

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

WW-15 An Introduction to the Havasupai

"I Guess We Are Going to Disappear"

El Vergel, Oaxaca  
Mexico  
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Mr. Richard H. Nolte  
Institute of Current World Affairs  
535 Fifth Avenue  
New York, New York 10017

Dear Mr. Nolte:

As I write this, the Congress is passing a bill to enlarge the boundaries of Grand Canyon National Park. When the bill was introduced in July, it included a section transferring 169,000 acres of federal land to the Havasupai Indians, who inhabit a reservation of 518 acres entirely surrounded by the Park.<sup>1</sup> After six months of hearings and lobbying in both Houses, the bill has now been stripped of its concession to the Havasupai, partly in response to conservationist objections to the deletion of land from the Park for this or any other purpose. Instead of the transfer of land, the bill orders that the Bureau of Indian Affairs and other departments of government study the Havasupai situation and make "positive recommendations" to Congress within the year on alternative ways to expand the reservation. When I first visited the Havasupai in late July, they were uncharacteristically hopeful that through this legislation they would receive land they have been trying to recover for more than 80 years. Now that chance seems to be slipping away. In this and the two succeeding newsletters, I want to describe the way the Havasupai live today as I saw them, summarize the history of their relations with Washington, and discuss some of the questions that made the original Havasupai section of the bill so contentious, questions Congress still must answer if it is to deal justly with the Havasupai.

The Havasupai experience is distinguished from that of other U.S. Indian people by the combination of their extreme isolation and their frequent contact with a

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<sup>1</sup> The Havasupai Reservation technically includes another 2,540 acres thirty miles from the 518-acre plot where the Havasupai live. This larger piece, added to the tribe's holdings in 1944, is an arid canyon-bottom of which the Havasupai make no use. Speaking of "the reservation," the Havasupai ordinarily mean only the 518 acres that they inhabit.



steady flow of tourists nine months of the year. They live crowded and cut off in a corner of the world so dramatically beautiful that travel writers who periodically "discover" the Havasupai homeland invariably call it a Shangri-la. For the Havasupai, it is something of a trap.

They live on the floor of Havasu Canyon, a tributary of the Grand Canyon of the Colorado River. Down the middle of their canyon flows Havasu Creek, a year-round stream of brilliant, clear turquoise color. (In the Havasupai language, ha means "water," vasu blue, green, or blue-green. Pai is their word for "people.") The banks of Havasu Creek are lined with watercress, which you can eat as you swim. Springs feed the creek along its course through the reservation, making it a fast-moving, self-purifying current measuring about 60 cubic feet per second. You can stand waist-deep in it without trouble, but walking upstream can be difficult, and if you lie down you have to hold on to an overhanging willow branch to keep from being swept downstream.

The canyon floor is a narrow strip of pinkish, sandy soil divided by the creek and shaded by willows, cottonwoods, and fruit trees. Near where the creek seeps out of the ground in an unpromising trickle, the upstream boundary of the reservation crosses the canyon. From there the reservation extends downstream and around the bend where the canyon floor is at its widest—about a quarter-mile. At this widening lies the only Havasupai village, Supai, where most Havasupai live. From there the

