

Persimmon Hill

25th

YEAR

A PUBLICATION OF THE NATIONAL COWBOY HALL OF FAME

AUTUMN 1997



SPECIAL NATIVE AMERICAN ISSUE

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Number 3

Autumn 1997



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On the cover ~ This Revival Germantown-style Navajo rug was woven by Priscilla Warren in 1992 and is one of numerous exquisite rugs featured in the current exhibition of Navajo weavings at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame.

The Barbers Of Burnham

A New Breed Of Navajo Weaver

BY ANN LANE HEDLUND

In 1978, a different-looking Navajo rug entered the marketplace. Members of the Begay and Barber families broke with previous traditions and created their own distinctive style. Using natural wool colors in grays, browns, white and black, these weavers combined regular geometric patterns with an assortment of new pictorial elements. They called it the Burnham style, after their New Mexico home community on the Navajo reservation.

Since the turn of the century, many Navajo rug styles have passed from one generation to the next. Such styles remain in the same communities for decades and have become known by geographic names such as Ganado, Tee Nos Pos, Two Grey Hills, and Wide Ruins.

The Santa Fe Collection, on exhibition at the National Cowboy Hall of Fame through December 28, 1997, presents many stellar examples of these well-known regional rug styles. The collection also contains two striking "Burnham rugs," which have a very different story to tell.

When and where did this unusual style begin? How did the weavers come up with their ideas? And now, what is becoming of it?

Once an active mining district, Burnham, New Mexico, consists of little more than a community



Anna Mae Barber at her loom in her home in Burnham, New Mexico.

center building and widespread views of the surrounding grasslands. Its residents live in far-flung homes across the windswept plains where herds of sheep and cattle graze freely.

The defunct Burnham Trading Post is now a roofless sandstone building. Another Burnham Trading Post, operated by trader Bruce Burnham, is located more than 100 miles away in Sanders, Arizona, and holds no direct relationship to this Burnham.

Farmington, 25 miles to the north, is the nearest town of any considerable size. To the west roll

the Bisti badlands, a designated wilderness of dramatic rock and sand formations. Twenty-two miles to the southeast is the famous community of Two Grey Hills, with the Chuska Mountains beyond.

Anna Mae Barber, an expert weaver, has lived all her life in the Burnham area. She and her female relatives belong to the *Nakaii dine'e* (Mexican People) clan. Her father belonged to the *To dich'i nii* (Bitterwater) clan and her husband to the *Hooghan Lani* (Many Hogans) clan.

After their mother died, Anna Mae raised her youngest sisters, Alice, Helen, and Sandy Begay, and eventually taught them to weave. Anita Johnson and Marie Begay, her other sisters, had already begun to weave. Anna Mae also raised her three daughters and five sons at Burnham.

The daughters, Bessie, Lorene, and Laverne, learned to weave from her. Now her granddaughter, Cheryl, and nieces, Teresa and Julia, also weave beautiful rugs.

Among the Barbers and Begays, weaving is a family affair: "The whole family works together," comments Bessie Barber, Anna Mae's eldest daughter. The more experienced weavers teach the newer ones and thus weaving passes from mothers to daughters, from aunts to nieces, and from sister to sister. Certainly, Anna Mae

msd

Bessie Barber wove this Burnham style rug in 1988. The rug is now part of the Gloria F. Ross Collection of Contemporary Navajo Weaving at the Denver Art Museum.

