Flaming Cliffs of Monument Valley

By Lt. Jack Breed, USNR

ON A MAP of the United States find the only spot where four States meet—Utah, Arizona, Colorado, and New Mexico. There, just west of "four corners," sprawls mile-high Monument Valley, spectacular desert land of red stone skyscrapers.

I first heard of Monument Valley while traveling through the Southwest in 1935. Fantastic stories about its huge buttes, astride the Arizona-Utah border, inspired me to see them.

With a companion to help with the "pushing," we drove up U S 89 from Flagstaff to Tuba City, both in Arizona, and thence by the Rainbow Trail through the heart of the Navajo country to Monument Valley. Since that first trip we have made eight more.

Our goal was the trading post operated by Harry and "Mike" Goulding, often called the "King and Queen of Monument Valley." They have been the Valley's sole year-round white residents for two decades.

Skyscraper City of Red Sandstone

One crystal-clear July day in 1922, Goulding, a young sheepherder, was riding the range in the "four-corners country," searching for stray sheep. The land was new to him.

Suddenly, at Comb Ridge, the view to the west took his breath away (Plate II). Far across the hot plains spread a skyscraper city. Flaming Woolworth Towers and Flatiron Buildings—huge buttes of red sandstone—rose from the desert. Some mighty blocks even had gigantic "windows"—natural bridges (Plate VIII).

This was fabulous Monument Valley.

Later, Goulding returned with his wife and set up permanent "diggings" in the Valley.

At first they lived in a simple sheepherder's tent. But soon they won the friendship of the Navajo, and their sheepherding became a trading business. A two-story stone trading post was built for them by the Indians. Now this sandstone house, perched on a natural step near Old Baldy Mesa, serves as headquarters for many visitors.

The post has the conveniences of a city home—electric lights, refrigerator, gas stove, bathroom with tub and shower, fine Navajo rugs on the polished floors, even a piano.

Downstairs is a combination pawnshop and general store. Every item a Navajo could wish, mostly from a mail-order-house catalogue, is on display.

The Goulding place is 100 miles from the nearest railroad. There are no towns in the Valley, no telephones, no street lamps, no hard-surfaced roads. To get mail we had to drive 27 miles to the village of Kayenta, Arizona. To shop Saturday nights we motored 175 miles to Flagstaff.

Across the Gouldings' "front yard" marches a parade of monuments rising a thousand feet above the plain. They look only a stone's throw away, yet they are over eight miles distant. The clear, dry air at mile-high altitude makes distances deceiving.

Valley Has an Airport

Goulding has constructed a hard-packed airfield snuggled beneath two lofty mesas. Three-thousand-foot runways crisscross the desert. Citizens in Albuquerque, New Mexico, or Cortez, Colorado, fly visitors to the Valley airport.

The Valley is a geologist's paradise. Originally it was level with the tops of its tall monuments, roughly a thousand feet higher than the floor today. A huge body of water covered the area. In succeeding ages extensive uplifts occurred and the sea drained off into the stream beds which now are the Colorado and San Juan Rivers.

Gradually the rivers cut the land away, carrying off enormous quantities of the softer sands and shales. Isolated mesas and buttes of more resistant material were left standing above the plain.

Canyon walls were undercut and giant caves formed. Sometimes thick chunks of the roofs fell in, leaving jagged holes. Running water and wind-blasted sand grains gradually smoothed out the edges, forming natural bridges.*

With only about eight inches of rain each year now, Monument Valley is not eroding very fast. Even in a thousand years, little change in its profile will be noticeable.

The first white people to view Monument Valley are not known. Spanish friars from Coronado's expedition in the middle 1500's may have passed close by, but probably they did not cross the nearly waterless Valley. About 300 years later, in 1864, some of Kit Carson's men pursued the Navajo in Canyon del Muerto,† 70 miles southeast of the Valley.

