



Toadlena • Two Grey Hills

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Johnson County Community College • Gallery of Art

### *Navajo Weaving Origins*

The *Dineh* (meaning the people, as the Navajo refer to themselves) are generally believed to have migrated to the American Southwest during the mid-14th century. Navajo origin narratives tell of Spider Woman and Spider Man bringing the first loom and weaving to the Navajo in the earliest times. The first loom is said to have been made of sky and earth cords, sun rays and rock crystal, turquoise, abalone and white shell, and sheet, zigzag and flash lightning.

The commonly held anthropological view is that, by the late 1600s, the Navajo had learned to weave from their Pueblo neighbors. According to Spanish accounts, by the early 1700s, the Navajo were maintaining herds of sheep and were weaving wool blankets using the Pueblo-style vertical loom.

### *Navajo Weaving – The Classic Period*

By the early 19th century, the Spanish considered the Navajo to be the finest weavers in the American Southwest. During the classic period of Navajo textiles, circa 1800-1875, Navajo weavings were made mostly to be worn. The primary weaving material was native handspun wool from Spanish churro sheep. To add the coveted color red, the innovative weavers developed the technique of unraveling Spanish bayeta trade cloth. They cut the cloth into strips and then unraveled it to obtain red yarns to reweave into their blankets. They would respin the yarn to make it finer, or card the yarn with equal amounts of white unspun fleece to create pink yarn.

Navajo weavers also began to create complex designs through the use of a technique known as tapestry weave. Design elements during the classic period ranged from simple horizontal bands or stripes to elaborate combinations of stepped diamonds, zigzags, triangles and crosses. Many of the classic blanket motifs are also found on early Navajo baskets.

In 1863, U.S. Army Colonel Kit Carson, acting upon government orders, forcibly relocated the Dineh to Bosque

Redondo in eastern New Mexico. Thousands died before the Navajo were eventually released in 1868 to return to their homeland, where they discovered their homes burned, their sheep killed and their croplands destroyed. Families eventually resettled in widespread, loosely aggregated communities across northern New Mexico, Arizona and southern Utah.

### *1875-1900 – The Transitional Period*

The transitional period of Navajo weaving, from 1875 to 1900, reflected the major changes impacting all aspects of Navajo life. Navajo weaving was profoundly affected by the economic hardships that the weavers faced in the late 1800s. Following internment at Bosque Redondo, they had to rebuild their flocks with merino sheep, whose wool lacked the qualities of the churro sheep they had herded originally. Eventually, the Navajo had surplus wool for trade, and trading posts began to flourish. As a consequence, commercial yarns (such as Germantown yarn from Germantown, Pa.) became readily available to weavers, as did synthetic dyes. In 1880-81, the Atchison-Topeka and Santa Fe Railroad completed its southern line, introducing more and cheaper trade goods and more visitors. The new customers were Anglos who desired textiles for use as floor coverings rather than as blankets for wearing. The



*Toadlena/Two Grey Hills weaving, Bessie Manygoats, c. 1935, wool, 70" x 50", collection Mark and Lerin Winter, Santa Fe, N.M.*

transitional period refers to the transition from weaving blankets to weaving rugs, as well as the significant cultural transitions faced by the Navajo.

Designs during the period typically incorporated numerous bright colors and were referred to as “eyedazzlers” by traders. Diamonds with zigzag or serrated lines often predominated weaving patterns.

### *1900s – The Development of Regional Styles*

The advent of the trading post and the influence of traders on textile format and design eventually led to the development of regional styles. In the early 20th century, a range of textile

motifs, including Occidental and Oriental, influenced Navajo designs. Numerous traders published mail order catalogs to promote Navajo rugs nationwide, and they also encouraged weavers to use handspun native wool.

One of the most influential traders was J. B. Moore, who operated a trading post in Crystal, N.M., and who published two catalogs, one in 1903 and the other in 1911. The color illustrations depicted the designs that Moore found most compatible with the changing tastes of the marketplace. Patterned borders were featured, along with large central medallions, with multiple hook elements and filler designs in the background. The color red was deemed to be very marketable, and in Moore's catalog of 1911, 14 of 15 color plates included red.

#### *Toadlena • Two Grey Hills*

At the Toadlena and Two Grey Hills trading posts, located on the eastern edge of the Chuska mountains in northwestern New Mexico, the traders encouraged weavers to include a one- to two-inch wide dark brown or black border around their rugs to frame the design. This device distinguished the rugs of this region from all others. Additionally, the preference among these weavers was to use only the natural colors of sheep's wool.

In 1913-14, traders George Bloomfield at Toadlena and Ed Davies at Two Grey Hills began very successful interactions with local weavers. They also promoted the exclusive use of natural wool colors of black, white and gray – aniline dyes and Germantown yarns were ruled out.

J. B. Moore's basic patterns continued to exert influence on Toadlena and Two Grey Hills designs throughout the 1920s. Single and double diamond patterns, column designs and variations of the "storm pattern" with both square and quartered diamond elements were widely utilized. Numerous smaller "floating" or "filler" motifs were included in increasingly complex designs.

Both Bloomfield and Davies spent countless hours with weavers, discussing ways to enhance their textiles. During this period, the quality of the local wool also became distinctive, exhibiting a hard, shiny surface that was well-suited to the finer spinning being done at the time.

