

## *Contents*

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List of Illustrations	<i>ix</i>
Acknowledgments	<i>xi</i>
Introduction	<i>xiii</i>
1. Those Who Came before Me	<i>1</i>
2. Those Who Paved My Way	<i>14</i>
3. Campus Brats, Cousins, and the Lessons of Life	<i>27</i>
4. Formal Education, Hard Knocks, and Rewards	<i>44</i>
5. Creighton Years	<i>61</i>
6. Finally: Doctor Blue Spruce	<i>79</i>
7. Lieutenant Blue Spruce, USN	<i>91</i>
8. Indian Health Service Dentist	<i>107</i>
9. From the Wilds of Montana to New York City	<i>122</i>
10. Merchant Marines	<i>135</i>
11. Back to School	<i>149</i>
12. Off to South America	<i>163</i>
13. Back in the States	<i>176</i>
14. Special Assistant, Bureau of Health Manpower Education	<i>188</i>
15. Career Change: The “Money Man”	<i>203</i>
16. King of the Hill	<i>219</i>
17. Finally: Director of the Program Closest to My Heart	<i>232</i>
18. Assistant Surgeon General	<i>245</i>
19. Come, Follow Me	<i>264</i>
20. To Those Who Hold Our Future	<i>280</i>
Index	<i>287</i>

# 1

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## Those Who Came before Me

I AM AN AMERICAN INDIAN descended from the Puebloan peoples of the Southwest. My mother belonged to the San Juan Pueblo and my father belonged to the Laguna Pueblo. Because an American Indian can be a member of only one tribe, Daddy enrolled all three of his children in the Laguna tribe when we were young, even though our home in Santa Fe was closer to San Juan. My grandmother Cruz, who lived alone in San Juan, needed our help, so it was important to live near her. In my early years I developed close ties with my mother's people, though I cherish the memory of visits with my Blue Spruce grandparents and my ties to Laguna are still manifest today. I frequently visit both pueblos and attend tribal ceremonies with my relatives.

My tribal lineage has been traced to the earliest inhabitants of the southwest area of North America. In about AD 500 my Puebloan ancestors began settling in the Mesa Verde area in what is now Colorado. By 600 they had established farming communities with permanent adobe homes clustered in villages on the mesa tops. In the tenth century they began moving into the canyons and constructed the cliff dwellings in the canyon walls in about 1200. Nestled

in large caves chiseled in the sandstone by the elements and time, these multistory pueblos, and the people who lived there, were protected from nature's destructive forces. As a result large portions of these dwellings have survived through the centuries. I visited the Mesa Verde National Park and saw the cliff dwellings in 1966.

Historians are not sure why these Puebloan ancestors relocated to these cliff dwellings or why they abandoned that area a hundred years later. The common theory is that they could no longer grow crops for food; maybe the land was farmed out, or drought had brought famine to the area. For whatever reason, my ancestors migrated in about 1200 and established small villages, later termed "pueblos" by the Spanish explorers, scattered along the banks of the Rio Grande River. Nineteen of these pueblos still exist today. They are the oldest continuously inhabited settlements in America.

The Puebloan peoples have never been united in a single tribe, yet they share a common link in the architecture of their villages and farming technique. However, the pueblos are divided by language. The San Juan, Santa Clara, San Ildefonso, Nambe, Tesuque, and Pojoaque pueblos speak the Tewa language; the Laguna, Acoma, Cochiti, Santo Domingo, San Felipe, Santa Ana, and Zia pueblos speak Keresan. Each pueblo acts as an independent political entity, with its own distinct culture and tribal government. For example, the Laguna Pueblo consists of six villages: Old Laguna, Paraje, Mesita, Encinal, Casa Blanca, and Pagate, my father's village. The Laguna Pueblo has a democratic government, and the people elect the tribal governor. The administrative offices that govern all six villages

are located at Old Laguna, just off Interstate 40, west of Albuquerque, New Mexico.

My parents told me of the time when America was a continent of isolation—of vast plains, deserts, valleys, forests, and mountains. Nature itself stimulated the imagination and invited an expansive life. It induced a reverence for nature, bound man to earth, and provided natural resources—food, water, and material for shelter—in abundance. The Indian was content to harmonize life, religion, and ceremony with the earth and nature. Not inclined toward material progress, this social order encompassed humility, tolerance, and recognition of traditional beliefs. This all began to change once European contact was made.

San Juan Pueblo, located about twenty-five miles north of present-day Santa Fe, came under Spanish rule in 1598, and Laguna Pueblo, located about forty-five miles west of Albuquerque, in 1699. As the Spaniards established missions, each pueblo was given a Spanish name that has been on the New Mexico road signs and maps until recently. The Pueblo people are making an effort to return their pueblos to the original names in their native language. In 2005 the highway signs near my mother's pueblo were changed from the Spanish San Juan to the Tewa name, Ohkay Owingeh.