Explorers and scientists penetrated the region, to study its prehistoric Indian cultures or to prospect for precious minerals. But not until the early 1900's, when John Wetherill

* See "Great Rainbow Natural Bridge of Southern Utah," by Joseph E. Pogue, in the National Geographic Magazine, November, 1911.

† See "Exploring in the Canyon of Death," by Earl H. Morris, in the National Geographic Magazine, September, 1925.

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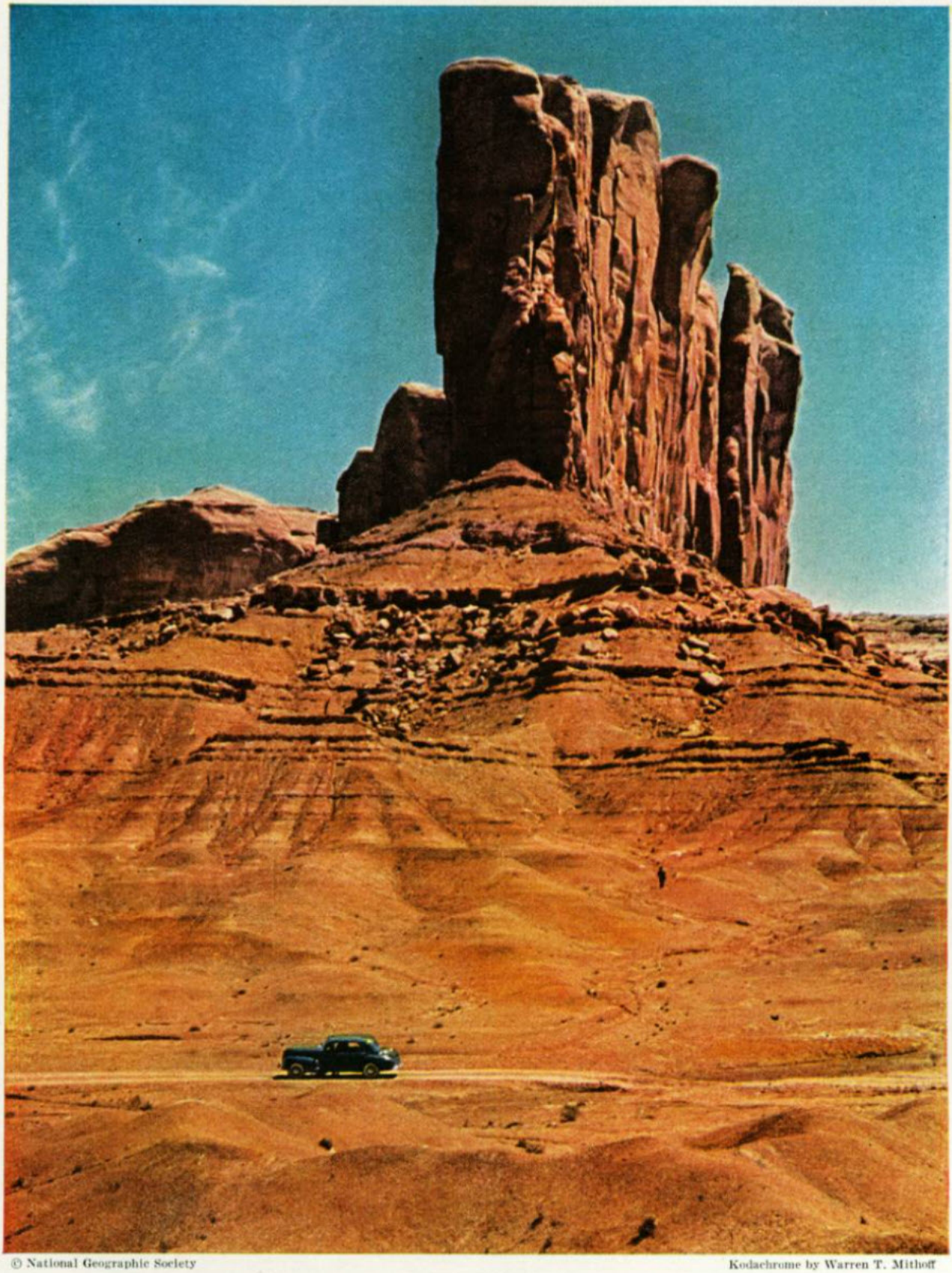
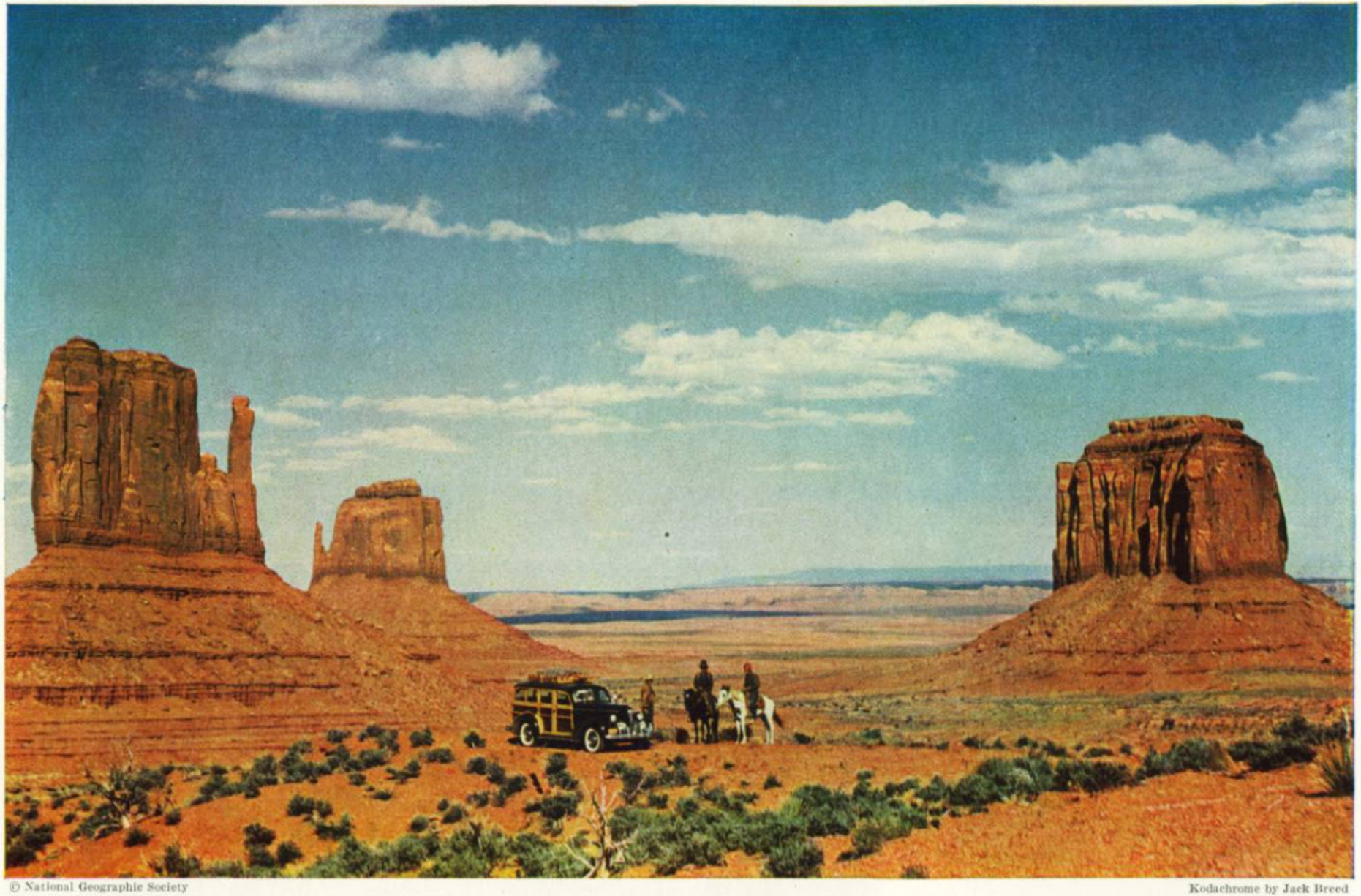


