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Before World War II, Navajo children were educated in government-owned schools where they were forbidden to speak their own language. In this U.S. National Archives photo, circa 1940, we see Navajo children learning English in their day school.

By the time Pearl Harbor was attacked on 7 December 1941, most Navajos had never left their 25,000 square mile reservation. They were one of few tribes allowed to keep their homelands in Arizona, New Mexico and southern Utah. Americans moving west did not want to settle on the rocky, inhospitable and arid Navajo land.

Educated in government schools, Navajo children were forbidden to speak their native language and were taught English. Their native language was unwritten at the time, so the experience of learning a second language was unique for them.

English-speaking teachers discouraged the children from ever speaking their own tongue. Parents, fortunately, ignored such suggestions. Had they heeded that advice, who can say whether the Allies would have won the war in the Pacific?

U.S. public records contain a rich pictorial record of Navajo life in the decade before World War II. A virtual "trip" to the national archives reveals what America's future Code Talkers experienced before they volunteered for duty.

- At the time of WWII, and to this day, the Navajo nation governs itself through a tribal council.
- Many people lived in shacks or hogans on the reservation.
- Government relief, in the early 1930s, helped some Navajo families build new homes.
- Navajo families usually had several ponies and traveled to fall fairs in horse-drawn carriages, cars, trucks or trailers.
- Although the Navajo homeland stretches for thousands of miles, getting to the interior (just before World War

It erupted) was difficult due to wide creeks and washes. Vehicles were often stuck due to lack of proper roads and bridges.

- Building roads through canyons, like Tohatchi, required back-breaking work.
- Crudely built bridges could not survive significant storms.
- Navajo “day schools” ranged from one-room rural cabins to more modern facilities.
- Children learned English with picture cards and notebooks.
- Santa Claus must have been a foreign concept for Navajo children.

The Navajo way of life had prepared future Code Talkers to endure the hardships of war. A young man used to deprivation, and the desert’s harshness, would be able to deal with life on a desolate Pacific Island.

On the other hand, a young man free to roam wide-open spaces would have to adjust to Marine Corps discipline.

See [Alignments to State and Common Core standards for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicAlignment/THE-NAVAJO-NATION-Wind-Talkers-Navajo-Code-Talkers-in-WWII>

See [Learning Tasks for this story online at:](#)

<http://www.awesomestories.com/asset/AcademicActivities/THE-NAVAJO-NATION-Wind-Talkers-Navajo-Code-Talkers-in-WWII>

Media Stream

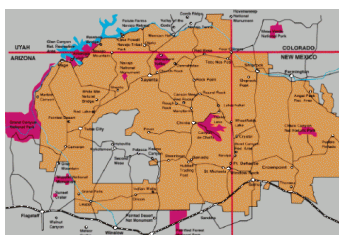


Navajo Children Learning English at Their Day School

Image - with ARC identifier 295158 - from the Bureau of Indian Affairs. Online via the U.S. National Archives (NARA).

View this asset at:

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Navajo Reservation - Map

Image online, courtesy [Northern Arizona University](#).

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Washes on the Navajo Reservation

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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Tohatchi Canyon - Navajo Reservation

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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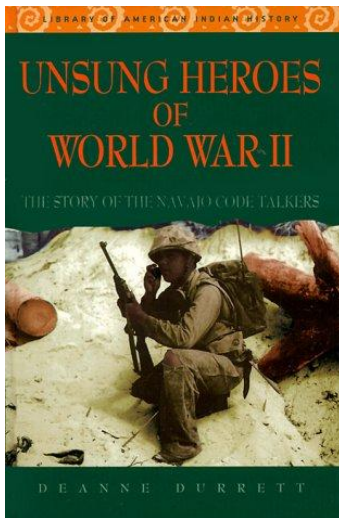
Navajo Reservation - Poor Roads Caused Wash-outs

Image online, courtesy U.S. National Archives.

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Unsung Heros of World War II - by Deanne Durrett

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