



The Christmas That Changed My Life

By Wes Eby, Global Representative

“Why don’t you spend Christmas with me?” Aunt Gladys offered. “You are certainly welcome. We can visit a lot of interesting places around the Navajo Reservation.”

I tingled with excitement as I considered such a trip. After my wife, Roberta, and I discussed it, we accepted the kind invitation without hesitation. Our family had never been to the Southwest, and this anticipated vacation occupied me for weeks as I poured over maps, checked out our overnight stops, and planned all the details.

Aunt Gladys Owen, who had previously spent 15 years in Swaziland (now Eswatini) and South Africa as a Nazarene missionary, had accepted a teaching position with the federal government on the Navajo Nation in Arizona. Still single, my favorite aunt and “second mother” had embraced a life of adventure without fear, accepting God’s assignments without reservation.

The Journey Begins

When the two-week Christmas break from teaching assignments in Alabama began, we had already packed our suitcases. We, along with Eddy and Joey, our two preschool sons, headed westward the minute we drove away from the school. After making a brief overnight stop at my parents’ home for an early Christmas with them, we continued our 1,500-mile drive to Arizona. Destination? Kayenta [kay-EHN-tuh], a small community on the northwest corner of the Navajo Nation near the Utah border.

While traveling across Oklahoma and Texas, we saw that the landscape changed drastically. The wide-open spaces seemed to go on forever; the miles dragged by. But when we entered New Mexico, we noted a difference in the terrain as we rounded curves and topped hills, as we encountered majestic mountains, red-rock cliffs, and pancake-flat mesas. We were intrigued by the cities of Tucumcari, Albuquerque, and Gallup, seeing for the first time the places in the Southwest previously observed only on TV. Fascinated, we ventured into Arizona and entered the Navajo Nation, noting the eight-sided log homes called hogans [HOH-gahnz], the large flocks of sheep and goats, and the ragged buttes jutting into the turquoise sky. We had not yet arrived at our destination, but I already felt I had received a marvelous Christmas gift. After three days of driving, weary but still excited, we pulled into the driveway of the apartment in Kayenta that Aunt Gladys called home.

We filled the next ten days of our “Navajo Christmas” with captivating side-trips, creating one indelible memory after another. . . . Monument Valley with towering sandstone masterpieces rising to 1,000 feet . . . Four Corners Monument where I was able to be in four states—Arizona, Utah, Colorado, and New Mexico—at the same time . . . Betatakin [buh-TAT-uh-kin] Indian Ruins, the well-preserved cliff dwellings of the ancient Native Americans . . . Humphrey’s Peak near Flagstaff, the highest mountain in Arizona at more than 12,000 feet and one of the four sacred mountains of the Navajo . . . Grand Canyon with vistas defying description and an enchanting charm that in the future lured me back to this sacred spot more than a dozen times. All of them were Christmas presents decorated with festive, scarlet bows.

Yet, there is more. On Sunday, we attended a Nazarene church in Chilchinbeto [chill-CHIN-bee-toe], a tiny community 25 miles southeast of Kayenta. The route to this isolated place included 20 miles of washboard, dirt-and-sand road. My aunt helped at the mission as often as the weather permitted, as the road was usually impassable in inclement weather. Fortunately for us, we were able to go even though we encountered a sandstorm, an unpredictable weather event that is an accepted but frustrating part of life on the reservation. The church service gripped me as I realized I was worshiping cross-culturally, as if we were in a different area of the world. While the words to the songs were unfamiliar due to the language, the tunes were well-known, and we could worship as the English words filled our minds. As the English-speaking missionary preached that morning, a Navajo interpreter provided God’s message for the congregation in their heart language. And through it all, we sensed God’s Holy Spirit as He transcended a language barrier and cultural differences to minister to the hearts of His children regardless of race. One more indelible experience in this “different” Christmas that changed my life!

A Life-Changing Day

But here is the best part of all. One day before Christmas, Aunt Gladys took us to visit the school where she worked as the librarian. Kayenta Elementary and Middle School, operated by the Bureau of Indian Affairs (BIA), was a 1,000-student boarding school for Navajos in grades kindergarten through eighth grade. The students lived in dormitories with Navajo employees who became their surrogate parents.

As we walked through the halls of this large school, we met a couple of teachers who were working in their classrooms and taking advantage of the days without students. As we paused to visit, I commented on the large supply of teaching resources to aid the teaching-learning process. “Most impressive,” I said.

“Well, why don’t you come here to teach?” one person asked. “There is always a need for teachers.”

That question—that moment—sparked a dream in my heart that I had dismissed weeks earlier. You see, after Aunt Gladys accepted her assignment, I, also, applied to teach in the BIA. While Roberta and I

enjoyed aspects of our teaching jobs in Alabama, there were issues we were not comfortable with, and I had considered seeking another education position. Aunt Gladys's new job had triggered the interest, and I submitted the necessary paperwork. Alas! The BIA returned the application marked "rejected." I tossed the papers aside, forgetting all about this possibility. We had previously accepted our aunt's invitation to visit her for Christmas, and we did not alter our plans when the "rejection" notice came.

In the conversation with our aunt's fellow-teachers, I mentioned the previous application and the rejection. When asked why, I told them that my college degree was from a non-accredited school and my student teaching was not at the elementary level. As we talked about the reasons, I realized I had failed to send with my application a transcript of the graduate classes taken at the University of Alabama. Also, I completed my student teaching with sixth graders, but the grade level did not appear on my college transcript. These new friends encouraged me to call a government recruiter and make an appointment, as they believed the recruiter would overturn the rejection.

After Christmas, I made an appointment with a BIA official, and on our return trip to Alabama, I met with him in Albuquerque. After a short conversation, he guaranteed that I would be hired—within three weeks, no less. Well, the three weeks turned into five weeks, and I signed the papers to become a federal employee in the Bureau of Indian Affairs on February 1.

So, this Christmas was truly a momentous one, changing my life forever. I spent the next 22 years of my education career as a teacher and school administrator with the Diné—the beautiful Navajo people. This cross-cultural experience resulted in my wife and I becoming "unofficial" tentmaker missionaries for more than two decades. And since God designed this blessed time in my career as an educator, His promise became even more precious and endearing: "'For I know the plans I have for you,' declares the Lord, 'plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future'" (Jeremiah 29:11, NIV).

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