Kodachrome by Warren T. Mithoff

Heat and Cold, Moisture and Drought Sculptured This Memorial to a Navajo

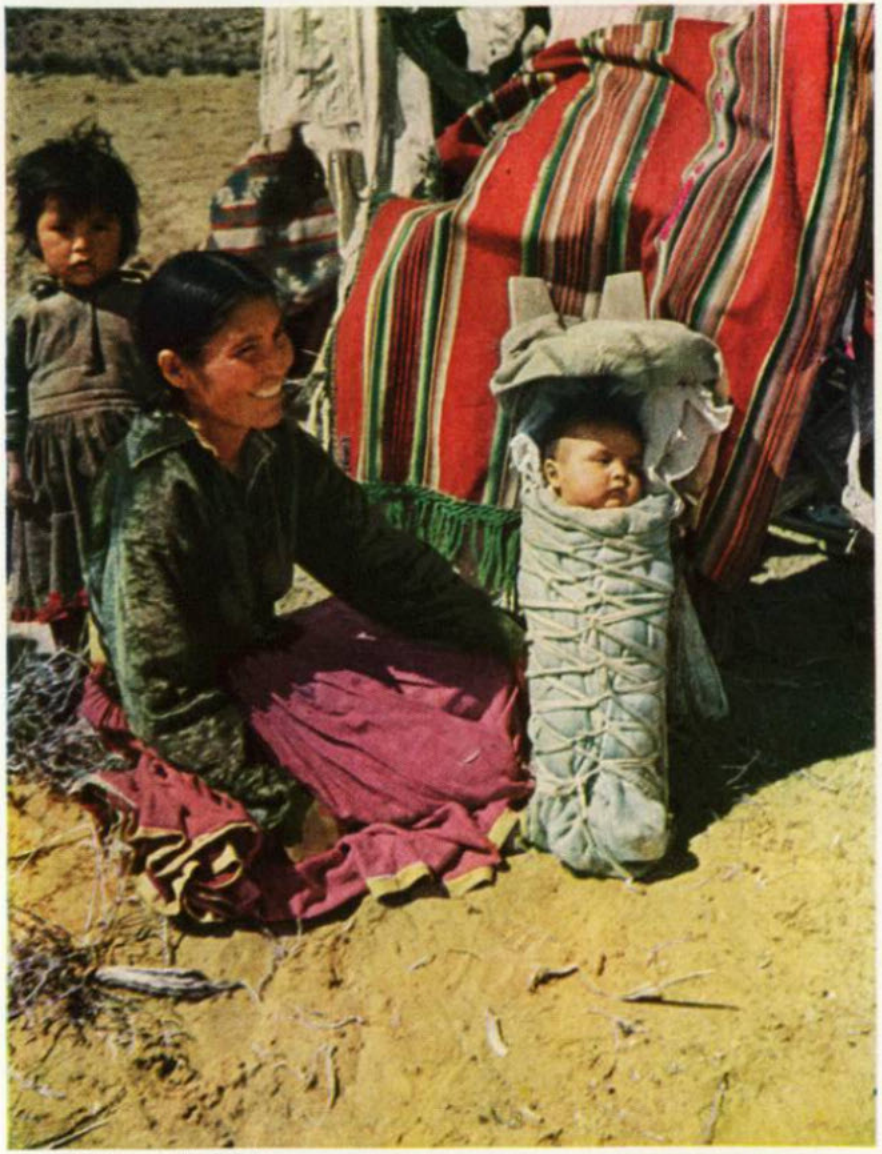
Cly Butte was named for an old Indian saddle maker who lived near by and was buried at its base. In accordance with Navajo ritual, his horse and some sheep and cattle were killed to accompany him to the happy hunting grounds. Many such red sandstone towers rise from mile-high Monument Valley, lying astride the Utah-Arizona border in Navajo Indian Reservation. Flocks are the livelihood for 200 Indians living in the valley.