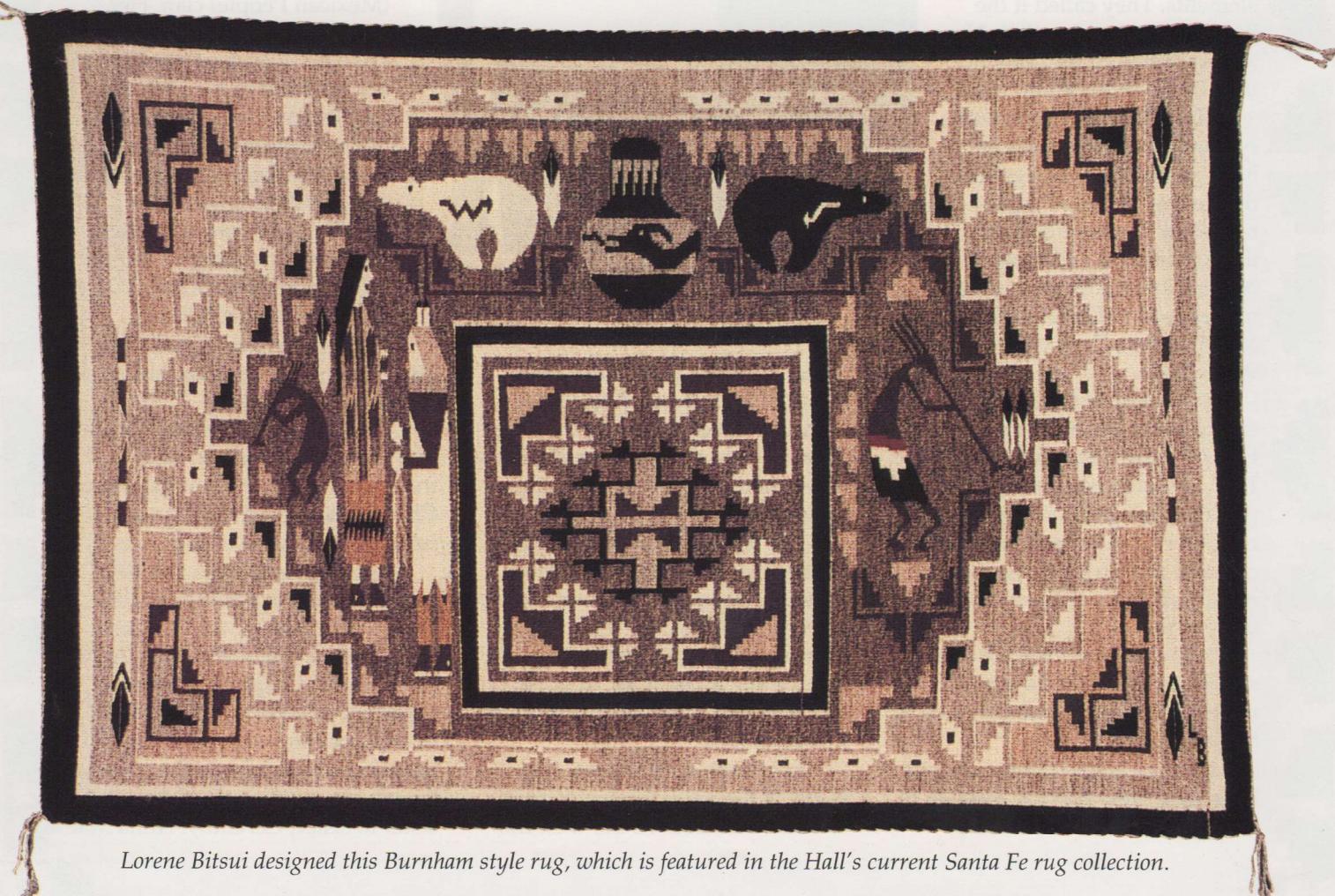


Barber, the matriarch, encourages everyone.

At times, Helen and Sandy Begay will work alternately on the same loom ~ sharing it back and forth which, they say, saves their eyes and makes it "less boring, less tiring."

In addition, the five Barber brothers, Roger, Jim, Harold, Darryl, and Daniel, shear the sheep and make looms, battens, and weaving combs. Other husbands and boyfriends also pitch in to make looms and hand tools for the women.

Because the Navajo surname "Begay" is at least as common as the Anglo "Smith," readers should recognize that the same last name does not always indicate a close kin relationship. I use "the Begay family" hereafter to refer specifically to



Lorene Bitsui designed this Burnham style rug, which is featured in the Hall's current Santa Fe rug collection.

Marie, Alice, Helen, and Sandy Begay and their offspring. It also should be noted that Helen Begay has occasionally used the name Cindy and Laverne Barber has also been known as Phyllis.

