

# I Just Want To Go Home!

*The story of the San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe is unique: It's the only federally recognized tribe in Arizona without its own land. The tribe used to have a place of its own, but now that land is part of the Navajo Nation. In 2000, the Paiutes signed a treaty with the Navajos that would grant the Paiutes 5,400 acres, but that agreement has yet to be ratified by Congress.*

BY MORGAN SJOGREN • PHOTOGRAPHS BY DAVID ZICKL

**“WE WERE A SECRET.”** Tears gather in Candelora Lehi’s eyes as she places her hands on her desk for support. “We just want people to know we’ve always been here. That we’re here.”

Candelora is the vice president of the San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe. As we sit in the tribe’s office in Tuba City, the name Lehi, inscribed on Candelora’s placard, catches my eye. I’ve seen it carved, along with petroglyphs of horses, in the canyons on the flanks of Navajo Mountain. I ask her about it as I pull up a photo on my phone.

“That was my grandfather’s brother Joseph,” she says.

Names and places can carry the weight of a nation, but in the American melting pot, their significance can go unnoticed. However, it was a *name* that brought me here. On hikes across the Colorado Plateau, I began seeing “Clyde Whiskers, San Juan Paiute” carved into sandstone canyon walls, and more than once it was accompanied by Joseph Lehi’s name. Countless other hikers across the decades have brushed past these names without notice, or perhaps glanced at them and marched on.

Yet my curiosity has pushed me off the trail, to Tuba City, to learn the history of a tiny tribe I’ve heard almost nothing about. I quickly learn that, like these Paiute names carved in stone, the modern history of the San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe is hiding in plain sight.



• Mary Ann Owl has lived her entire life on traditional San Juan Southern Paiute land in Northeastern Arizona, and she still speaks the tribe’s unique dialect of Paiute.

► Hikers on the Colorado Plateau might know Clyde Whiskers from the inscriptions of his name on sandstone canyon walls. "I've been everywhere," he says.



**THE FIRST TIME I MEET CLYDE WHISKERS,** I'm star-struck, looking at the wide eyes and toothless grin of the man whose name has stirred my imagination so many times in the desert. Sitting across from him at the Tuba City McDonald's, on an afternoon so windy it howls through the glass, I hardly know what to ask him. So I just listen. I learn he's a former member of the San Juan Southern Paiute Tribal Council. He's spent much of his life herding sheep in remote canyons at the foot of Navajo Mountain and, later, traveling around the Southwest for seasonal work.

He pauses deeply between bursts of stories about his nomadic life in traditional Southern Paiute territories. "I've been everywhere," he says proudly, telling me about the time in his youth when he climbed a precipitous desert tower and, of course, carved his name. Clyde's inscriptions confirm that, indeed, he's been everywhere between Bears Ears and the Little Colorado River, and in some respects, those inscriptions are the only physical marker of the San Juan Southern Paiutes' territory. His passion for his tribe is distilled from the land itself. Consider the weight of carving "San Juan Paiute" into the very stone on which your people have always lived, knowing they no longer call it their own.

Traditionally, the San Juan Southern Paiutes were a semi-nomadic band based in pockets of what now are Northeastern Arizona and Southeastern Utah. Every year for centuries, while one or two members of each family took care of their homes, the rest of the tribe spent a portion of the year hunting and foraging on 9,000 square miles of the area's desert landscape. Today, the San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe is the only federally recognized tribe in Arizona without its own land.

That wasn't always the case. In 1907, the U.S. government set aside the Paiute Strip, in Southern Utah, as the tribe's official reservation. But when oil exploration became a priority in 1922, Interior Secretary Albert Fall recommitted the Paiute Strip to the public domain — without consulting the Paiutes.

After the oil companies left the area, a young Navajo petitioned the government to set aside the Paiute Strip lands again. The initial paperwork referred to "the Indians who have always lived here," but later versions specified the Navajo people. A series of planning meetings in the early 1930s brought together the Navajo Nation Council, regional Bureau of Indian Affairs officials, and other federal and state bureaucrats — but not the Paiutes. The final language adopted by Congress specifies that the former Paiute Strip be set aside "for the Navajo and other such Indians," alluding to the Hopis and the San Juan Southern Paiutes. Today, this territory is part of the 27,000-square-mile Navajo Nation.

The reason the Paiutes were deprived is because in the 1930s, the federal government didn't recognize them as an official

tribe. Without that recognition, the Paiutes were not allowed to claim land partitions. Today, though, many of the few hundred members of the tribe continue to live on their traditional lands in Navajo territory in Arizona and Utah.

**ALTHOUGH I'VE DRIVEN THROUGH** the area countless times on road trips, getting to know Clyde inspired me to visit on a regular basis. The 71-year-old is charismatic and thoughtful when he speaks, always punctuating his words with humor. I ask when he'll return to Navajo Mountain: "Springtime, baby!"

In between meetings with Clyde, I study the San Juan Southern Paiutes. Their history, traditions and culture are sparingly but beautifully documented in academia — most notably by Pamela Bunte and Robert Franklin, and more recently by Logan Hebner. Beyond that, to learn about the San Juan Southern Paiutes means getting to know them — a rare step back in time in this technological age.

So, when Clyde invites me to the tribe's holiday party, I jump at the chance, even though I have no idea what to expect. On a cold morning, he picks me up at McDonald's because my car battery is dead. On the way, he calls a friend for directions.

"I don't know," he says, laughing. "I think someone is trying to sabotage us. We're lost." He makes a U-turn.

Posted at the door into the party is a large San Juan Southern Paiute seal — other than Clyde's inscriptions, it's the first sign of the tribe I've seen. The posting also includes the standard Tribal Council meeting rules, including "No talking about politics." Christmas carols are blasting from a karaoke machine as families gather in clusters. Occasionally, people get up to greet other families and shake hands.