Kodachrome by Jack Breed

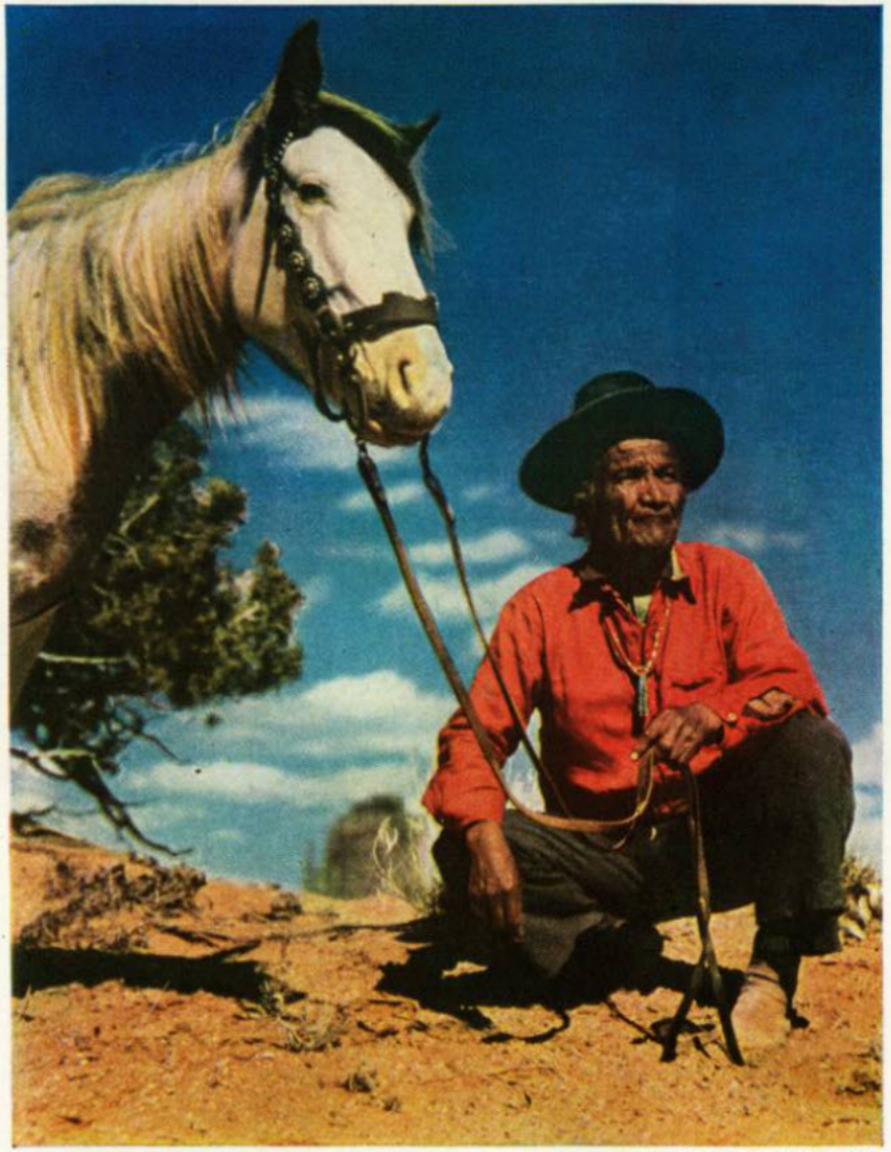
Clear as Crystal Is the Hot, Dry Air of Monument Valley; Mitten Buttes (Left) Are Actually Three and Six Miles Away

Merrick Butte (right), named for a prospector who was murdered at its base by Indians, is four miles beyond the two Navajo horsemen and Harry Goulding, Monument Valley guide. The pillars average close to 1,000 feet in height above the desertlike floor. Comb Ridge in the distance is 25-40 miles away.



