

Dine'tah – Hajiinei (The Place of Emergence for Athabaskan people)

Co-Directed: Kent Tompkins and Willam Ben Begay Tsosie, Jr.

Funded by: Chinle Unified Schools-Federal Programs and The Arizona Commission on the Arts.

Navajo oral tradition describes the Dine'tah era as a time when the Holy Ones walked among the Dine', teaching and guiding them. The Yeis or Holy Ones left their images on the walls of Dine'tah to remind their children of the lessons, stories, songs, and healing ceremonies that they had learned. The sacred sites and historic ruins need the understanding and protection of all people if they are to be preserved for tomorrow's generations. The Dine' also changed from a patrilineal to a matrilineal society during the Dine'tah period. They also developed farming techniques to augment their pastoral lifestyle, and developed the clan system that is so much a part of the daily life of the Dine' today.

Athabaskan and Pueblo peoples lived together in the canyons, each building homes characteristic of their cultures, and exchanging practical skills and spiritual beliefs with one another.

Kent Tompkins and Will Tsosie, started observing and discussing the situation at Dine'tah. As they continued their trips to Dine'tah, Kent and Will then consulted Ms. Annie Kahn, a Navajo cultural consultant and other Navajo elders and medicine people. At this juncture, all drew the same conclusion. Something must be done.

As a photographer, Kent's contacts in the art and photography world led him to invite a number of nationally renowned photographic, sculptural and painting artists to help document the area. Will and Annie provided spiritual and cultural guidance for the photographic camping trips to Dine'tah that was fiscally supported by a grant from the Arizona Commission on the Arts.

This five-year collaborative photographic, sculpture, painting and video art exhibit documented rock art, historic ruins and geologic features of an important site in Navajo history. The Dine'tah area of northwestern New Mexico holds masonry structures of Pueblo origin in its canyons, and rare rock art of Navajo origin on the canyon walls. As Linda Connor stated, this area is the only place on the planet where a culture has such an active sacred place in which to continue its ceremonial ways.

This historic place is utilized by the El Paso Natural Gas Company. The resulting network of roads provides unfortunate ready access to a procession of vans, pot hunters, ruin desecrators and rock art thieves armed with back-hoes, jackhammers, firearms, and other tools of their trade. At Dine'tah profiteers remove rock art panels, dig for buried pots and use sacred images for target practice.

The Dine'tah project was instrumental in the Navajo tribe purchasing a large portion of Dine'tah. Tony Hillerman also assisted Kent and Will in getting this area set aside as a National historical site. The result was an exhibit of forty photographs and sculpture by eight artists, illustrating their visions of the richness that is Dine'tah.

With each photograph was a narrative by Will Tsosie which explained and connected the photographic images with contemporary and historical Navajo perspectives. Whether viewed from the traditional Navajo point of view, or from an anthropological or historical perspective, the Dine'tah era was a significant period in the development of the Dine'.

This exhibit which traveled nationally for three years, shared this precious resource of the Navajo people with others who were interested in learning more about the Dine' people and their sacred and beautiful place of emergence. Thus if you were have gone into the Heard Museum in Phoenix or a museum in Miami, you would have been able to experience Dine'tah from a cultural and allegorical perspective as a sacred place. The corral gate would have left open so as not to pin down Spirit via archeological or anthropological explanations typical of the western mind.

Artists involved:

Linda Connor, Rick Dingus, Krista Elrick, Barbara Gilson, Mark Klett, Lawrence McFarland, Kent Tompkins and Tsosie Tsinhnahjinnie.

The photographers donated their time, talent, expertise and materials to the project. Chinle Public Schools supported the project with funds, materials and personnel. Two additional school employees, Rudy Begay, and artist, and Alfred Nelson, a videotape photographer, also participated in the Dine'tah documentation.

Financial support for the Traveling Exhibitions Program was provided by the Arizona Commission on the Arts, a state agency and the National Endowment for the Arts, a federal agency. Arizona Commission on the Arts, 417 West Roosevelt, Phoenix, Arizona 85003. Telephone: (602) 255-5882.

The Dine'tah Project images are now housed in the Federal Programs department at Chinle School District, Chinle, Arizona.