At long communal tables, we dine on steaming plates of chicken, corn, peppers and mashed potatoes. I sit next to Evelyn James, who speaks

fondly of her childhood in the tributaries of Glen Canyon. That was before the government relocated her family because of the construction of Glen Canyon Dam and Lake Powell — even though she, like other Paiutes, had no designated tribal land to which to relocate.

"We had to enroll as Navajo when I was a young girl, but it wasn't right," she says. "We have a separate culture and language." But without recognition from the federal government, the Paiutes lacked the funding and other assistance the U.S. provides to recognized tribes. Tribal members began working toward federal recognition, and that difficult effort paid off: In 1989, the U.S. government officially recognized the San Juan Southern Paiutes as a tribe.

About a decade later, the tribe signed a treaty with the Navajo Nation that would grant the Paiutes 5,400 acres of their own land. But that agreement has yet to be ratified by Congress. Robyn Interpreter, the Paiutes' general counsel, and the tribe's longtime attorneys at the Native American Rights

*Consider the weight of carving "San Juan Paiute" into the very stone on which your people have always lived, knowing they no longer call it their own.*

*Designated San Juan Southern Paiute land would help solve the tribe's housing woes and allow developments that generate opportunities, cultural retention and continued pride for the tribe.*

Fund are working toward that goal. Currently, both tribes are reviewing the treaty with their constituents, because it's been so long since the agreement was signed.

If the treaty someday gets congressional approval, the Paiutes say their new tribal land will have little effect on neighboring Navajo and Hopi communities.

**AT THE PARTY, CLYDE PROVES TO BE** a stellar wingman, introducing me to as many of his relatives and friends as possible. He takes me over to the Owl family, where his aunt, Mary Ann Owl, is quietly sitting with her daughters. Her hair is cloaked in a floral pink cloth, and at age 85, she exudes a rare beauty. Clyde converses with her in Paiute, and although I don't understand the words, the significance is clear: The San Juan Southern Paiutes' language continues to be the tribe's most potent link to cultural continuity. Members speak their own unique dialect of Paiute, which distinguishes the tribe as an autonomous people. While different, other Southern Paiute and even Ute dialects are intelligible among these independent groups. And given their lives of close proximity, many San Juan Southern Paiutes also speak Diné (the Navajo language), English and Hopi.

Additionally, the San Juan Southern Paiute language continues to expand. Rather than adopt words from other languages, tribal members create their own vocabulary for aspects of modern life. "Young kids will never know words that used to be spoken," Evelyn says. "Now, we have words for almost everything. For example, a newer word is 'telephone.' People used to travel long ways to tell someone news. Now, we call phones 'the talker': *ah-pa-ha-nip*. You spell it just like it sounds."

Lavern Owl, Mary Ann's daughter and the mother of a 16-year-old son, says language retention among tribal youths is a challenge: "The kids only speak Paiute at home, not in school." But as we chat, two young children stand at the front of the room and sing traditional songs in both Paiute and English.

Lavern grew up at Navajo Mountain, where her family, including her cousin Clyde, tended sheep in the surrounding canyons. She and her siblings helped herd the sheep with her father, Jack Owl Sr., a tribal councilman for more than 40 years. Today, Lavern lives in Flagstaff to ensure that her son gets the best education possible.

"When I grew up, I had to move away and start my own life

because there [were] no jobs," she adds. It's a familiar story for members of the tribe: Since there's no established tribal land, it's common for San Juan Southern Paiutes to settle elsewhere.

But those insufficient educational and job opportunities are side effects of the biggest challenge the tribe faces: housing. Currently, homesite leases are granted through the Navajo Nation, which prioritizes its own members and their spouses. Designated San Juan Southern Paiute land would help solve the tribe's housing woes and allow developments that generate opportunities, cultural retention and continued pride for the tribe.

"We can't just build a house on the Navajo Reservation without our own land," Lavern says. "We need a place to go home to. This is where our home is and has always been. This is still where I will always call home."

### LAVERN'S GREAT-GREAT-GREAT-GRANDFATHER

was Nasja Begay (whose name translates to "Owl's Son"), a guide to historical explorers who came to the Southwest to study and map its cultural sites and topography. Nasja's work with the legendary John Wetherill led to some of the Southwest's most notable documentation and archaeological discoveries.

In 1909, Nasja led the Cummings-Douglass Expedition to Rainbow Bridge in Southern Utah, making that group the first white visitors to reach the 290-foot bridge and publicize it. He also guided President Theodore Roosevelt and novelist Zane Grey to the bridge, which now is a national monument and features a plaque recognizing Nasja's efforts.

Nasja's story is among the history Jack shared with Lavern from an early age. "He stood for that history," she says. "We

don't want it to die." Her father also worked tirelessly to gain federal recognition for the tribe. He died in 2018, and Lavern is hopeful that an official designation of tribal land will complete the last important goal on his list.

"Nasja Begay is still here," she says, her voice cracking with emotion. "My father is still here. We are still here. But very few people know. He wanted the Paiute people to be known. To have a reservation."

The San Juan Southern Paiutes' saga, while frustrating for the tribe's members, also reveals their patience and ability to endure — not only hardship, but also as a people. They live their lives in their own evolving ways, in the place where they always have. And they've never abandoned their land, their language or their identity. **AH**

◉ Candelora Lehi (left) is vice president of the San Juan Southern Paiute Tribe. Here, she's pictured with her daughter Hope John, a fellow member of the tribe's council, and Hope's daughters Freya (center) and Lydia.