Pity the Papoose Strapped Tightly to a Cradleboard

Before their brush-covered summer hogan, a young Navajo mother poses her infant for his first portrait. Heat and flies must be unbearable for baby. The mother wears traditional dress—a velveteen jacket and large pleated skirt.



Kodachromes by Jack Breed

Little Gambler, One of the Oldest and Best-loved Navajos

Ada-Ki-Yazzi, medicine man of Monument Valley, is expert at making Indian sand paintings, part of the curing ceremony for sick people. He wears his favorite red shirt, split-bottom trousers, moccasins, and a turquoise necklace.

Kodachrome by Jack Breed

Beneath the "Three Sisters" a Young Navajo Sheepherder Waters His Flock in a Monument Valley Mudhole

Kodachrome by Jack Breed

In Stately Procession the "Three Sisters" March to the Red Rock "Cathedral" in Monument Valley

The "Prioress," bringing up the rear, seems to have her hands folded sedately; even her features can be made out. Snow sometimes veils the figures towering some 800 feet above the valley floor. Brief cloudbursts have washed away the mud covering from this deserted winter hogan, leaving exposed its skeleton of logs and sticks.

Kodachrome by Jack Breed

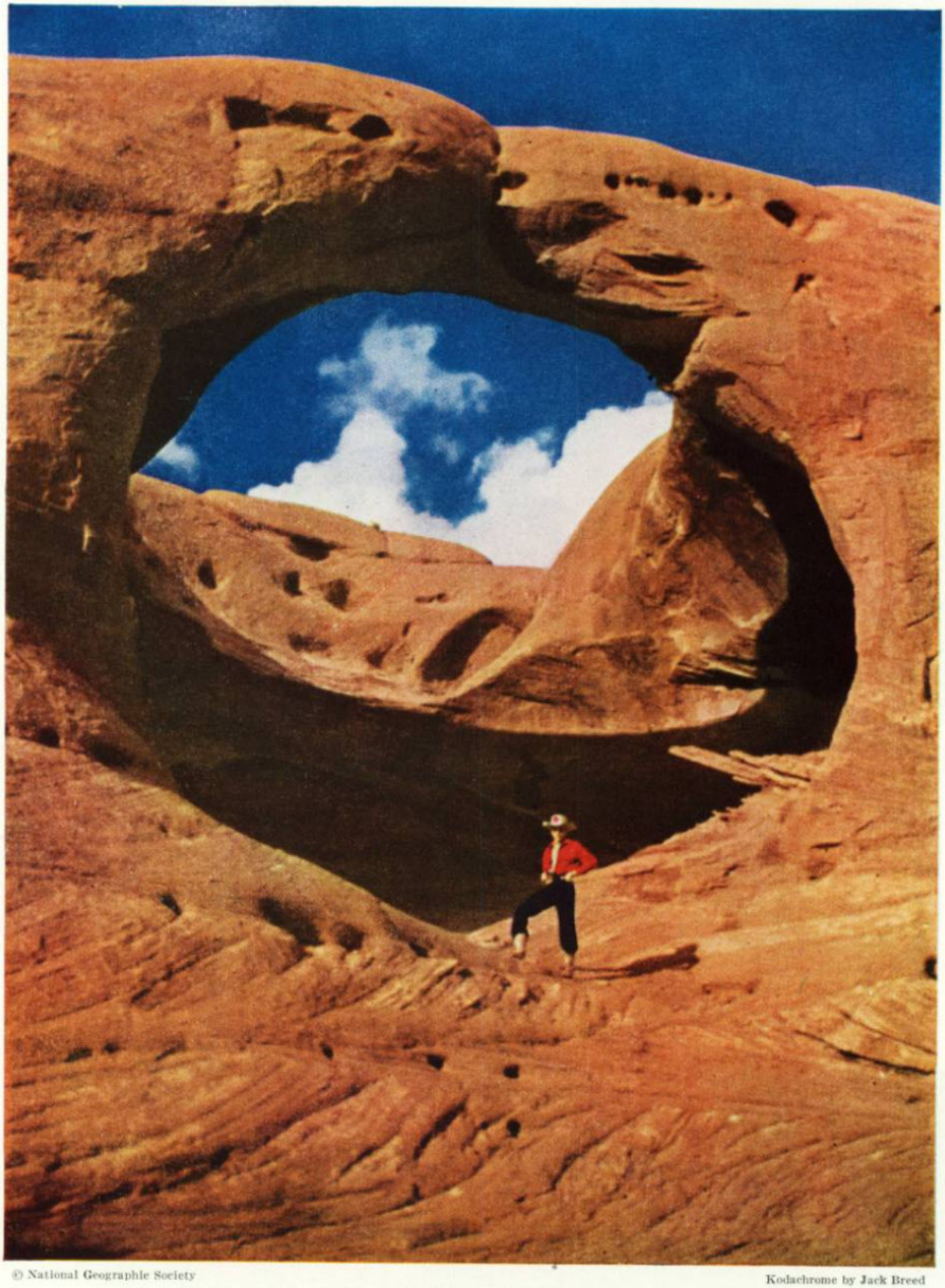
"A Yellow-and-purple Corrugated World of Distance," Zane Grey Described Monument Valley