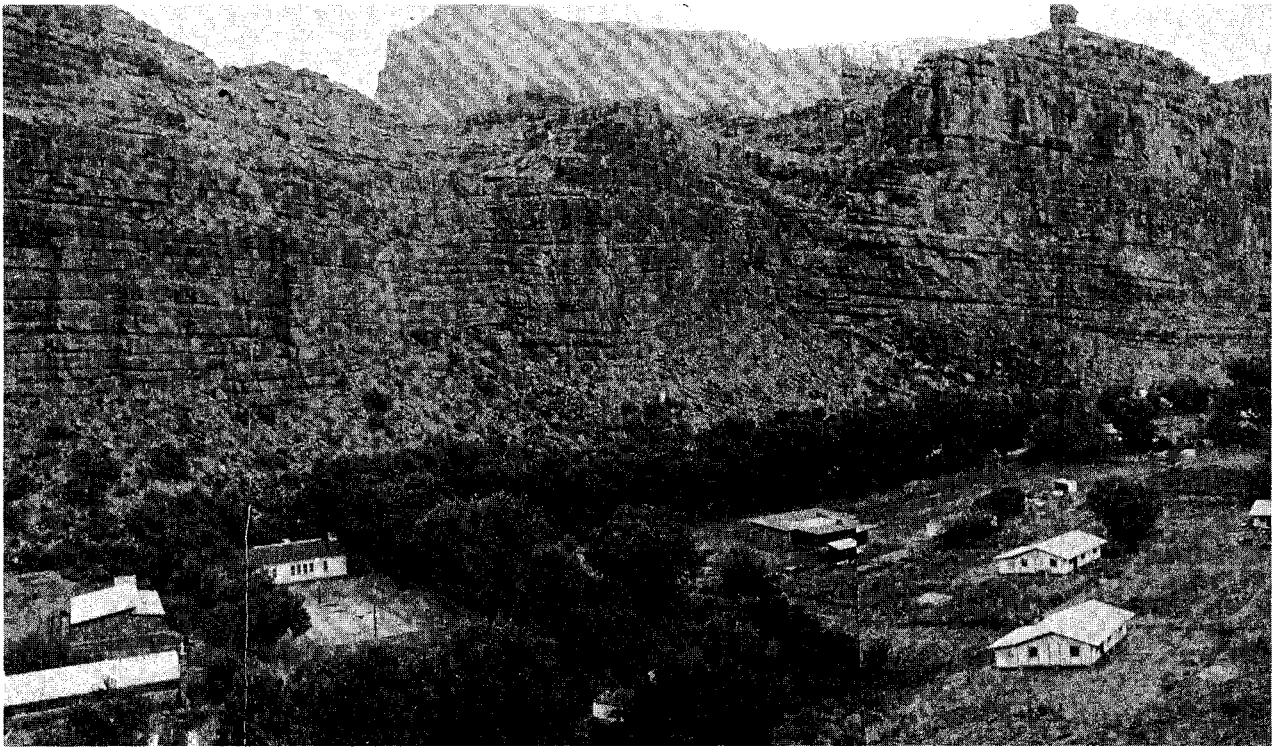
reservation extends downstream to a point where the canyon narrows again, making its overall length about three miles.

The only open space in the canyon ranges upward. You crane your neck first up the red limestone walls rising 400 feet from the edge of the canyon floor, then up a second tier of white limestone rising another 2,000 feet to the south rim of the gorge on a level with the rest of the world. These walls dominate every vista, and echo the sounds of Havasupai life— kids' whoops, the hammering of the construction crew, horses' hooves on a wooden bridge, the braying of mules. When the helicopter swoops down along the canyon and settles in the dust beside the new cafe, the walls report its chatter up and down the reservation. The walls keep the canyon bottom in shadow long after the sun has risen on rim-land Arizona, and they return it to shadow early in the afternoon. In these long dawns and dusks, light reflected by the walls gives the dark red-brown Havasupai a rich, rosy glow, and turns white skin slightly blue.

Up the canyon past the source of the creek, you find dry canyons branching into more dry canyons, a few animal trails leading up to the rim, and one trail— about eight miles long— that man and horse can negotiate. This is Hualapai Trail, the only way in and out, unless you are a v.i.p., gravely ill, or under arrest, in which case you may move by helicopter. Downstream from the reservation, on Park land, you find three thundering waterfalls at roughly one-mile intervals along the creek, each more picturesque, more imposing, than the one before, the last of these higher than Niagara. Then the canyon walls narrow to within a few yards of the creek, making the eleven-mile hike to the Colorado River a major wilderness adventure.