By the time the Spanish reached my father's people a string of missions marked their trail and numerous Pueblo Indians had been baptized into the Catholic Church. My father told me, "They offered us the cross or the sword. We weren't stupid, so we chose the cross." Consequently I was raised Catholic within the culture and tradition of the Puebloan people of my father and mother.

My grandparents on both sides remained a part of the Indian culture and outside the mainstream of the dominant society all the days of their lives. They lived in the pueblo, worshipping as Catholics but also participating in traditional religious ceremonies and dances. They tended their livestock, planted their crops, maintained their modest homes in the pueblo, and lived according to the seasons. To this day I regret that I didn't learn to speak the native languages of my grandparents. I would give a great deal to go back in time and converse with my elders. How much wiser I would be. How much more I could learn about my culture. Like many other American Indians today, I long to be fluent in my native language and I am working to gain better understanding and expand my vocabulary.

Among my people storytelling was the prime pastime. With no written language and no way to record history, storytelling was the way tribal history and custom were passed to each new generation. I am told that my grandfather Blue Spruce was an excellent storyteller; I know that he passed his stories and talent down to his son, my father. Although I could not understand my grandfather's stories, I have the memories of the observances of my youth. I remember that after the sun went down the kerosene lamp was placed on the kitchen table, the men gathered around, and my grandfather would talk. I couldn't understand many of his words, but I believe he might have been telling of the last time he went deer hunting and bagged a nice buck—just telling the story of the hunt. Everybody sat around listening. I remember they would say in my dad's language, "Eh. Eh," which means "Is that right?" They all listened closely, eager to hear all of his story. My trips to the pueblos to visit my grandparents gave me firsthand knowledge

of the remaining Pueblo culture and the lifestyle of my American Indian family.

I remember my grandfather Blue Spruce as an older man with long white hair that hung past his shoulders. He almost always let it hang free, seldom braided or tied in a ponytail. My father told me that Grandfather suffered a back injury while working at a lumber mill on Mount Taylor, a mountainous forest area near Paguate Pueblo. He was fortunate that the injury healed without medical attention, because there was none available to him in those days. By the time I knew him he walked stooped over and often used a cane. I remember seeing him carry buckets of water from the well to the house. He made this hundred-yard trip several times a day to provide the household with water for drinking and cooking, cleaning and bathing. His disability didn't seem to slow him down.

He was a strong man who worked hard all his life and became one of the more successful residents of Paguate Pueblo. He built his house with his own hands, cultivated a large garden, and tended the only vineyard in the pueblo. Grandfather Blue Spruce's garden and vineyard provided fruits and vegetables for his family and a surplus to share with relatives and neighbors. I fondly remember that he named a row of grapes after each of his grandchildren. I remember feeling proud and special when harvest time came and I saw baskets of grapes that came from the row that bore my Laguna name, Hee-Ay-Su-Wah.

Grandfather Blue Spruce owned a variety of livestock, including poultry, sheep, cattle, pigs, and horses. Some of these farm animals were raised to provide meat for the table. I remember my grandfather overseeing the process when the men gathered to butcher an animal. My people

made use of every part of the animal; from head to tail, not one single thing was wasted. To be sure that every part was preserved properly, my grandfather directed the preparation of the carcass, from skinning and sectioning the meat to separating the organs, preserving the blood, rendering the fat, tanning the hide, and drying the hooves and horns.

I am not sure how the fresh meat was preserved, but I remember seeing slices of meat hung up to dry. To this day I love dried meat. Although my grandparents didn't have a refrigerator, or even electricity, they had a storage shed kept cool by thick adobe walls, where they could keep fresh meat for a few days. I know they didn't allow it to spoil before it was used. They shared everything with the neighbors and didn't need to store it long.

My grandfather took pride in doing things well and on a grand scale. This included the large garden, vineyard, and livestock, and I think he built the largest outhouse in Paguete Pueblo. Some families had "one-holers" and some had "two-holers," but Grandfather Blue Spruce made his outhouse a "three-holer." I remember that he placed it at least a quarter of a mile from the house. It seemed much farther on a dark, cold night, especially if you were a kid and a little bit scared to be alone.

My grandparents brought cool water from their well to a large clay pot for drinking. No one used a cup or glass; we all drank from a dipper my grandfather fashioned from a gourd.

When I recall Grandfather Blue Spruce I see him laughing often and in different surroundings. Although my understanding of the Keresan language was limited, I know his sense of humor accompanied him wherever he went

and he viewed all life's happenings with a pleasant outlook. He was always very pleasant to me. Although we did not share a common language, he communicated his warmth and love with his facial expression, body language, his gentle touch, and grandfatherly caress, which I very much understood.

