



THE RETURN OF NAVAJO BOY

by Nancy Watson, Gallup Independent, March 29, 2000

GALLUP, He sat down to read the Gallup Independent, and before he was done, he had found his family.

"It was the gateway to home," said John Wayne Cly.

Cly had been reading a story two years ago about the filming of "The Return of Navajo Boy," a documentary about Navajos who had lived in Monument Valley for more than 60 years.

Cly had once been one of those Monument Valley Navajos, but he'd been taken from his family by missionaries when he was 2 years old after his mother had died of lung disease.

Although they had promised to bring him home when he was 6, he spent the rest of his childhood with a foster mission family in Continental Divide.

"I felt lost. I never fit in," he said. "The people I was living with told me I could call them Mom and Dad, but it didn't feel right."

As a child, he wondered who he was and where his family was. He wasn't even sure how old he was, since he had no birth certificate

He did have two letters, one from his namesake, John Wayne, and another from his grandmother, Happy Cly.

Wayne's letter was a response to a letter the missionary had written, obviously requesting money.

In the letter, Wayne inquired about the child and included a check to help with his care.

The letter from his grandmother said when she was well, she wanted the boy brought home to her and his family in Monument Valley.

His grandmother never recovered from her illness, but she left a rich legacy that would one day lead him home, although it would take decades.

Like Wayne, the Cly family of Monument Valley had been filmed and photographed many times. Even John Wayne Cly had been filmed before the missionaries took him away from his Navajo family.

Harry Goulding, who started the Goulding Trading Post in Monument Valley, frequently took tourists to the Clys, so the visitors could observe Navajos.

Goulding and others took thousands of photographs of the Clys that were made into postcards.



Happy Cly, John Wayne Cly's grandmother, was once called the most photographed woman in America, but she was never named. She was known simply as the Navajo woman

Goulding also brought John Ford to the area, where he filmed several westerns.

It was during the shooting of one of these westerns that John Wayne appeared at the Cly home and named the baby, John Wayne Cly.

Ford filmed "The Navajo Boy" in the area and used the silent, black-and-white home movie to describe life in Monument Valley. Jimmy Cly, John Wayne Cly's brother, was the star of the film. The Kerr McGee Co. also filmed a piece of propaganda about uranium mining near the Clys' home.

A few years ago, Bill Kennedy, Ford's son, took the film to producer Jeff Spitz in Chicago. He wanted to do something with the movie.

Research on the movie brought Spitz to the Navajo Nation, where he began a documentary about the return of the home movie to the Clys.

He and Kennedy met Jimmy Cly, the star of Navajo Boy, and the other members of the Cly family, including Elsie Mae Cly, John Wayne Cly's sister.

She told Spitz about her 2-year-old brother, whom the missionaries had taken.

At the same time, hearings were taking place regarding the federal government's responsibility to the Navajo victims of uranium mining. Spitz included footage of the hearings in the documentary, because some of the Clys were testifying at it.

The Gallup Independent reported on the hearing and the filming of the Cly family that took place there.

Included in the news story was the fact that a baby had been taken from the family.

The next day, after reading the stories, John Wayne Cly called the newspaper office.

"They gave me the number of my niece, Violette Adakai, in Fort Defiance. I called her and told her who I was. She cried. She said, 'You're the uncle we've always been looking for.'"

He then called Spitz, who wanted to include John Wayne Cly's homecoming in his film.

In "The Return of Navajo Boy," Spitz had taken on a mother lode.

When Bennie Klain, a radio news reporter who had previously talked to Spitz, visited him in Chicago, Klain discovered Spitz had an enormous amount of "rich material" but couldn't tie it together.



Klain, became the co-producer, and together they wove the Clys story.

Spitz said his usual funding sources for films, including the MacArthur Foundation, denied him money for "The Return of Navajo Boy, but Kennedy kept the film alive financially.

The film includes the return of the original movie and many of the postcards and photographs taken of the Clys over the years. And it documents some of the devastation that uranium mining has had on the Clys, including the death of some family members.

But it also was responsible for and includes the return of John Wayne Cly to his family.

The tearful reunion of John Wayne Cly and his family is the climax of the film.

Cly says he cannot remember much of his life before the fourth grade. He thinks he may have chosen to forget.

He grew up with three foster brothers, two foster sisters and a foster mother, Patty Laughlin, who now lives in California. The father of the foster family was a missionary who took care of things from another location and was seldom at the home.

He graduated from Thoreau High School. About a month later, while waiting to hear about job in the uranium mine or from the U.S. Coast Guard, he was kicked out of the foster home. He was told that it was time for him to leave.

He had no money and nowhere to live. He did not know where to go or what to do.

Sherwood and Roberta Stoddard, friends of his, gave him a place to stay, and he began working in a uranium mine.

He later met his wife Rufina and moved to Zuni, her pueblo, where he became a silversmith. They have a son, and Cly is stepfather to Rufina's two daughters. They have one grandchild.

He currently works as a fire bus driver, taking firefighters to forest fires.

He said the reunion with his family is like a "monkey off his back, like a burden lifted."

When asked his comments on the Indian Child Welfare Protection Act, passed by Congress in 1978 to protect Indian children from being adopted or taken into foster care off the reservation, he said, "It's a good idea.

"That way, there will not be so many lost people."

"The Return of Navajo Boy," an official Sundance Film Festival selection, will be shown in several locations this weekend.