman and together they were raising three children, but, he told Spitz, "there was something missing from



my life all the time." Yet he was wary of aggressively searching for his family. Once he'd met some people who shared his last name and asked if they were related to Happy and Willie. But they'd snubbed him, perhaps because he didn't speak Navajo. Another time he'd left a note with his phone number at a gas station in the town of Kayenta saying he was looking for his family. The Clys had heard about the note but never found the gas station.

Spitz rode along with John Wayne on the day he drove to Monument Valley to reunite with his family. Dozens of family members had assembled for a party to welcome him back into the fold. As John Wayne approached the crowd, Elsie stepped forward. The footage of their embrace, the first in over 40 years, brings goose bumps even after repeated viewings. Says Spitz, "If I never worked again I would savor that the rest of my life." He could not have asked for a more fitting climax. "Each time I've gone back to do some filming something unexpected has pushed the story forward, so that we got a sense of a story taking place that is a result of the initial film that we brought back."

It also took a budget to push the story forward, and Spitz still didn't have one. Early on he encouraged the Clys to answer his questions in their own language if they were more comfortable. He found himself sitting on mountains of footage containing stories, anecdotes, and answers to questions—mostly in Navajo. This forced him to rely on hired translators to help him make sense of what he caught on film. But the money ran out and he felt he was floundering. In October 1998 he was invited to screen the work in progress at a Navajo studies conference in Window Rock. There he ran into Bennie Klain, a reporter for KTNN, a Navajo Nation radio station he'd met the previous spring. Klain, who grew up in a small community on the reservation called Tonalea, had been assigned to do a story about the documentary and interviewed several of the Clys. He had since left KTNN and was studying at the University of New Mexico. When Klain interviewed Elsie the previous spring she had told him the same story about her missing brother. He was stunned to hear that John Wayne Cly had found his family.

At Spitz's request Klain translated the interview and sent it to Chicago. Spitz sent back other tapes and Klain began working for him as a translator. Last summer Klain and some friends jumped in a car and headed for New York on a road trip. On their way through Chicago he rang up Spitz, who invited him over to take a look at the latest rough cut. While he was there Spitz asked if he would work on a few more translations, and he ended up staying for a month. "As each day went on I got more and more involved with it," says Klain, who is now studying film at the University of Texas. Spitz told him, "I've been wanting to collaborate with someone who knows the language and the culture." He asked if I would be interested.

"I think when Jeff first showed up with this project I was apprehensive. Some guy from Chicago shows up and he says he's doing a documentary, I was like, "I don't know, Chicago is a long way from the reservation." Klain says he got over any misgivings when Spitz offered him a producer's credit. "I had never worked in film before," he says. "That really told me about how true he wanted to be to the story, that he was willing to go that far out on a limb." Klain dug into his role as translator, and also helped Spitz wade through some tricky ethical issues. Spitz was still worried about using the footage of the Windway ceremony. He'd encountered more people-



Native Americans and Anglos—who told him he should not be messing around with a film of a Windway. "It's sacred," one woman told him. "Don't you understand what that means?" Another person said, "No elderly Navajo would allow a white man to film his ceremonies."

Representations of Navajo healing ceremonies raise all sorts of thorny questions. Were the subjects filmed against their will? Who did the filming and what was done with it? Were the subjects aggressively persuaded? Were they paid? How much were they paid and is it OK to pay to film them? Is the ceremony authentic or did the medicine man fake it? Then there's the question of whether they should be filmed at all. Anthropologist Jim Faris, whose book *Navajo and Photography* tackles the subject, believes they shouldn't. "The sand painting is supposed to be consumed," he says. "At the end of the day when the blessings all have been taken from it, the painting is finally sacrificed. It's important that that be done in order to facilitate the healing. One of the views is that a photograph preserves that sand painting in some fashion and it can't be fully sacrificed and it can't be fully consumed. A different perspective is that these things are all individual and anybody can do what they like." Faris says that compared to other parts of the reservation, Monument Valley is home to a more entrepreneurial tradition with respect to the issue. "Much of the rest of Navajoland hates it, but that's not the point." In Moon's biography, Harry Goulding discussed the practice of outsiders paying medicine men to observe the ceremonies: "We got to doing a lot of that. Our guests were paying the fiddler; and they could well afford it and enjoyed doing it. Never did I have anybody that wouldn't turn around and hand him [a medicine man] a fifty dollar bill or something on top of all that. Then Katso [sic] started, and there were two or three others in here that would do sand paintings. That way they could get a lot more money out of it, and everybody was happy."

Elsie told Spitz and Klain that indeed the Windway ceremony in *Navaho Boy* was the real thing. Ketso (the only Navajo in the film identified by his real name) was hired to perform the ceremony for Happy Cly, then suffering from the respiratory condition that would later kill her. Ketso agreed to the filming, she told them, and the rest of the family didn't think anything of it. "The controversy all depends on who you talk to," says Bennie Klain. "My grandfather was a medicine man who knew a lot of the old ceremonies. I know the ramifications of putting something like that on film. But at the same time the medicine man said it was OK. I look at it and think that if my grandpa said it was OK to film a certain ceremony then I wouldn't argue with him. "Now some people will look at something like that and take an activist attitude: 'Those people were misrepresented,' blah, blah, blah. The thing is, people who say this can afford to be activists. And people like the Clys, they had to make a living, and they were getting paid to do this, so they really couldn't afford to be activists."