The trip out of the canyon via Hualapai Trail takes about three hours on horseback, five or more on foot. Lee Marshall (my host in Supai) is a past Chairman of the Tribal Council, runs some cattle up on the rim, and has friends in most of the towns up there. He goes out of the canyon about once a month. His wife Florence goes out once or twice a year. Other Havasupai go out less often still. Pregnant women usually ride out by horse about two weeks before delivery. When a Supai has died, his body is carried out by mule for burial in Supai Cemetery on the rim.

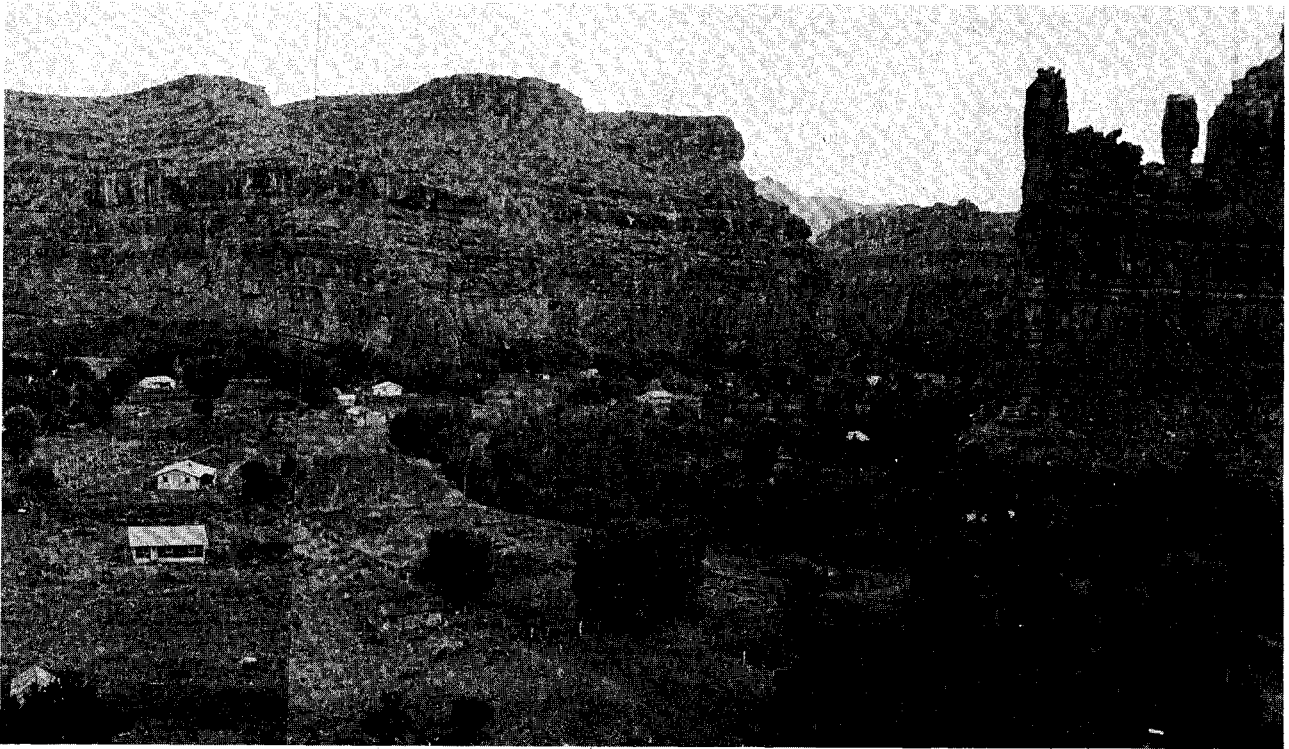
Practically everything in Supai gets there by trail on the last surviving mule train of the U.S. Postal Service. ("Supai, Arizona 86435" is a prized cancellation among philatelists.) Lee and Florence's new stereo turntable from a Chicago mailorder house; the Headstart teacher's kit for making old bottles into drinking glasses; obscure 16 mm. films for the Saturday night movies in the Community Building; bread, soda pop, canned and frozen meats, oranges, potatoes, onions, American cheese, flour, etc. for sale in



the store; frozen hamburgers and hot dogs, potato chips, and jugs of soda pop syrup, all for the cafe; movie magazines, comics, welfare checks, and letters from children away at boarding school-- it all comes in the mail. In summer, by the time the groceries from the Safeway store in Kingman-- 110 miles away-- have arrived at the hitching post in front of the combination post office-tourism bureau, the frozen chicken has pretty well defrosted, the bread has been reshaped, cookies crumbled, and the price of all of it doubled by the cost of mailing.

