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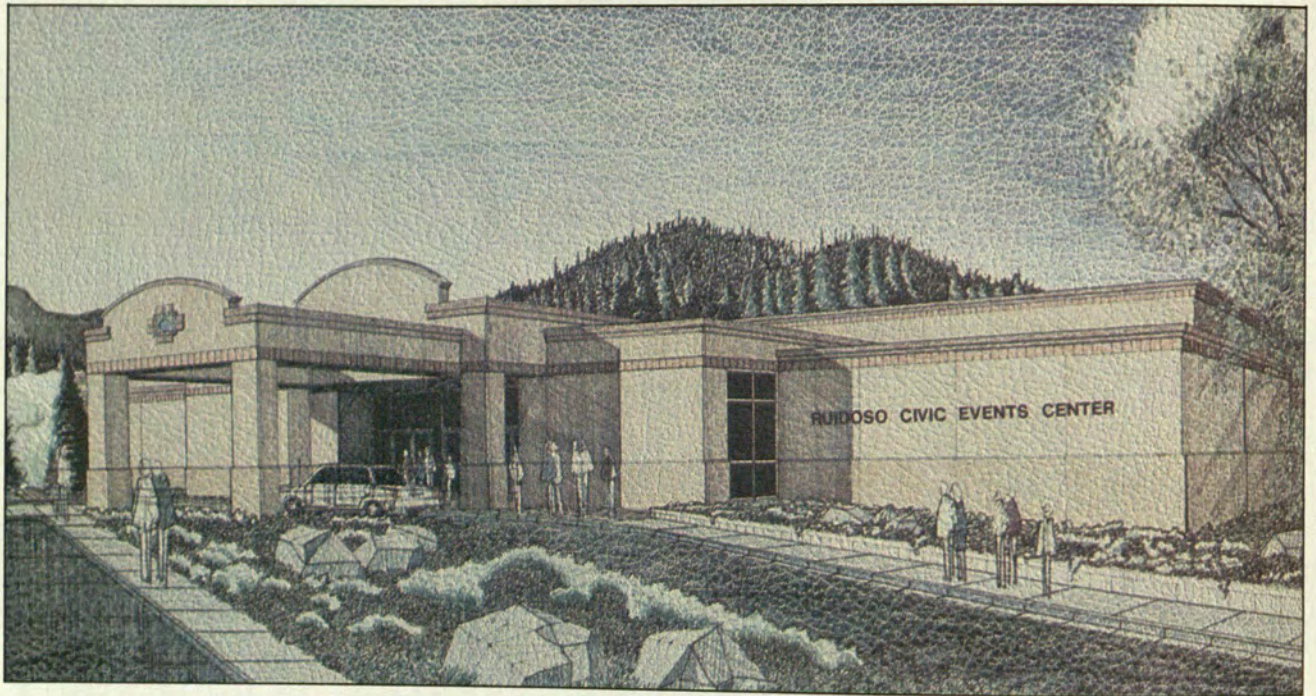
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John Nichols

John Nichols reflects on the holiness of water 44

70TH YEAR

July 1992

Volume 70, Number 7



COVER—Art/production director John Vaughan and associate art director Daniel Martínez collaborated on the design of our anniversary issue cover. Daniel superimposed computer graphics he created against a backdrop of a 367-carat Blue Gem turquoise stone, courtesy of Shalako Traders of Old Santa Fe. The cover is printed on 100-pound Mead Northcote paper stock.

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NAVAJOS CALL THEM SKINWALKERS

by Tony Hillerman
illustration by Gregory Truett Smith

The driver was young and shaken by what he'd seen. He leaned against his truck in the cold moonlight, stuttering while he described it. He was hauling oil field equipment from Texas to a well near Bluff Creek in southern Utah. It was his first time out here. He'd missed his turn at Red Mesa and was halfway to Kayenta before he knew it. Someone there told him to circle back to Bluff through Monument Valley and Mexican Hat. He had covered about 35 of those 50 empty miles when he saw it.

"I noticed motion, and I looked out the window and there he was. A man. Big man. Running beside the truck, motioning me to stop. Looked like he had on a fur coat but the head was still on it. Like a dog's head. Or a coyote's. I was geared way down for that long slope there. I was doing 36 but he stayed right with me. With the load and the grade I couldn't get it past 40, and he kept up with me for at least three miles until I finally got it over the ridge. I was doing more than 70 downhill when I finally looked out and he was gone."

The driver telling this at the Mexican Hat service station was describing an encounter with a skinwalker. The Navajo name is *mai tso* (wolf man), or *Yenaldlooshi*, which translates roughly into "he who trots on all fours with it." The "it" is the power to fly, to run supernaturally fast, to take animal form and to cause sickness, death, despair and other evil. The skinwalker is the Na-

vajo-American version of the Anglo-American witch.

In my years around Navajo country, reading Navajo lore and exchanging yarns with Navajos, I have encountered a score of similar stories of skinwalkers trying to stop drivers, with U.S. 666 between Shiprock and Gallup a popular scene for that. Other fairly standard skinwalker accounts involve finding the witch bothering the family's cattle or hearing him (rarely her) on the roof at night.