By the 1930s, weavers of the Toadlena/Two Grey Hills region were recognized for their technical excellence both in preparation of materials and execution of complex designs. Design innovations appeared; the weavers began to play with

patterns and take the elemental roots of the Crystal patterns to a new dimension. The concept of "negative space" was also employed. It was common practice for local traders to photograph outstanding work and distribute copies to other weavers to further innovation. The practice resulted in widespread change in the overall style of the local rugs. Creative innovation became the standard.

During the 1940s and 1950s, Toadlena/Two Grey Hills textiles gained renown for superlative technique and bold, complex design. These weavings became the most highly prized 20th century Navajo textiles, to a great extent because of the works of two extraordinary weavers: Bessie Manygoats and Daisy Taugelchee.

#### *Manygoats and Taugelchee*

By the early 1930s, Bessie Manygoats had achieved acclaim for the technical

excellence and elaborate design schemes of her weavings. Born at the turn of the century, Manygoats had undoubtedly begun weaving by the 1920s. Her earliest documented work is circa 1927. She was an exceptionally gifted designer, and seldom repetitive in her designs. Manygoats was also aided by the trader George Bloomfield, who referred to her as "Black Sheep's Daughter."

High-quality spinning and a characteristic use of dark brown wool were standard elements of Manygoats' weavings. She received numerous awards at competitions, including the



*Toadlena/Two Grey Hills weaving, unknown weaver; c. 1945, wool, 87" x 57½", collection Bill and Leslie Banks, Elkhart, Ind.*

Gallup, N.M., Inter-Tribal Ceremonials. Manygoats excelled as a weaver throughout her career and until her death in the 1960s.

Daisy Taugelchee, born in 1909 or 1911, further defined the Toadlena/Two Grey Hills style with her finely spun yarns, tightly packed weft threads and sensitively conceived designs. In the 1950s, she was reported to be the world's highest-paid weaver. The well-known trader Gilbert Maxwell once remarked, "Daisy Tagelshee [sic] ... is without doubt in my estimation the greatest living Navajo weaver. A good Navajo rug may have 30 weft threads to the inch – Mrs. Tagelshee will average 100 weft threads, and some of her work has an astounding 115 weft threads to the inch." Anthropologist Bertha Dutton wrote, "Her hand-spun weft threads are so fine ... They are as soft as cashmere."

Encouraged by the Toadlena traders Charles and Grace Bloomfield Herring, Taugelchee dominated the competitions she entered. By 1951, the judges at the Gallup Ceremonials had created a special tapestry class just for Taugelchee, so other weavers would not have to compete with her.

Her last large tapestry was completed in 1962. A year later, she was working on yet another when lightning struck her home, and the rug was burned in the subsequent house fire. After a year or so, she began weaving again, although she now focused only on smaller textiles. Late in her life, as her health and strength declined, she collaborated with her daughter-in-law Priscilla, who is recognized as a fine weaver in her own right. Taugelchee died in 1990.

#### *Toadlena/Two Grey Hills – 1960 to Today*

In the 1960s, Navajo weavers were once again faced with daunting changes. New traders came to both the Toadlena and Two Grey Hills posts, but the established system of traders providing the primary market for weaving was subverted by the increased fame of individual weavers. Now recognized by name nationwide, weavers were sought out directly by dealers and collectors. While prices soared on

outstanding weavings, the bottom line became "more product to meet demand."

Textiles became smaller in size, to reduce their time on the loom. Many weavers began to create tapestries, rugs defined by 80-plus wefts per inch, and a wider palette of natural hues was utilized, with some weavings containing as many as 12 distinct colors.

The 1970s continued the trends established in the '60s. Overall, the size of textiles continued to decrease, and

weavers emphasized technical excellence over design innovations. Commercial wool and tapestry yarns were introduced to further expedite the labor-intensive process.

The multicultural climate of the 1980s focused greater attention on Navajo weaving as a symbol of cultural identity at the same time that native artists were taking their place among mainstream artists. Increasingly, weavers' individual styles and contributions were recognized. Today, as throughout history, Navajo textile designs grow out of complex interactions between individual artists and their families, communities and marketplaces.

The Toadlena/Two Grey Hills style of weaving represents the pinnacle of 20th century Navajo weaving. While the impact of traders

on the development of regional styles cannot be denied, in the end, the weavers themselves are the indisputable creators of these extraordinary textiles.

—Jama Akers, Mission, Kan.  
Mark Winter, Santa Fe, N.M.



*Toadlena/Two Grey Hills weaving, unknown weaver, c. 1930, wool, 73" x 57", collection Bill and Leslie Banks, Elkhart, Ind.*

#### Acknowledgment

*We wish to thank the Two Grey Hills Weaving Museum, located at the Toadlena Trading Post, for its efforts on behalf of this exhibition. In 1997, the historic trading post was restored to its early 20th century style, and a museum focusing on local culture and the development of Toadlena/Two Grey Hills weaving was established. The museum's ongoing research and collections were critical to this exhibit.*

Cover: *Toadlena/Two Grey Hills weaving, Daisy Taugelchee, c. 1945, wool, 79½" x 59", collection Mark and Lerin Winter, Santa Fe, N.M.*