Although for tourists the trip along Hualapai Trail can be terrifying, especially if the horses act crazy or the guide is drunk, the Supai people boast that they travel the trail at night and in virtually any condition of weather, illumination, and inebriation. They maintain the trail when the Park Service fails to do so, that is, frequently, and speculate about developing it-- tapping water sources to relieve travellers and animals midway through the journey. They are quick to point out that the Jones boy ran from the trailhead to Supai in half an hour; the trail separates the Havasupai from the white world in more ways than one.

From the end of the trail at Hualapai Hilltop to the nearest paved highway, you must drive about two hours. For this portion of the trip to civilization the Supai have very little affection. The rutted dirt road crosses the wind-blown plateau, passing through the Hualapai Reservation and various private lands, arriving 67 miles later at a junction with Interstate 40, and still you are more than two hours from Flagstaff.



Riding up the trail with a Havasupai acquaintance, you may hear a tale or piece of gossip associated with the stopping places and rock formations along the way. Riding out along the dirt road, you hear that in this place so-and-so had an accident, drove off the edge into the canyon, and you see the rusted hulks of Supai cars abandoned at the roadside. Lee Marshall remembers when the whole trip out was made by horseback, from Hualapai Hilltop to Grand Canyon Village. In those days, the mail got through whatever the weather. Now, in the summertime, cloudbursts close the road to cars for hours at a time, and in the wintertime, rain and snow keep even heavy-duty vehicles from getting from the Interstate to Hualapai Hilltop to meet the mule train. Last winter, four four-wheel-drive vehicles got stuck in the same stretch of half-frozen ooze on the same day. A six-wheel-drive was dispatched to pull them free, but it got stuck, too. A second six-wheel-drive was sent, and got stuck. A Caterpillar-type earth-mover came to assist, and bogged down. A second "cat" was sent, and got stuck. Then the eight vehicles were abandoned until the road had thawed and dried. In 1967 the reservation was cut off from supplies for two months.

The isolation that thrills tourists in the warmer months leaves the Havasupai gloomy, cold, and ill-supplied in winter. The canyon is damp, sometimes covered with snow, and cast into shadow for all but a few hours at midday. The diesel generator breaks down from time to time, leaving the thin-walled older houses and new pre-fabs without elec-

tricity for heat and light. Supplies of petroleum run out. Firewood is scarce. The old people get colds that last till spring. The telephone line out of the canyon is out of service a third of the time in summer, more in winter. No visitors come in. All the children over seven have left the canyon to attend schools in distant cities. Liquor is contraband on the reservation. Last summer a pint of Twister could be had for \$10, a fifth of whiskey for \$40. In winter the prices go up gradually until the supply runs out. The creek still runs, keeping about the same mild temperature-- 70°-- as in summer. It sends up wisps of steam where it runs over rapids. But nobody swims. The Havasupai have not chosen to live in this canyon in the winter, but there they are. Why this is so I will explain later in these newsletters.

Indian communities all over North America are underdeveloped enclaves economically dependent upon, and malnourished by, the white majority economy. The disadvantages of being Indian in America are particularly grave for the Havasupai. Their natural resources are nil. They are nearly all unskilled. They have no domestic market for their goods, should they produce any, and the cost of transportation to external markets is prohibitive. They have land to farm, but they do not use it to capacity. Their unique resource-- the scenic beauty of the canyon and adjacent falls-- they exploit by renting pack animals to tourists, but the packing business is declining in popularity. They are capable of raising cattle on land on the rim, but, they say, the Park Service and National Forest prevent them from doing so profitably. Windfalls of wage-work occasionally come their way, but the ultimate effect of such bonanzas seems to be destructive of their way of life. They say welfare has the same effect; it accounts for about one-third of their income.