"The first time I saw a skinwalker," a Navajo friend once told me, "I was 11 and helping my grandmother get in the sheep because they were going to dip them the next day. It was twilight and I saw it walking along the ridge against the sunset. Just a dark shape. Two legs like a man, but bent way forward. And a head like a dog. I said, 'Grandma! Look!,' and she said 'Dennis, run and get the gun.'" Dennis, a college student

when he was telling me this, said he had shot at the witch and it "sort of flew away."

More commonly such encounters involve hearing the sounds of panic among the livestock at night, running outside to find a large dog attacking the animals, shooting at it and seeing the dog convert itself into human form and run away. Or a human seen bothering the animals turns into a dog (or a bird) and escapes when shot at. It often happens that later it is learned that a neighbor has suffered a gunshot wound.

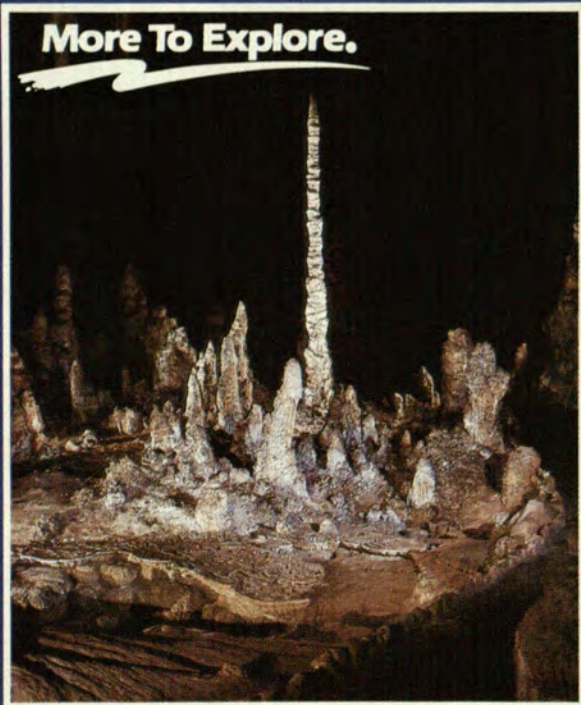


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SKINWALKERS

Most common of all are the "witch on the roof" accounts, which often seem to be remembered from childhood and which I will summarize and generalize like this:

The family is sleeping in its hogan (a one-room structure usually round or octagonal, with a single door facing east, a floor of packed earth and a fire pit in the center under a smoke hole). Usually the father is away. One of the children is awakened by the sound of the wolfman on the roof, trying to drop "corpse powder" down the smoke hole. Usually four (the Navajo magic number) attempts are made and usually the witch is shot at and driven away.

A Navajo friend once told me that the only fault he finds with my Navajo tribal police novels is that one key character, Joe Leaphorn, doesn't believe in witches. He says he's never known a Navajo who didn't. I have known a few who didn't, but not many. Belief in the reality of evil, and people who deliberately cause it, seems to thrive as well in Navajo Country as it does in the rest of America. In fact, in most versions of Dine Bahana, the Navajos' metaphysics, First Man, First Woman and Coyote, were witches.

According to tradition one can become a witch by violating the most sacred tribal taboos—murdering a relative, committing incest, handling a corpse or perhaps all three. Other witches conduct grisly initiation ceremonies, usually in a cave, in which Navajo moral rules are obscenely violated. This gives the new initiate the power to reverse the evolution into humanity and become a beast. Accounts of the ritual usually involve cannibalism and mutilation of a corpse for the preparation of the "corpse powder" or the "bone beads" that skinwalkers shoot into victims to produce fatal illness.

As in Anglo-American culture, witches serve Navajos as scapegoats, blamed when people fall ill, cattle die or accidents happen. (Years ago, when I was new to


New Mexico, a Navajo father shot four other Navajos. He testified at his trial that they were skinwalkers who had caused the death of his daughter.) And as in the Anglo-American witchcraft culture, the Navajos have defenses against skinwalkers. The shamans who perform the curing ceremonials on which Navajo religion centers use several such rites as specific treatment for those who have been witched. In one, the medicine man sucks the witch's bone bead from the breast of the victim. In another, some item intimate to the suspected witch (his hat, a lock of hair, etc.) is ceremoniously attacked in a "turning around" rite, which cures the victim and kills the witch.

Navajo witchcraft represents an exact reversal of Navajo values. The Navajo's first priority is caring for the family. The witch kills relatives and commits incest. The Navajo prizes harmony, balance, generosity and the golden mean. The witch causes disharmony, glories in the ugly and accumulates wealth. The Navajo sees no good in accumulating possessions. One who does so must be neglecting his first priority—caring for his relatives. But witches are always heavy with jewelry and greedy for riches.

The Navajo account of the tribe's genesis included this incident. Witchcraft had caused a flood to destroy the Fourth World. First Man and the other spirits had escaped to the Fifth World through a hollow reed. But First Man had left behind his witchcraft bundle and asked Heron to retrieve it. Not wanting the other spirits to know it contained witchcraft, he called it "the way to make money."

That says a lot about Navajos' attitude toward materialism. ☛

Tony Hillerman is a longtime resident of the state. He wrote his first story for the magazine in 1960. His best-selling novels include *The Fly on the Wall*, *People of Darkness*, *The Dark Wind*, *The Ghostway*, *Skinwalkers*, *A Thief of Time*, *Talking God* and *Coyote Waits*. He lives in Albuquerque, where he is working on another novel.



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