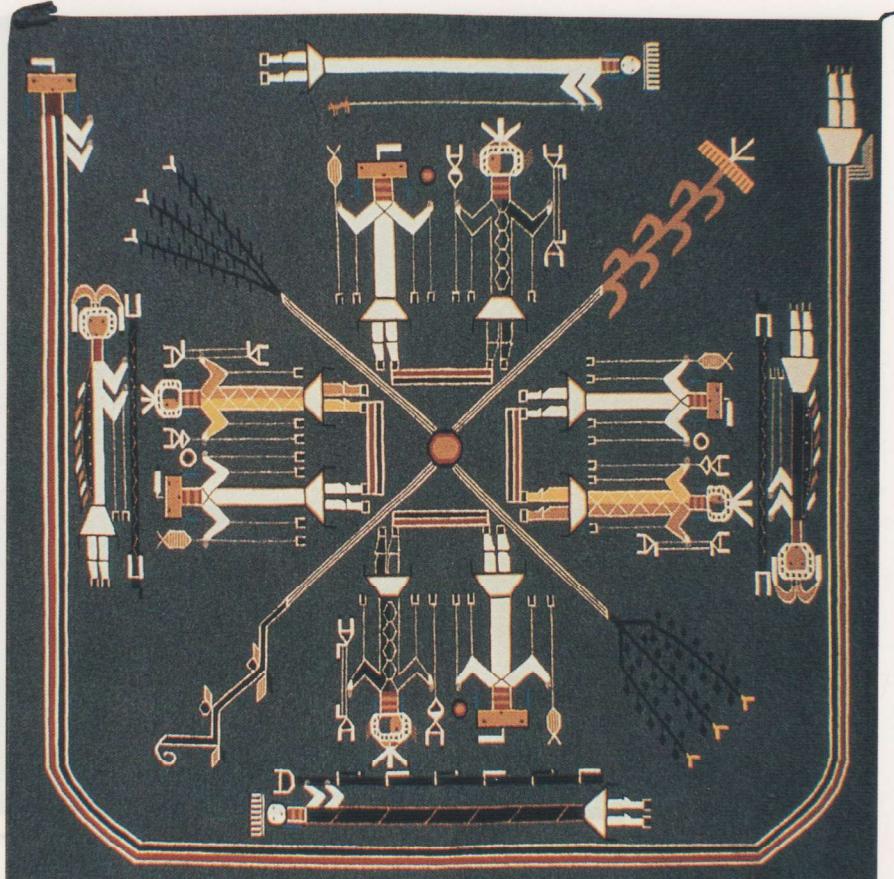
For years, the women in this extended family sold their rugs for as little as \$75 every six weeks at the Crownpoint Rug Weavers Association auctions. Although they were well-woven in lovely natural colors, these rugs were fairly modest works and rarely commanded high prices.

The women made the 140 mile round-trip because the prices they received were fair, usually 90 percent of the highest bid, plus they received annual dividends from the Association's sales. Each weaver set the minimum price for her rugs, but the auction simply did not provide the incentive to make larger, more elaborate works.

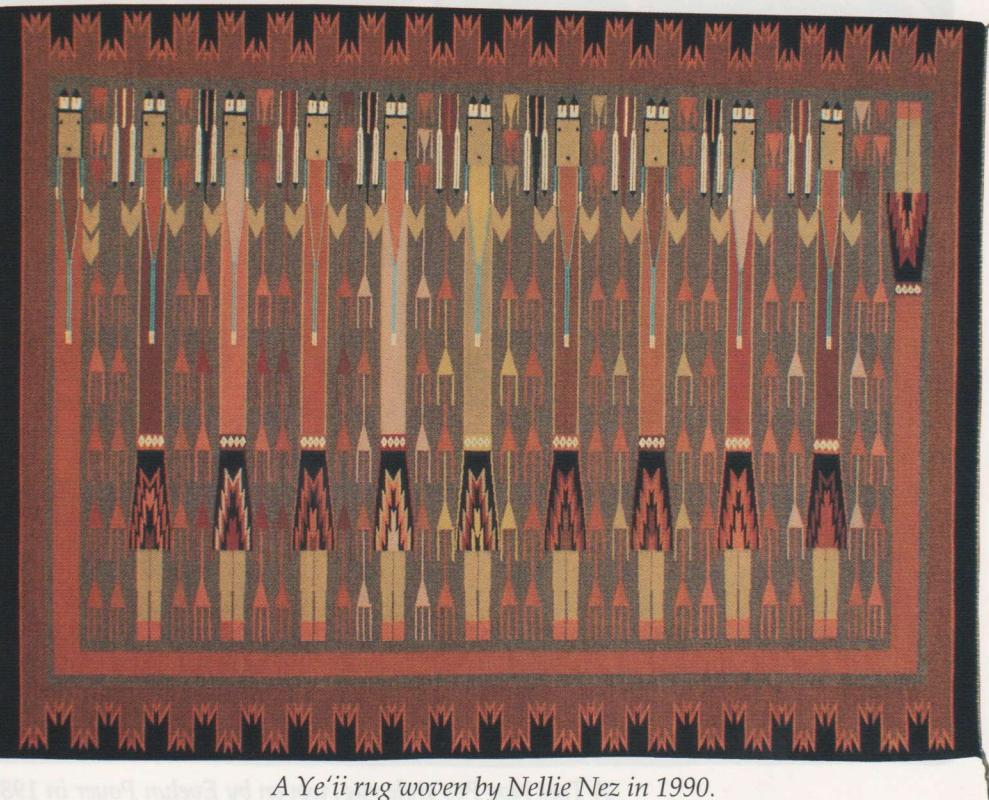
Until 1980, rugs woven by the Barbers and Begays most closely resembled the Two Grey Hills style. Named for a neighboring community 22 miles southeast of Burnham, this rug style is renowned for its intricate geometric patterns in a strict color scheme of grays, browns, black, and white.

