



# Under Sacred Ground: A History of Navajo Oil, 1922-1982

*Kathleen Chamberlain*

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Modern Navajo tribal government originated in 1923 solely to approve oil leases. From that beginning, the responsibilities and functions of tribal government expanded, fostering economic and political changes that brought the Diné people into closer contact with their Anglo neighbors. As tribal government undertook more projects, the revenue from oil and natural gas leases became key parts of the Navajo Nation's finances.

This book is an ethnohistory of the changes wrought by oil. The economic development spurred by oil leases is a cautionary tale in the transition from a subsistence to a capitalist economy. The federal stock reduction program imposed in the 1930s and 1940s devastated the Navajo agricultural economy and altered family structure. Women had owned and cared for the sheep and goat herds which were now reduced in number by hundreds of thousands. Oil did offer some wage work, but only for men who dug trenches, laid pipe, or drove trucks. Following the end of World War II as the millions of dollars generated annually from oil and gas leases became available to the impoverished Navajo Nation, inter-clan squabbles erupted over uses for the money. Navajo was set against Navajo in disputes over lifeways and identity of the Diné people. This book is also an assessment of the price the land and culture of the Navajo ultimately paid for oil. Sadly, greater involvement in Anglo society meant! less reverence for the land and sacred sites of the Diné.

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