

Man served as agent among Indians

Army was both sympathetic and very patronizing

The name of William F.M. Arny is not generally familiar to modern-day New Mexicans.

But in the 1860s and 1870s, he was well-known along the upper Rio Grande, where he served in various capacities for the Indian Bureau and also twice filled the office of territorial secretary.

By inclination, Arny was an idealist and a reformer, and in politics, a crusading Republican.

In 1861, President Abraham Lincoln appointed him agent for the Utes and Apaches at Cimarron. But shortly, he left the Indian service and went to Santa Fe where he began building the local Republican Party.

In 1869 Arny went to Washington, seeking some sort of political plum from the administration of President U.S. Grant.

Since the close of the Civil War, Indian affairs in New Mexico had been deteriorating, owing to dishonesty of some agents, thieving supply contractors, and rapid expansion of white settlement.

As reports by local agents and superintendents were usually unreliable, the Interior Department secretary decided to name Arny a special agent for the Indians of New Mexico, and gave him broad investigatory powers.

Specifically, Arny was instructed to visit every native village, take an Indian census, examine land titles, inquire into



Marc Simmons

New Mexico Scrapbook

the need for schools and settle reservation disputes. By May of 1870, he was back in New Mexico and on the job.

In the course of that year, Arny visited all Indian pueblos and nomad tribes and spoke with every famous chief of the day within the New Mexico Territory.

His personal observations and collected data were recorded in an official journal, discovered in the National Archives and published in 1967 by the late historian Lawrence R. Murphy.

The journal grants us an inside view of the state of Indian affairs in that era.

From it we see that while Arny was sincere in his sympathy for the Indians' plight, he was also patronizing and short-sighted.

For example, while among the Utes in the Four Corners, he wrote: "I am surrounded by sleeping savages, who in their pagan worship of the Great Spirit care nothing for this day."

Upon his visitation at Zuni Pueblo, he spent the day in a council with the Indians and taking a census.

They complained that no agent had visited them for 10 years.

"The Zunis are beginning to think that because they do not steal," said Arny in his journal, "the Government does not give them anything. They are starting to believe that if they steal like the Navajos they would get something from Washington."

Next he examined Laguna Pueblo in central New Mexico, which by his count held 169 persons, seven of whom could read and write.

These Indians had their own complaint: that Hispanic New Mexicans were encroaching upon their farmlands.

Arny promised to report the matter to the Great Father in Washington, who would send a surveyor to measure and mark their lands.

In the meantime, he urged them to remain calm. Next day, however, the Indians and Hispanics "had a fight with their hoes" and Arny had to intervene to restore peace.

Traveling down the Rio Grande through Socorro and Fort Craig, the agent then made an inspection of the Southern Apache Agency at Alamosa (today's Monticello northwest of Truth or Consequences).

He held a council with 790 Apaches and their chief Cochise.

Arny told the assembly that "the Great Father desired peace with his red children and wanted them to quit war with his white children."

Cochise spoke next, confessing that he had been guilty of murders and robberies.

He pleaded that he had lost many men and now had more women and children than he could take care of and still fight. Hence he wanted peace.

Upon that declaration, Arny entered this judgment in his journal: "Cochise and his Indians have probably committed more murders and outrages than any other Indians in the U.S. If they can now be got upon a reservation, it will be a blessing to this country and make it safe to develop one of the richest mineral regions of the West."

On his way back through Socorro, Arny saw the young lieutenant who headed his military escort arrested by a justice of the peace. It seems the lieutenant had smashed some illegal barrels of whiskey intended for sale to the Apaches.

The whiskey runner had been a cousin of the J.P.

By the year's end, Arny finished up and returned to Washington to make his report. It contained some enlightened recommendations for improving Indian affairs.

But corrupt officials and land speculators scuttled most of his suggestions.

Arny returned to spend his last days in New Mexico, dying at Santa Fe in 1881.

He was buried in the National Cemetery and his grave can be seen near that of Charles Bent, the territory's first U.S. governor.

Marc Simmons is a New Mexico author and historian who lives in Cerrillos. His column appears each Sunday in the El Paso Times.