Each rug had a central diamond or double diamond, numerous smaller filler motifs, and one to three borders around the four edges. The only dye used was a black, applied on top of natural dark brown-black wool to deepen its color. Sandy Begay remembers their first rugs as "just plain Two Grey Hills."

Beginning in 1978, several of the young women in the Barber/Begay family decided to develop a distinctive style by departing from the local Two Grey Hills tradition in significant ways. They still used native, hand-spun sheep's wool but often added small



A sandpainting style rug woven by Mary Long in 1983. This and those that follow represent some of the many styles in the Santa Fe Collection.



A Ye'i rug woven by Nellie Nez in 1990.



A pictorial style rug woven by Mary Claw in 1988.



A Teec Nos Pos style rug, woven by Evelyn Poyer in 1988.



Alice Begay wove this Klagetoh style rug.

accents of brightly dyed colors. Their complex designs became asymmetrical and pictorial, in contrast to the strict geometry of the Two Grey Hills pattern.

Some of the pictorial imagery in Burnham rugs was initially inspired by a young cousin, Bobby Johnson, who painted and drew sketches of idealized Indian life. Unfortunately, he was killed in a car accident, but his notebooks continued to circulate among a few of the weavers, supplying design ideas.

Although several women initiated their own design books, keeping a record of appealing motifs found in magazines and galleries, most of them rely on their imagination to inspire new designs as they sit at the loom.

Helen Begay stresses the perils of following the sketches too closely:

"Sometimes you put more design on the paper than you can put on the rug. So sometimes we just have to throw in some of our own designs as we go up on the loom, seeing what fits in."

Burnham weavers often achieve a highly energized style by compressing design elements into shallow, horizontal or vertical shapes and packing them densely together. The very fine threads they use help make this compression possible. Teresa Begay's rugs often contain nothing but geometric motifs densely packed together.

In Lorene Bitsui's rug in the Hall exhibition, the same effect can be seen in the attenuated feather motifs at each end and the way in which the linear figures of a woman and a *ye'ii bicheii* dancer confront each other.

Although some earlier Burnham designs look almost accordion-pleated, the effect is less pronounced in many later works.

Burnham weavers begin with the basics ~ hand carded and hand-spun wool in undyed natural sheep colors. The brown and gray wools originally came from the fleeces of Two Grey Hills sheep. Now, much of the wool comes from the Barber family's own flock, bred from Two Grey Hills stock.

Another source for wool is provided by Jackson Clark II through the Utah State University program to raise old-style *churro* sheep for Navajo weavers.

The women spend long hours working the wool ~ cleaning, picking, teasing, carding, spinning, and respinning. Sometimes an older woman in the family makes yarn for



Ye'ii figures within a Burntwater rug, woven by Emily Black in 1989.

the others, although the women in their 30s, with the sharpest eyesight, seem to spin the finest yarns.

The thin hand-spun yarns give a characteristic wiry texture to many of the Burnham rugs. Their finest and strongest warp is a hand spun combination of sheep wool and Angora-goat mohair. Laverne Barber, Anna Mae's youngest daughter, has even begun to experiment with cochineal and indigo dyes to create old-style wearing blankets in addition to her pictorial work.

All of the weavers stress quality standards: "Sometimes you have to take all your time to come out with a real good rug, so it just takes all your patience. I'm pretty sure my other sisters feel like that too."

