



DIGGING IN—Ed Morris Milligrock, Nome, assists archaeologists in digging up the past on old Indian camping grounds just below the totem at the University of Alaska, College. Milligrock is among 75 high school students participating in an eight-week Upward Bound program at the university.

—Photo by Frank Sipes

☆☆☆ Indian School Takes Good in Both Cultures

"We want to instill in our youngsters a sense of pride in being Indian," the director of an Arizona Indian school says. "We want to show them that they can be Indian and American at the same time,

that they can take the best from each way of life and combine it into something viable."

The speaker is Robert A. Roessel, Jr., director of Rough Rock Demonstration School, located near the heart of the United States' largest reservation—25,000 square miles that 105,000 Navajos call home.

Roessel's school was featured last February in a story by Paul Conklin for *American Education*, the magazine of the U.S. Department of Health Education and Welfare.

Roessel became director of the school after complaining for years about the system used to educate Indian children. According to the system, children are told they are either Indian or white. "The way we have traditionally weighted things, the good way is always the non-Indian way and the bad is always the Indian," Roessel said. "We tell Indian children they are superstitious and primitive and that their hogans are dirty. We try to impose our values and tell them they should eat green, leafy vegetables and sleep on a bed and brush their teeth.

"The Indian child listens and looks at himself and sees that he doesn't measure up. In his own eyes he is a

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failure. Education can be a shattering experience when one is taught nothing but negative things about himself for 12 years."

Roessel recalls that when he first came on the reservation as a teacher, he told children they had two legs, one being their Navajo heritage, the other the best part of the white world. "They couldn't get along with just one leg, but needed both to be secure and whole."

The school attempts to carry out that philosophy. It is a self contained community of 600 with the nearest sizable town, Gallup, New Mexico 120 miles away. Of the 91 full-time people on the payroll, 46 are Indian, 35 from Rough Rock. Roessel believes that local people should be as involved as possible in school life. Other staff people include 10 full time classroom teachers, a remedial reading specialist, a speech therapist, an art teacher, a librarian, two recreation leaders and 15 VISTA. Two specialists are employed to teach English as a second language.

Classrooms are decorated with Navajo motifs. The library has a Navajo corner. Recordings of Navajo music and rituals are played during the school day.

In the evening old men, the historians and medicine men of the tribe, tell Navajo folk tales and legends in the dormitories.

In the lower grades, 35 minutes a day are devoted to "cultural identification" lessons. In grades three through six, the subject gets 45 minutes daily.

Youngsters learn about their people's economic conditions, customs, history and government.

Unlike some Indian schools, where children are still punished if they speak their native language, at Rough Rock, they are forced to use their own language. Navajo is taught in fourth, fifth and sixth grades for one hour, three days a week. Also, portions of regular classes, such as arithmetic and social studies are held in Navajo to see whether students can learn more easily in their native tongue.

Rough Rock's school board has one woman and four men who are middle aged Navajos. Only one has had even a day of formal education. This board controls the school.

In other schools, local Indian boards take care of housekeeping, roads, maintenance and truants. They have no authority or decision-making power. The superintendent calls the shots. "The belief persists that Indians have neither the desire nor the ability to manage their own affairs," Roessel says. "It's the old 'father-knows-best' approach that says it's up to me, an expert sitting behind my desk to make policy for them. But Indians are eager for responsibility and if given a chance, they'll act creatively and assume leadership."

Roessel means what he says. Once a week he and staff members discuss part of the master program with the school board, explaining the reason behind each item.

In every case, the board has accepted the proposal, modifying it, however, and adding a Navajo cast. Roessel's faith in his board is so strong, he is willing to completely discard anything they oppose.

"This is a community-oriented school, rather than child-oriented," Roessel says. "In the past, Indian schools have taken little interest in their communities, but here we want to involve adults and teenagers, drop-outs, people who have never been to school."

Rough Rock's school facilities—gym, kitchen, dormitories, shower rooms, library—are open to anybody who wants to use them.

Parents are encouraged to attend board meetings, visit classes, eat in the cafeteria and stay overnight in the dormitories.

They sometimes come in team-drawn wagons, the men with stiff-brimmed hats and if they are of the old generation, their hair drawn into tight knots at the back. The women wear long velveteen skirts, silver jewelry and strings of turquoise and coral.

Roessel believes children belong to their parents, not to the school. Parents can take children home any weekend they wish.

To give a more homelike atmosphere, the school employs eight parents to mend clothes, tell stories, help with showers and do a variety of other chores that parents know how to do

best. For this they receive a dollar an hour.

The school board handles recruiting of parents, who change every six weeks.

The school also runs an adult education program. An arts and crafts project is attempting to revive dying Navajo handicrafts so that children can see the old processes and so that more local wage earners will be produced. On the staff are a weaver, silversmith and moccasin maker. They soon will be joined by basket-makers, potters, leather craftsmen and rawhide workers.

"This is not art for art's sake," Roessel explains. "We are training people who otherwise would have no income." The average family of six at Rough Rock makes \$500 a year herding sheep.

Other adult programs have been started after asking the people what they want. The men were most interested in auto mechanics. Women wanted classes in cooking and nutrition. So those classes were started.

Both were interested in learning to read. They wanted a basic knowledge of money and how to make change so they would not be cheated at the store. They wanted to learn some English so they could go into the outside world. These courses also were started.

The school is funded by Office of Economic Opportunity and Bureau of Indian Affairs, but is independent of them. The funds, are administered through a private nonprofit corporation called Demonstration in Navajo Education.

Roessel says, "At Rough Rock the BIA and OEO have said to the Indians in effect, 'This is your school. Make of it what you want. Develop a curriculum that will reflect what you think is important.' This is an isolated, illiterate community where 95 percent of the people are uneducated, but I am convinced that they have the necessary vision and concern for their future."