

Lila Begay's bequest

by Hilde Hein

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It was a sad day on the reservation when Lila Begay died. She was eighty-four years old, but her sudden decline had surprised everyone. There was barely time to find two qualified tribe members to witness her hastily drawn-up holographic will. There weren't a lot of possessions to distribute, but some of them were a mystery to the crowd of mourning relatives and friends, who gathered at her graveside. A puzzle was revealed in a strange deathbed bequest.

Why would anyone leave a pair of spectacles to a museum? Lila Begay had worn those thick lenses, day in and day out, for decades, as long as anyone could remember. They were a fixture, a part of who she was, and she seemed almost proud of them. They were more than a utility to her, but why should a bunch of mostly white people who visit museums care about the glasses – or the vision – of a little old, nearly blind Navajo lady? The spectacles held a story that few people knew.

It must have begun in the mid-twentieth century, when white kids ran around playing cowboys and Indians. The boys got to win once in a while, but the girls were always just squaws carrying papooses and tending a fire. Hardly any real Indians could still speak the Navajo language, and only a few linguists wanted to master the complicated symbols that someone had invented to preserve its melodious sounds and stories. Lila had been one of the rare ones. She had listened to the stories her grandmother related in the spoken language of the people, and learned to translate them into the English of the anthropologists. Determined to overcome her handicap and demonstrate her worth, she even acquired typewriting skills and earned a small salary transcribing research notes. When her father and brothers, and then her young husband went off to fight other people's wars in Europe and then in the Pacific, she befriended the brilliant young physicists, who seemed to spring up like mushrooms around the desert near Los Alamos. A particularly clever one of them designed a pair of special glasses for her.

With them perched on her nose she could count the grains of sand, follow the sprint of a flea on her arm, and make out the squiggles and strokes that her friend, Albert drew to correlate sound impulses with symbols that could be relayed along telegraph wires across continents. Together she and Albert devised a system of communication that would transmit secret information incomprehensible to German or Japanese intelligence, and that only another Navajo could decipher. After the war, she got a citation for that from President Truman, and stuck it away in a drawer someplace. Then the men came home, some of them in bad shape, and there were real papooses to tend.

Who would have suspected a blind young Navajo girl and an inconspicuous young Indian man of enabling a spy operation, and who could fathom the vital part they played in bringing an end to the war? Of course, their contribution was ultimately overshadowed by that of the young physicists at Los Alamos; and new encryption devices soon superseded Lila's cumbersome language transfer technique. But there was a moment of glory even if most people, even on the reservation, were ignorant of it.

Now, in her final moments, Lila Begay wanted to bequeath a memento of herself to posterity. Only those glasses were left as a tangible reminder of youthful adventures. But to whom should she leave them? In the rush to confide ordinary words to commonplace paper, she said only "I leave my precious spectacles to the museum." What did she mean? Which museum did she intend? Who merits this treasure?

Uncertain how to fulfil the provisions of Lila's will, the executors decided to set up a committee made up of four family members and four museum representatives (ineligible to apply) to screen proposals from various institutions that expressed interest in receiving the bequest. A notice inviting proposals was placed in *Museum News* and several other national and local museum publications and a deadline for submissions set for a date four months ahead. At the end of this period the committee would meet to evaluate the proposals and decide which museum should be the beneficiary of the bequest. Sixty-seven responses arrived within the specified time period and the committee has convened to review them.

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Exercise

As a museum or family member of the committee, how would you assess the following proposals? Consider which factors are relevant to your decision.

How should a museum's location, funding source, mission, audience, and prior record be weighted?

How much weight should be given to family or tribal preference?

1. Simon Hopalong, a member of the Navajo tribal council, argues that Ms Begay certainly must have intended a museum of tribal history to be founded on the reservation. Noting that many tribes now own and operate casinos that invest in art collection as a tributary and embellishment of their gambling operation, Mr. Hopalong views Ms Begay's spectacles as an important cultural property that, as the keystone of a museum, would enhance the Navajo site and serve a valuable economic function. The Begay Museum would promote tourism, he argues, and also instill pride among the Native American residents, many of whom are ignorant of their own tribal contribution to the US triumph over its World War II enemies.