Burnham weavers often incorporate small *ye'ii bicheii* dancers, wedding baskets, feathers, corn-

stalks, and other Navajo motifs into their otherwise geometric patterns. Non-Navajo sources for Burnham motifs include prehistoric rock art, Pueblo pottery, and Plains Indian thunderbirds, and other symbols.

One favored image is a silhouette of James Earle Fraser's famous 1915 sculpture, *The End Of The Trail*, which is now the focal point of the new entrance to the National Cowboy Hall of Fame.

The weavers themselves say that they draw upon Navajo and other Indian imagery for their rugs because it gives their work aesthetic distinction. They thrive on the challenge to find new motifs.

Although the weavers get some ideas from magazines, books, and other artwork, and they share designs through their sketchbooks,

each weaver stresses the creative process when she begins to weave a new rug.

Helen Begay reports, "The more we come up with a very good rug, the more we want to do more. I can't just stop and forget about it, you know ~ get a job and go to work. Somewhere along the way, I'll think about all the designs that go into a rug and that's what brings me back to weaving. I'll start thinking, 'How will it be if I make it like this?'"

Raised within a society that values individual autonomy as well as family togetherness, the Barber and Begay women are, as Jackson Clark II describes them, "A group of weavers who decided not to follow any rules." Alice Begay has said that what typifies their work is the fact that it is always changing, always growing with each individual's

inspiration.

To gain greater economic control over their weaving, the Burnham weavers sought a new buyer for their unusual rugs, and in 1978, they found Jackson Clark II of Toh Atin Gallery in Durango, Colorado. Alice Begay learned that this trader was giving weavers a free case of pop along with their rug payment, and so she and several other sisters decided to check him out.

A third-generation native arts dealer, Clark had shifted the business away from trading for Indian rugs and baskets to the gallery-style promotion of individual Native American artists.

In the larger Burnham rugs, he saw the women's artistry and their market potential. More than anything, he was fascinated by the weavers' self-initiative and their energy to create something new.

Clark believes that this may be the first time a group of weavers has imitated a new style "without the influence of traders, chapter houses, or someone else." As buyer, he gives advice on the overall technical quality of the rugs, but stays out of the designing.

One of the Begay sisters notes, "The designs ~ we take care of that. We think about our designs, and Jackson actually just tells us to take our time on it so the rug can be real good . . . He'll know when we're in a rush, and he'll tell us to slow down."

Toh Atin Gallery has shown many Burnham rugs over the past decade and a half. And other dealers now recognize their popularity. The weavers have won prizes and awards at numerous arts and craft fairs. Early on this was an uphill struggle because shows like the Gallup Ceremonial initially had no category in which to judge these unusual rugs. Now, their work has gained recognition in museum collections, exhibitions, and publications.

Jackson Clark II points out, "When this started, the young girls



The sheep are getting ready to be shorn.



Darryl Barber begins shearing the sheep.

all lived together at Burnham in a family compound." In the years since, the core family group has scattered, spreading the style to other communities.

Bessie Barber moved to Aneth, Utah, in 1984. Several others moved from Burnham into modern housing developments outside of Farmington, New Mexico. Now they joke about how they keep in touch only through rug-selling trips to Toh Atin Gallery in Durango.

In 1981, there were only three weavers in this family. Five years later, in 1986, there were nine. By 1991 there were 14, and now there



Anna Mar Barber sorts the wool.



A Teec Nos Pos style rug, woven by Marian Nez in 1993.

are even more. In addition, weavers who are unrelated to the original Burnham creators have also begun to make this rug style, although not always using the same native hand-crafted materials.

The original Burnham weavers view such imitation as a form of flattery, "as long as the weavers still call them Burnham rugs."

Weavers of the Burnham style continue to borrow some traits from

the nearby Two Grey Hills community, including the all-natural color palette and its geometric motifs and border patterns. From there they quickly diverge, adding pictorial elements and small areas of brightly dyed color, and following their whims.

At this point, at least three living generations of the Barber and Begay family are weaving Burnham rugs. And so, even as you are

reading these words, this relatively new Navajo weaving trend continues to unfold in an ever-expanding circle.

Ann Lane Hedlund resides in Phoenix, Arizona. She is on the faculty at Arizona State University in Tempe and is the guest curator for the Hall's current exhibition titled "Navajo Weaving from the Santa Fe Collection, 1971-1996."