When I was about twelve years old we received word that Grandfather Blue Spruce had been killed. It must have been in the middle of World War II because my father had not yet been drafted into the military. The accident happened when Grandfather was tending his favorite horse—removing the hobbles, I think. Something spooked the animal and Grandfather took a blow from one of the frightened horse's hooves that crushed his skull. Killed by his favorite horse, my grandfather died before his time. This sudden and unexpected death brought a sad, sad time to our family, especially my father. This was one of those rare times when I saw my dad cry.

My grandfather, like other members of my family, was buried in the traditional way, within twenty-four hours of his death. On the day he died the family gathered at my grandparents' home, where his body lay in state. There were no Catholic rites and no priest was in attendance. The Pueblo spiritual leader led the ceremony. Draped in a ceremonial blanket, he prayed to the Great Spirit, asking for a safe journey to the other side and happiness in the afterlife for Grandfather Blue Spruce. Everyone who attended the service brought a dish of food my grandfather was known to have enjoyed; during the ceremony the spiritual leader took a small portion from each dish and placed it in a large clay pot. Then Grandfather's body was wrapped in a blanket and laid to rest in the Paguate cemetery accompanied

by the pot filled with food, a plentiful amount to take care of his needs in the early days after his arrival in the afterlife. This was the first death among the people close to me, and I remember the feeling of loss.

Grandmother Blue Spruce lived about nineteen years after Grandfather died. I have many fond recollections of her. She was heavysset, happy, and easygoing. I recall that she always had a smile on her face. I thought she was pretty darned cute.

She was always delighted to see us when we came to visit. She greeted us with hugs—and when we got a hug, we got a hug! One by one she pulled us to her. We all remember being wrapped in her arms and held close. When we were each at just the right height—well, I still remember trying to breathe with my face buried in Grandma’s ample bosom.

Although it was hard for me to converse with her, I think she must have been quite a woman. She was a good homemaker and the mother of five daughters and two sons. Unfortunately my dad’s older brother died before he reached his tenth birthday.

Grandmother Blue Spruce took pride in her cooking. She baked wonderful bread in her large outdoor oven, shaping her loaves with care and adding her special design on top. She baked as many as twenty loaves at once. She knew how much I liked her bread. I appreciated good food and I was the fattest grandkid. She would always give me a special signal to let me know that she was about to open her oven and bring out the fresh loaves. I got the first taste of bread, warm and delicious, just out of the oven. Because of this I always thought I was special with her. I think she was one of those wonderful grandmothers who can make every grandchild feel special.

I also remember Grandmother Blue Spruce sitting by the stove, keeping warm, while the men sat around the table laughing and telling stories. When I looked at her, her eyes were closed but her thumbs were always twiddling. She might have been thinking her own thoughts, but I think she was quietly enjoying the men's stories.

After Grandfather Blue Spruce died my grandmother had opportunities to travel outside the pueblo. By this time some of her daughters and granddaughters and their husbands were working with the Santa Fe Railroad in Barstow and Los Angeles. When she went to visit them she had a chance to experience the big city and see what life was like off the reservation. She watched television and enjoyed other modern conveniences. My dad was always excited to hear about what Grandma had learned while she was visiting in California. He greatly respected formal education and was interested in learning the white man's ways, and he hoped his sisters would take Grandmother to the library or to visit a museum. After one visit she was just as excited to show him what she had learned as he was to find out. She sat in a chair, unwrapped a piece of bubble gum, and slipped it into her mouth. She chewed until it was just right. Then, to my father's dismay, she blew a big bubble. The story is still being told and enjoyed in our family. We remember my dad being so upset when he found out what Grandma had learned, and we all still have a big laugh. I believe this is an example of my grandmother's sense of humor.

My mother's people speak the Tewa language. Her home, the San Juan Pueblo, was established in 1598 by the Spanish explorer Juan de Onate. Later San Juan Pueblo became

the home of Popé, a medicine man who led the Tewa-speaking Pueblo Indians in revolt and temporarily freed them from Spanish rule.

I did not know my grandfather Cruz. He died when my mother was a child, and she did not say much about him. However, she did speak of her closeness to her grandfather and all that he taught her. Grandmother Cruz raised three sons and a daughter as a single parent. I know she was one of those special people with a big heart because she took in a couple of orphaned girls and brought them up in her home. I see one of them frequently now, and she still speaks very fondly of my grandmother, with very tender words for the special person who helped raise her.

As a child I spent more time at San Juan Pueblo than at Pagate Pueblo. In the summer I stayed with Grandmother Cruz for several weeks at a time in her modest home, located near her garden and close to a small irrigation canal. It was a one-room adobe dwelling with a dirt floor. It always amuses me when I remember her cleaning the room. When she swept the floor with her straw broom, dust filled the air. Sweeping smoothed the dirt on the floor to make it look neat. I do not remember any furniture in that one-room dwelling. We sat on the floor, we ate on the floor, and we slept on the floor.