Lee Marshall has two married daughters, no sons, fifteen head of cattle, several horses, and three houses-- two that he built and one pre-fab just completed for him. He lives considerably better than virtually all the other Supai, materially. He has often spoken for the tribe through the years. The house he lives in is a one-story, two-room bungalow made of massive blocks of canyon-stone cut from the wall and hauled into place by his own efforts. We sit one summer evening near the door, our backs against the house, the stone radiating heat absorbed during the day. A cat traps grasshoppers and eats them at our feet. Lee's buckskin mare browses a few yards away. Kids on ponies gallop past Lee's camp on the trail out of the village. Their shouts echo and fade, leaving no sound in the still air but the snorting of the mare as she blows the dirt away from the base of the grass, and the splash of the creek twenty yards away.

"I guess we're going to disappear," he says. "There're about 300 of us down here

now, I guess, and we're growing. But these kids, they don't want to live down here anymore. Lots of these kids don't even talk Indian anymore. They're talking English. I talk to them and they don't know what I'm saying sometimes. I don't know what's going to happen. I guess we're going to disappear. Packing is dying out. They're going to have to build that tramway. The kids just don't seem to care. Girls dropping babies, just because they get this welfare. It used to be, the old people would say, 'You wait till you find the right man, someone who's got property.' But now, kids just get married, screw every night, make babies. Some of these girls go with bums. Just bums.

"If we had that land back, these guys would run cattle up there. The old people built earth dams up there. We know that land. It's our land. But I don't know."

Of the 518 acres comprising the main Havasupai reservation, about 170 are within reach of the existing irrigation ditches. Of 170 irrigable acres, about eight are under cultivation. Of the Havasupai per capita income (less than \$500 per annum), about 70 per cent is spent on food imported to the tribal store. Most afternoons in the summer you find Havasupai men taking it easy, chatting under the cottonwoods on the trail through town, dozing at home, or bathing at one of the two sweatlodes near the creek. Except when there is wage work on some federally subsidized project, Havasupai men are idle half the day. Why do they not farm the land more extensively, and save money by thus raising more of their own food?

Most of the people I talked with about farming said they were doing all they needed to do. That is, in the summer and fall harvest months nearly everyone has some fresh corn, squashes, and fruit from the fruit trees. I was there during corn and peach harvest; these fresh products of their own cultivation account for an insignificant fraction of the Havasupai diet. These foods were eaten in addition to-- not instead of-- the foods they buy year-round at the store: white bread, Spam, corned beef, chile con carne, canned vegetables and fruits, etc. What Havasupai people seem to want is cash, cash for mailed-in groceries at twice the rim-world price, cash for radios and record players, cash for saddles and liquor. From the produce of their own gardens they can derive only nourishment; there is no market for homegrown produce. The system by which land is managed and inherited also discourages serious farming.

