

GLADYS REICHARD, SPIDER WOMAN
NAVAJO NAME: WEAVING WOMAN

Elisabeth Ruffner

Gladys Amanda Reichard was born in Bangor, Pennsylvania in 1893, and she died in Flagstaff, Arizona at the age of 62, while conducting research at the Museum of Northern Arizona. Her personal collection of letters and manuscripts are archived in the Colton Research Center at the museum. Reichard was raised in an intellectually stimulating family and achieved post-doctoral degrees abroad, studying and recording many cultures. She taught at Barnard College of Columbia University from 1921 and remained on the faculty until her death in 1955

In her book "Spider Woman", Reichard adapted the weaving myth of the Navajo people with whom she lived for many summers often occupying a root cellar of a Navajo family with whom she became closely entwined through studying and writing about weaving. Spider Woman in Navajo mythology was the teacher of weaving to the women. Her published work bearing the title is subtitled "A story of Navajo Weavers and Chanters".

From the Spanish explorers, and from the Pueblo peoples, the Navajo learned shepherding, weaving, silver working and sandpainting, translating their origination stories into art forms. Richard Sims, former Director of Sharlot Hall Museum has written, "The Navajo brought with them on their journey from Western Canada to the Southwest, in archaeological time around AD 1100, an ability to adapt, borrow and re-imagine many aspects of the cultures they would encounter."

Reichard became close to a number of families in her studies, writing

extensively about social organization, linguistics and arts. Her many published works deal with anthropological studies and genealogy of Navajo families going back more than nine generations. Becoming fluent in the Navajo language, Reichard used contemporary interviews to build a thorough understanding of life of the people at the time as the basis for works on religion and language in a presentation of symbol systems in all the complexities involved in traditions and customs.

Gladys Reichard was not well known in Prescott at the time in the early 1930s except by one youth of fifteen who was introduced to her by Indian trader Ramon Hubbell, the son of Don Lorenzo Hubbell who established his headquarters on the Navajo Reservation at Ganado in the early years of the last century. Ramon Hubbell customarily attended the Prescott Rodeo as did many other traders, selling rugs, pottery and jewelry.

The youth was Lester Ward (Budge) Ruffner and he spent two summers in 1933 and 1944 as camp tender and driver of Reichard's Model T Ford long before paved roads welcomed visitors to the vast reservations of Arizona.

Ruffner was profoundly affected by this woman, and later wrote of his experience in his Courier newspaper column of June 29, 1989.

"Gladys Reichard was the most amazing woman I have ever met. She was an anthropologist who taught at Barnard College, a woman's college within the complex of Columbia University. In the early 1930s she came west every summer to do research on the Navajo Reservation and it was here I was fortunate she took me under her wing.

" She was a pure scientist, devoted to her work well beyond what I regarded as

the realm of reason. She taught me the valuable lesson to judge 'other people' by their values and standards rather than mine. I was fifteen years old and had never even heard of ethnocentricity and certainly didn't know that I was infected with it. If Gladys Reichard didn't eliminate it from my system, she certainly diluted it.

" I began to regard Indians as people. Even Navajos. Today 45 years after her death, she is regarded as one of the foremost American anthropologists."

Ruffner went on to become friends with many Indian people, welcoming them into his home and visiting many times in the Hopi as well as the Navajo lands. Once he was able to convince a friend with whom he served in the military in World War II and who had returned to his home in Oraibi on the Hopi Reservation, that white man medicine would be beneficial to him in treating his service related illness, sent him the bus fare and saw him admitted to Fort Whipple veterans hospital. When Carl Chukima wrote him thanks, after his return home, not having a stamp handy, he drew a simulation of Uncle Sam's postage and the letter was delivered promptly from Oraibi to Prescott.

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