

CONSERVATION Showcase

Navajo Code Talker Honors NRCS Personnel

Producer Joe Vandever's Navajo name is ta-de-yhi which means 'going places'. Little did this child of the land know when he was born west of Grants, New Mexico in 1923 that he was going to play an important role in United States history, as a Navajo Code Talker in World War II.

Philip Johnston, a World War I veteran who was raised on the Navajo reservation as the son of a missionary, knew of the military's search during WWII for a code that could withstand attempts to decipher it. He believed the Navajo language answered the requirements. Navajo is an unwritten language of extreme complexity. It has no alphabet or symbols, and its syntax and tonal qualities make it unintelligible to anyone without extensive exposure and training. From this beginning, a code was crafted for six divisions of the Marine Corps that was never deciphered by the Japanese.

Vandever, like some 375 to 420 trained Code Talkers, demonstrated skill and courage that saved both American lives and military engagements in World War II. Vandever entered the service in 1943, just a year after the first Code Talkers had gone to boot camp. After six months of training he was sent to the Pacific theatre where he did duty in Guadalcanal, Guam, Okinawa, Marianas Islands, and other locales.

He applied the Navajo words for common English words in a random pattern to spell messages. Thus,



in a transmittal, the letter "a" for example, could be sent using the word wol-la-chee for ant, be-la-sana for apple, or tse-nill for axe. Navajos, like Vandever, could encode, transmit, and decode a three-line English message in 20 seconds. Use of Navajo was as fast as Morse code. The value of the Code Talkers has been noted by Major Howard Connor, who said if it were not for the Navajos, the Marines would not have taken Iwo Jima.

Even after the war, the code was valuable; therefore, it was not made public until the Reagan Administration. It is for this reason recognition of these meritorious men was so slow in forthcoming.

But, Joe Vandever's story does not end there.

Returning to his birthplace after the war, he worked for an oil company and as a uranium prospector until 1967, and all the while ran sheep on the 160 acres he lives on that has been in his family since 1893.

Today, you can see New Mexico's crop of NRCS personnel look at Vandever's operation ... and then you can see the light bulb go on.

"You know all those new words we put to conservation practices, like rotational grazing and sustainability - Joe is already doing it and has been all his life," said an NRCS staffer.

Vandever's family, in doing things the old and traditional ways, shepherd their sheep every day in the best of rotational grazing practices. As a consequence, the land surrounding their home blushes with the health of well-cared for range.

Sustainability is reflected in the lichens they gather

from Haystack Mountain that can be added to salt water to create a golden amber dye for yarn. Bessie, Vandever's wife, uses the homespun yarn to weave on large Navajo looms that reach to the ceiling in their home. The current authentic Navajo rug on her loom shows the promise of being a treasure for generations to come.

On the kitchen wall a stitched sign says, "Home Sweet Home, Walk in Beauty."

Joe Vandever has been 'going places' many never dreamed of, yet has chosen to 'Walk in Beauty' most of his life in the shadows of Haystack Mountain. He and his family have been stewards of the land and their livestock, with a birthright that has shown courage, character, and wisdom.

Another sign in the living room says, "Home is where you hang your heart." The Vandever's have hung their heart at Haystack Mountain a long time - with a very large heart for the land and their country.

It is an honor for NRCS personnel to be welcomed into the Vandever home, respond to a request, and learn of the traditional ways that have been a mainstay of their culture for generations.