Sometimes I would see her cooking outside on a grill over a wood fire. When the weather cooled she built her cooking fire inside, positioned so the smoke would rise up through a hole in the roof. Everything was fried or stewed in metal pans and pots placed on a grill over the fire. Grandmother Cruz always had coffee on the grill. She made wonderful whole-wheat tortillas; they were huge and thick and delicious. When she cooked a pot of beans seasoned with

green chilies to go with the tortillas and fried potatoes—well, I can't think of a greater memory than having this meal prepared by my grandmother.

I remember that in my grandmother's house, where there was no electricity or running water, there was always the delicious aroma of bubbling stew, oven-baked bread, tortillas, and those beans seasoned with chili. Neither of us was fluent in the other's language. Still, the simplest joys of nature bound us together: the freshness and vitality of a sunrise, the happy chatter of birds, and the forces of wind and rain in northern New Mexico that transformed her modest dwelling into a warm and cozy refuge. During those summer weeks I spent in that humble environment each year I felt as happy and content as at any time in my life.

Grandmother Cruz was hardworking. As a youngster I often watched as she hoed rows of vegetables, irrigated the fields, and mended fences as competently as any man. She planted corn, squash, melons, and beans and always had a bountiful harvest from her garden. She had chickens, several pigs, and a few sheep. When I was six or seven she let me have a lamb to call my own. My lamb followed me just like a puppy, and it grew to be one of the biggest and finest sheep in San Juan Pueblo. One time I came back to San Juan and my sheep wasn't there; someone told me that it had been butchered. During this visit, when Grandmother Cruz served fried mutton, even with my hearty appetite I couldn't eat it. This is a sad memory for me, but of course this was the way of life in the pueblo. These animals were raised for food; even though they could be temporary pets they were destined to be butchered.

Besides introducing me to the realities of life, the farm brought out a bit of my ornery mischief. Grandmother Cruz

used to tell people that sometimes she hated to see me coming because I was not the most obedient of kids. She said that I went into her chicken coop (I'm sure she told me not to) and upset her chickens. They didn't lay any eggs for days afterward because I had disturbed them so much. When I was older I helped with the chores; I chopped and stacked firewood and tended the livestock and poultry. During the summer I helped in the field and garden.

The Pueblo people are noted for pottery making, but the pottery makers from some pueblos are more artistic than others. San Juan Pueblo had some of the most talented and artistic potters. Grandmother Cruz made beautiful pottery that ranked among the best. Every year she would take her pottery to Santa Fe and display it on the porch of the museum at the Governor's Palace along with other artisans, mostly from the northern pueblos. Tourists from all over the world visited there and bought Pueblo pottery. As the first-born grandson I was given the rather prestigious responsibility of assisting her in the sale of her pottery. I could speak English, so I could translate for her in negotiating the sale and make change. I remember that some time during the day she would give me a quarter to go to the creamery. I would get an ice cream cone for her and one for me (double dips) and bring back a nickel change. My grandmother's pottery sold for little more than the price of two ice cream cones back then. A piece of pottery similar to the ones she sold for a quarter in the 1930s now bears a price tag of \$250 at the Heard Museum in Phoenix—worth much more than the current price of two double-dippers.

In her day Grandmother Cruz was recognized as a talented pottery maker. Her pottery won numerous blue

ribbons at the New Mexico State Fair. My mother told me that in 1904 Grandmother Cruz was honored with an invitation to the World's Fair in St. Louis. That year she made pottery for tourists attending the fair from all over the world. I am so proud to know that my grandmother was as famous as she was. She was a contemporary of Maria Martinez, a world-famous potter from San Ildefonso Pueblo, whose pottery is displayed in museums. She lived a long life and passed her skills to her son. When I see books honoring Maria Martinez and her pottery, I am saddened that my grandmother's artisan days were cut short by tragedy. I wonder if she too might have been a world-renowned Pueblo potter had the tragic accident been avoided.

My mother told me that the accident occurred when my grandmother was chopping wood and a woodchip flew off and hit her in the eye. From that time on she was unable to see well enough to create the precisely detailed designs on her pottery, and she was unable to perfect her skills any further. Her vision slowly deteriorated, and by the time she died she was totally blind. She lived into her eighties. Like many Indians of her era, no birth certificate was recorded, and no one knows her exact age.

My grandparents spoke only their native languages and my parents insisted that my siblings and I speak English. Still, we were able to build strong relationships with our extended family and my grandparents were able to convey some tribal heritage to us. They gave me strong and proud roots and a link to Pueblo cultures with an appreciation of our Puebloan ancestors.