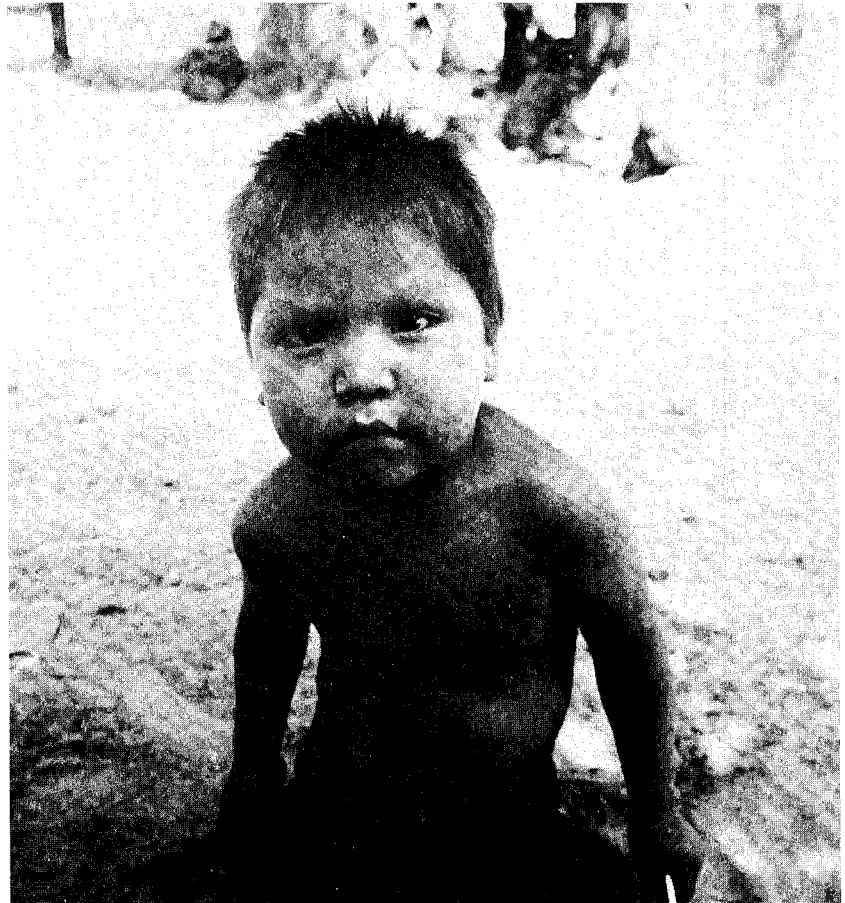
For many years the principal source of income among the Havasupai has been packing and guiding tourists, but now packing is in decline. A round trip by horse costs the tourist \$20.00. Taking into account the cost of feeding his animals and the cut taken by the tribe from each packer's fee, a packer's profit averages a little less than

\$3.00 per hour, netting him \$20.00 on a good day. For Havasupai men accustomed to the trail, this is not strenuous work, and the money is good, yet the tribal Tourist Enterprise regularly finds itself unable to meet an obligation to supply pack animals for trips in or out of the canyon. A family from New Haven had a confirmed reservation for five horses to meet them at the trailhead on the rim at 8:00 a.m. That night at 5:00 p.m. they were still waiting in the heat of the parking lot. They had some unfavorable things to say about the People of the Blue-Green Water. What explains the decline in Havasupai participation in packing, their occupation since the turn of century and a vital service to the tourism that brings the tribe its only outside income?

Like the under-utilization of irrigable lands, rejection of packing seems to be the natural result of at least these three facts of Havasupai life. First, the education of the young Havasupai who would ordinarily take up this kind of work has alienated them. They aspire to other ways of making a living. Second, because the Havasupai father controls the use of, and income from, all of the land belonging to the family, middle-aged sons of surviving fathers balk at working the family string of pack animals without sharing in the ownership and direction of business. Third, for the past two years, wage work has been available on the construction of new housing. This wage work has been a fetching alternative to packing. Let us take each of these circumstances in order.

Education: From 1955 to 1967, all Havasupai children six years of age and older were taken from the canyon in the fall and placed in federal boarding schools or with foster parents to attend public schools. The Bureau of Indian Affairs justified this policy by explaining that the small population of the reservation made a school system for the Havasupai economically unfeasible. Also, educating Indian children away from their parents has often been a preferred technique for advancing the process of assimilation. Since 1967, a program of primary education has been gradually built up in the canyon; now children leave the canyon after third grade. When they are home for the summer, the pre-adolescents ride ponies up and down the trails of Supai, looping lariats over fenceposts and smaller children. The teenagers lounge around the cafe, talk their mixture of Havasupai and English, listen to hard rock, and stare coldly at the tourists. They are generally idle. From time to time they are put in the little Havasupai jail stoned or drunk, but otherwise life is pretty dull. One afternoon I watched a band of Havasupai teenagers harrass some white teenage hikers resting near the cafe before going on to the Park Service campground. It began when a Havasupai boy snagged a white boy's foot with his lariat. Then a dozen other Havasupai tripped,