Klain told Spitz he was too preoccupied with justifying the use of the Windway ceremony in the film. In the end, Spitz included less than a minute of the ceremony, in the context of Elsie explaining it to Bill Kennedy. The story took on too many other dimensions. "As it turns out," says Spitz, "nothing can be more tangential to the film I'm making. But it loomed so large. It made it hard to see these people as real human beings with real lives and jobs and problems and a whole contemporary set of needs, interests, and desires. Everything was filtered through that ceremony. I didn't start to realize that until Bennie and I started translating the Navajo. Once we



started, the sense of humor, the spontaneity, the charm, and the real flavor of their personalities started to come across. They had more things to talk about than what happened 40 years ago when some guy showed up with a camera."

By the end of the summer the documentary began to take shape. *The Return of Navajo Boy*, narrated by Lorenzo Begay, begins with Bill Kennedy handing over a film reel to Jimmy Cly. Over the next 50 minutes archival films and photographs of the family are woven into footage of the Clys telling their family history, beginning with Hosteen Cly's relationship with Harry Goulding on up through Bernie Cly's struggle for compensation and John Wayne Cly's homecoming.

Except for the Hefner Foundation, which provided a \$2,000 grant, Spitz was having no luck raising money. A public television station in Phoenix told him that uranium "was not pledgeable." Others, with their own visions for a film, were interested in either Kennedy's story or the Clys', but not both. Finally one attempt paid off, but not in cash. On his first visit to the Navajo Nation Museum, back in 1997, Spitz noticed Robert Redford's name on a plaque on the wall. "It was for their directors or advisers or something. I thought, 'He's got to find out about this project.'" Spitz wrote a letter to the Sundance Institute, which was forwarded to Redford's political consultant. He received an encouraging letter saying they had no funding but that he should let them know once he produced a rough cut. After John Wayne Cly's return, in June of '98, Spitz sent some footage and was bounced over to Sundance's Native Program, where again no money was available. But, they said, if he could have it ready in a few months they would like to premiere the film at the Sundance Film Festival the following winter. "It was a huge shot in the arm," says Spitz, but there was no way he could make it to Park City in time. He plugged away, and this past September Spitz was again invited to the festival. Kennedy came to the rescue one last time. "I had no intention of doing that," he says. "But Jeff was doing a study of expenses and I wanted him to not get hurt. When it got down to Sundance being interested I told him I would finish it off." Neither will say what they spent on the entire project, though Spitz says it was less than the \$400,000 he once told the Gallup Independent it might end up costing.

With that final push, Spitz made a last trip to Zuni to shoot more footage of John Wayne Cly. He reedited the film, put music down on the sound track, flew Lorenzo to Chicago twice to add narration, and took it back to Elsie to get her input. Then he tightened and fine-tuned until it was ready to go. *The Return of Navajo Boy* will have its premiere at Sundance on January 23, during a private screening held every year to honor one film in the festival's Native Forum. The Clys were invited, of course, but they almost missed the party. The usual method of communicating with them—sending a fax to the high school with a request that a student deliver it—failed for some reason, and though they'd heard about the screening, they never got any details. Spitz, who happened to be in Los Angeles last weekend, got wind of the problem and went to Monument Valley on Monday to show them the final cut and let them know when and where they were expected at the festival. Kennedy had booked their rooms. John Wayne, Elsie, Lorenzo, and other Clys will attend. The audience will also include journalists, representatives from Utah's native tribes, and Sundance board members. The movie will have a public screening at the festival on January 28. The Sundance premiere lends a certain cachet that can help get the film picked up for



broadcast on public television. Spitz is negotiating with two funding sources-the Independent Television Service and Native American Public Telecommunications-that might help with promotional support. No profits are sought, but the Cly family will receive the proceeds should the film be sold to any museums or schools.

For his part, Bennie Klain says he's grateful the project never received major funding from an outsider because it left the Cly's point of view uncorrupted. But he has a "healthy apprehension" about what kind of coverage the Cly's might receive down the road. "It's interesting because the film addresses how the Cly's were presented through other people's eyes," he says. "And sometimes I struggle with that because I think, well, we're doing the very same thing. Every time we choose to go out and do publicity for the film, we're presenting it in a certain light and it's self-perpetuating. Once you open that door it's like you open yourself up to all these other media outlets. There could just be an onslaught. What are they going to write? What's going to go through that filter?" Spitz plans on filming the event at Sundance, "just another part of the journey" for the Cly's. He's been trying to track down Bernie Cly's surgical records in the hope that they might expedite his RECA claim, and he's still waiting for answers from the EPA. Spitz isn't worried about the media. "There are southwestern journalists who are looking for stories and they understand the context of the New West. In that context, the Cly's are great witnesses, and their story is going to shake people up. Most journalists will never want to have to go through what it takes to do justice to that way of thinking. But the Cly's handle themselves very, very well. If people want to take certain things and twist them or distort them, the Cly's will understand. For the most part they aren't going to let anything get them too up or too down. They just go along and keep going. They will do just fine."