Furthermore, too few Native American heroes and especially heroines have been celebrated as individuals throughout America: This museum could be a first step toward righting that wrong. Ms Begay's glasses might inspire comparable contributions from among Navajo elders, many of whom are dying, and who might have additional uncelebrated exploits to reveal. A museum of Navajo history, instead of the anonymous, generic products typically exhibited in folk and anthropological museums, would display Navajo people as full-fledged, responsible American citizens, who respond to the demands of the modern era with dignity and imagination. Ms Begay has left her people a legacy that, while educating the public, should continue to honor her name and memory.

2. Henrietta Goodspeed has been readying her four year old, privately funded Museum of American Women for AAM accreditation. Exhibits are already in place displaying the contributions to American society made by such stellar women as Abigail Adams, Susan B. Anthony, Margaret Sanger, Harriet Tubman, Sojourner Truth, Coretta Scott King, Maya Lin, and others, but so far there are few women of color represented, and no Native Americans. Who, after all, is more deserving of the title "American Woman"

than one of the First People? And who can boast a contribution whose benefits are more consequential nationally? But for Lila Begay's skill and dedication World War II might well have ended differently. Ms Goodspeed had hoped to obtain a display on Wilma Mankiller, but in the end, this material went to the National Museum of the American Indian in Washington D.C., included with a cache of Cherokee memorabilia. The Navajo (Dine) constitute the largest tribe among the First Nations, and is traditionally matrilineal. Women have always been well respected within this culture, but have not been individually distinguished outside it.

Yet, Ms Goodspeed contends, as Americans, these women deserve to be identified by name and merit the distinction for accomplishment that is normally accorded to men alone. Lila Begay is an eminent figure, a credit to her people, and a woman whose work, as embodied in the spectacles that enabled it, should certainly be represented in the MAW.

3. Dr. E.Z. Graft requests Ms Begay's spectacles for inclusion in the collaboratively managed Four Corners Museum of Science and Technology, in Utah. The museum features instruments that pertain to mining, sheep and cattle ranching, farming and railroads. It also has a wing devoted to ancient Indian crafts and architecture, and a series of gallery exhibitions highlighting phases of the Manhattan Project. In its mission statement the museum pledges to combine theory with practice, creating exhibitions that illuminate scientific concepts and principles and also illustrate their historical application with emphasis on local use. The museum was chartered by the four state governments and receives additional support from federal agencies, including the Department of Interior (BIA), National Science Foundation, Department of Labor, NEH and NIH. It provides educational programs for school groups K-12, and hosts weekend institutes for local colleges.

- Dr. Graft envisages Ms Begay's glasses as the centerpiece for a sequence of branching exhibits on optics and visual aids; alphabets, literacy and translation; codes and communication. The glasses would play a simultaneously poetic and material role, while representing Ms Begay's visionary disposition of her native language from private to public benefit.
4. The history of cabinets of curiosities (Wunderkammern) can be traced to 15th century Europe, but they are rare in the United States. Herman Finster has been fascinated by these precursors to the modern museum since childhood, and as heir to a small castle in the Rocky Mountains, he decided to create his own cabinet. His collection includes a variety of animal skeletons, rare minerals, cult religious objects, domestic utensils, and tradeware from abandoned villages and ski centers, and tourist memorabilia. Upon learning of Ms Begay's bequest, he decided to broaden his interest to include contemporary, as well as traditional native realia, and to open his collection to the public. School groups and private excursions are admitted by appointment, and the museum is open to the general public on weekends. If Ms Begay's spectacles are entrusted to his museum, Mr. Finster promises to endow a scholarship for the benefit of visually impaired Navajo children.
 5. The West Coast World War II Museum was founded in 1991 in commemoration of the 50th anniversary of the attack on Pearl Harbor. Its narrative begins with the little-known build-up to that event, moving eastward through the threat of submarine attacks in California, the effect of the shipyard industry on the Pacific coastal economy, civilian defense preparation, Japanese internment camps, the northwest aviation boom, and military induction. The addition of Ms Begay's spectacles to the museum collection would provide an excellent segue into the story of minority participation in the war effort and to the final triumph by the allied forces. The museum would be honored to receive this bequest, and would, in turn, guarantee that the donation would be prominently exhibited in a manner that honors Ms Begay's heritage and memory.