bound, and eventually released all the hikers that ran the gauntlet. From time to time, Havasupai hostility toward tourists is expressed still more directly, as when older teenage boys menace white girls at the campground after dark. When young Havasupai talk about what they want to do as adults, they talk about jobs in Phoenix or Los Angeles. If they end up living on the reservation, they want to make money in cattle. They do not want to lead pack animals and tourists up and down Hualapai Trail. Unfortunately their education has not prepared them for a life outside the canyon. Most Havasupai are unskilled, speak English just adequately for their specialized contact with outsiders, and experience prejudice in their trips outside the canyon. Only four Havasupai have attended college; none has graduated. Young Havasupai are intolerant of the lives the old people lead in the canyon, yet they cannot forge an alternative in the white world where they have been educated.

Control of Land: The population of Havasupai people who were sent out of the canyon at age five or six now includes everyone between eight and twenty-three. Older Havasupai are also increasingly disenchanted with the traditional occupations--packing and gardening. For them, a major disincentive seems to be the rules of custom by which land is inherited and held among the Havasupai. Although the Havasupai say that their land is held in common by the tribe as a whole, in practice it

is divided into small, fenced family plots. Families retain rights of ownership as long as the land is being used, even if only for occasional grazing. Land is inherited patrilineally. A father typically "owns" a few acres of land. Most of it is used for pasturing his pack animals, a small part for gardening. Sons of working age help the father cultivate the land and manage the animals. When a son marries, he is expected to bring his wife into the father's compound and become a part of the father's family. The married son continues working under his father's direction. Eventually married sons grow ambitious for land of their own and an independent income. They ask the father for land. To preserve the family production unit and thereby the interests of the mother, unmarried children, and other dependents, the father refuses to subdivide the land and grant pieces to married sons. There is no unassigned land in the canyon. Unable to acquire land from the father or the tribe, the dissatisfied sons leave the family and, in some cases, the canyon, returning to Supai from outside only at holidays or when there is temporary wage work on the reservation.

Finally the father names an heir-- traditionally from the deathbed. He customarily names one heir, often the youngest son, the son least alienated from the father and family through squabbles over the control of land and use of income from the land and animals. The sole heir may or may not share the land among his brothers, now disinherited for having challenged the father's authority. The sole heir may well continue packing, but landless brothers do so, under the heir's terms, only if there is no other way to make a living. There are more enrolled Havasupai now than ever before-- about 450. Grudges and feuds over pieces of land sometimes no more than a few yards square are now endemic. For Havasupai who want to continue living on the land, the possibility of acquiring land of one's own has to be increased, presumably by putting more land at the disposal of the tribe as a whole, since the system by which land is held and inherited is not subject to directed change.

Wage Work: The first European visitor to the Havasupai, the Franciscan Padre Garcés in 1776, found them inhabiting dirt-and-brush conical huts. These houses have been replaced, first by cabins of wood and found materials, and more recently by houses of canyon stone. In the late 1960's, the Havasupai suffered several unusually severe winters, during one of which an airlift was mounted to deliver emergency supplies. That airlift caught the attention of the American public, and came to mark the end of a period of governmental neglect of the Havasupai. Since then, programs funded by the Office of Economic Opportunity have sprung up on the reservation, including Headstart and a Community Action Program, and the tribe has built a community building and cafe

with the help of the Economic Development Administration. The most striking effect of the current wave of official attention to the Havasupai is a program of housing construction that within the year will have provided a single-story, three-bedroom, pastel pre-fab house for fifty of the fifty-odd families that live on the reservation.

