



LYNN SANKEY

The Matriarch of Monument Valley

Although she's a local legend who's been featured in movies, Susie Yazzie has lived a traditional Navajo life for close to 100 years — raising sheep, carding wool, weaving rugs — and her hogan has been a frequent stop on guided tours of Monument Valley for decades.

By KATHY MONTGOMERY

SUSIE YAZZIE SITS BEFORE her upright loom on a low stool, regal as a queen on her throne. On this day, the “grandmother of Monument Valley” wears a pink satin skirt, purple velveteen blouse and chunky turquoise jewelry. Her thinning silver hair is tied at the base of her neck in the traditional hourglass shape.

At the sight of visitors, the creases in Susie's age-spotted face deepen into a smile. She exchanges a few words in Navajo with her daughter, Effie. Susie wants to know about the guests Effie has brought. She asks if they've been there before.

Nodding, satisfied, Susie plucks a handful of wool from the fluffy mound near her stool. She cards it, combing the wool until the fibers are clean and orderly. Then she pulls the wool off into a fluffy roll and feeds it onto the tip of a long, wooden spindle. Rubbing the shaft of the spindle against her thigh, Susie works the wool into a spool of thick yarn.

Although she speaks little English, Susie has welcomed a great many visitors. Her hogan has been a frequent stop on guided tours of Monument Valley for decades. She has appeared in John Ford movies, as well as many books, documentaries and

magazines, including *Arizona Highways*. Her image has even graced bags of Frito-Lay's potato chips.

Yet for all her celebrity, Yazzie has lived a traditional Navajo life for close to 100 years — raising sheep, carding wool, weaving rugs — all without the benefit of electricity or running water. She's a medicine woman of sorts, a midwife who delivered two of her own grandchildren, and a hand trembler, adept at the ancient Navajo practice used to diagnose illness or find lost objects.

The oldest girl of eight children, Susie's Navajo name roughly translates to “fair-skinned woman.” It was her late husband, Tully, who gave Susie her Anglo name. Though the exact date of her birth is unknown, Susie was born in the spring, sometime around 1917. Her birthday is celebrated on tax day.

She learned to weave as a young girl. Her mother was often sick, so Susie took on most of the family chores. She tended sheep and scaled the surrounding sandstone mesas for rainwater that collected in depressions, carrying it back in a sumac

basket lined with piñon pitch.

When Susie was perhaps 16, her mother became very ill while pregnant with her last child and had to be taken to the hospital. The family was living in the summer shade house at the time. When the weather grew cold, Susie's mother had still not come home. Susie never saw her again. But her father returned with a baby brother, then wandered off in his grief, leaving Susie to care for the baby and all the other children.

Susie appealed to trader Harry Goulding for help. By then the man the Navajos called "tall sheep" was coming around regularly selling groceries and other goods from his wagon. He kept an eye on the family, giving Susie condensed milk for the baby and trading rugs she had woven for other necessities. He also started bringing around tourists.

Susie posed for photos for the tourists, and eventually began giving weaving demonstrations. The income helped support the family, but it was Susie's marriage that finally made her life easier. The work her husband found off the reservation supported the family, and when he returned home he brought wagons, mattresses and other luxuries.

When Goulding convinced John Ford to use Monument Valley as a backdrop for Ford's Western films, Susie, Tully and Effie were among the Navajos hired to

work as extras. Susie also performed in *My Darling Clementine*, and all three appeared in *Cheyenne Autumn*.

Colette Waddell, who recorded the stories of the entire Yazzie family for a yet-unpublished book, says Susie was directed to do the things she normally did: mostly to get on a horse and ride around.

At one point, Waddell says, Susie and her husband had trouble cashing their paychecks from the studio and had to travel to Los Angeles. It may have been the only time Susie left the reservation.

"She was not at all impressed," Waddell says. "She called it the hot country. Can you imagine? She lives in Monument Valley and thought Los Angeles was the hot country?"

While she was there, Susie got her name tattooed on her forearm, perhaps so she would remember how to sign her name. That gave her the ability to execute contracts, but she didn't always understand what she was signing, Waddell says.

Like the time a photographer came to the reservation and got Susie to sign away her rights to the photos he took. Her image ended up on bags of Frito-Lay's Santa Fe Ranch chips.

But Waddell believes Susie's real joy has been hosting the tourists she refers to as visitors.

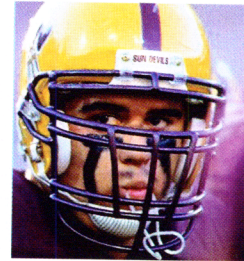
"That's what keeps her going strong," Waddell says. "It's what keeps her alive."



Susie Yazzie works at her loom, creating a traditional Navajo rug. | STEPHANOS ANTONIADES

P R A T T ' S

Q & A



Juan Roque
Football Analyst,
Fox Sports Arizona

As a former NFL player, you've traveled all over the country. What are some common misconceptions about Arizona?

The perception of Arizona can be pretty twisted to people who have never been here, especially to people in the Midwest. People think it's the Wild West and that it's all saguaros and scorpions. My wife, for example, was hesitant to move here after spending most of her life in southeastern Michigan. Once she got a taste of desert living, though, she was hooked.

What's your favorite Arizona memory?

My favorite place in Arizona is A Mountain in Tempe, next to Sun Devil Stadium. Just looking at the butte brings back so many memories. We used to run up that sucker three times in one workout for conditioning. It represents hard work, dedication and commitment for me.

Where's the best place to watch an ASU football game?

Sun Devil Stadium, of course, but I love University of Phoenix Stadium, too. We went to the Super Bowl there when the Giants beat the Patriots. I will never forget watching Tom Petty play at halftime.

After you've wrapped up a game-day broadcast, where do you like to grab a bite to eat? The Native New Yorker at Broadway and Dorsey in Tempe. It was there when I played at ASU, way back when the wings cost 10 cents. It was a family tradition to go after a game, and it still is. My favorite wings are honey-hot and hot.

If you could have an Arizona celebrity as your next-door neighbor, who would it be?

I would like to live next to Kevin McCabe. Kevin and I go way back to my ASU days, and he's always been a great person to be around. Now that I'm an adult, too, we can actually sit around, talk football and drink beer. Back then, that might have been a major problem.

Three words to describe Arizona?

Proud, strong, beautiful.

— Dave Pratt is the author of *Behind the Mic: 30 Years in Radio*