The Havasupai men who work on the construction crew receive wages on a par with construction wages elsewhere in northern Arizona, about \$7.35 per hour. That yields an annual income of more than \$10,000 in some cases, compared with less than \$2,000 in a typical year of packing. The construction work draws the most dependable men in the canyon, young or middle-aged, relatively free of problems with alcohol, and willing to work. The foreman, a white man who has directed housing construction programs on other southwestern reservations, says the Havasupai crew is the best he has worked with. With these men diverted from packing, the Tourist Enterprise manager's life is a nightmare of stranded visitors, and stale mail is an accepted fact of Havasupai life.

In the 1920's, following the flood of 1916 that devastated Supai, the government built 20 homely clapboard bungalows for the Havasupai. The people never moved into them. They were said to be too hot in summer, cold in winter, and useful only for storing corn. Several of them still stand, but most have been dismantled for firewood. The Havasupai usually find fault with what the government does; the new housing program gives them abundant grounds for complaint. The foundations reach less than a foot into the sandy soil. They say they will not resist a flood. The plywood flooring of houses built in 1971 has already broken through. The plumbing has stopped up in all the houses inhabited for more than a few months. Some say it is poor plumbing; others say the people do not know how to use indoor plumbing properly. Whatever the cause, it is a messy situation. Inside, the houses are sparsely furnished. All the new houses are much larger than the old. They require more furniture, but the cost of shipping furniture into the canyon is insupportable. The most common complaint I heard is that the new houses are hot in summer and cold in winter. My own chief complaint, as an outsider, is that they are ugly. They look foreign, like the cluster of houses found in most reservation towns where the BIA employees live apart from the Indians. Here the cluster of government-issue houses has overtaken the entire population. Looking at the village of Supai from an outcropping high above the canyon floor, you see the green of the trees and pink of the earth dotted by simple, weathered cabins and shacks of wood and tar paper, and dominated by boxy, unvarying pre-fabs in pinkish-brown, aqua, cream, sky-blue, yellow, and gray.

The housing workers hope to get similar work outside when this work ends.


Rising unemployment and regulations in housing trade unions prejudicial to the poor may make entry into construction jobs on the outside impractical. Most Havasupai men who have acquired a saleable skill in the past end up using it on or near the reservation, employed by the BIA, the local utility company, the telephone company, or the like. Havasupai people seem to need to live with other Havasupai to be comfortable. What will the twenty housing workers do, the cream of the Havasupai work force, when the last house is built and the BIA foreman leaves the canyon?

One popular answer for these and other Supai men is to run cattle up on the rim. The white man's schooling does not seem to erase in Havasupai boys the desire to excel as horsemen. They learn to rope before they learn to read. A favorite slogan and graffito is "I'm a Roper, Not a Doper." Even the most alienated teenagers turned out to watch or, in some cases, ride in the Peach Festival rodeo in late August. I asked one of them what he thought he would do to make a living when he was older. He said he would be a cowboy. His companion laughed and said, no, he would end up being a wino in Flagstaff.

Currently ten families run about 100 head of cattle on the rim, under permits from the National Forest and the Park Service. If the Havasupai expanded the cattle operation, developed tribal stock facilities, and employed the men of the tribe in all phases of range work and management, young Havasupai could nurture realistic aspirations. To support a large stock-raising effort, some Havasupai might live on the rim near the stock facilities. A community might develop on the rim above Supai, an outpost on a level with the rest of the world, a jumping-off point for work in the outside world.

To expand their cattle business, the Havasupai need rim land that they can develop to its capacity for stock-raising. They have been trying since the turn of the century to recover rim land from the federal government. A year ago, when Barry Goldwater introduced Senate Bill 1296, their continuing fight to escape the confinement of the canyon seemed on the brink of victory. As opposition arose to the Havasupai portion of the bill, the Supai people slipped back into hopeless skepticism. Even if land should be granted them this year, I suspect they would view it as a freak contretemps in the steady neglect of Havasupai interests by the federal government. They seem to expect to lose.

Sincerely,



Woodward A. Wickham

Received in New York on February 11, 1974