Flat tops of the brilliant turrets mark the level of a vast plateau through which water carved its way ages ago. Wind, sand, rain, and frost chiseled the buttes into odd shapes. To the left is Mitten Butte, over the car appears Castle Rock, and to right, Merrick Butte (Plate II). Late evening shadows creep out for miles.

Kodachrome by Jack Breed

Elephants Feet Buttes Stalk Across the Desert Like Prehistoric Giants

At Tonalea, on the rough sandy road leading into Monument Valley from Cameron, Arizona, the motorist sees these fantastic sandstone towers. Hard caps on top served as roofs protecting the monoliths from weathering. During the war, Navajos have mined much rich vanadium ore from such cap rocks in the valley.



Kodachrome by Jack Breed

Holes in the Rock, Indians Call Such Red Sandstone Natural Bridges

Monument Valley has many stone arches gouged out by water and carved and smoothed by wind-driven grains of sand. West of Monument Valley in Utah lies Rainbow Bridge National Monument, famous for its huge arch that rises 309 feet above a small clear stream. Rain is scarce; only eight inches falls annually.

explored the mesa country, did the real wonders of the Valley become known.*

Cliff dweller pueblos are found in larger caves of the Valley. Usually ruins are small one-family clusters, but some cave villages contain 200 rooms, thus rivaling the more famous Mesa Verde in neighboring Colorado. Navajos say there are many fine pueblos still undiscovered in distant canyons.

To visit these red pillars, natural bridges, and pueblo ruins in isolated reaches of the Valley, Harry Goulding took me for a trip in his sand-duning vehicle. Behind a tractor with deflated balloon tires, his homemade trailer bounced along. Dry arroyos became our highways, sand dunes our short cuts. Our Indian guide took us to many new canyons probably not seen by white men before.

We saw Navajos in their family wagons creaking across the Valley to the nearest water hole, sometimes more than 20 miles from their earth-covered homes (Plate V). At one stop a Navajo girl had her papoose out for an airing. We wondered how the baby, strapped so tightly to its cradleboard, could survive the heat, dust, and flies (Plate III).

Goulding is the Indians' best customer. Goats and sheep, he explained, provide the fine wool from which the women weave their blankets and rugs. These are traded at the post for flour, sugar, coffee, bright-colored shirts for the menfolk (Plate III), and even sunglasses! Wool not used for weaving is traded in its raw state for household articles that catch the Indian's eye. Goulding in turn ships the handiwork to Gallup and Shiprock, New Mexico, or to Holbrook, Arizona.

Navajo Men Make Jewelry

In their spare time the Navajo men make jewelry, such as handsome bracelets and necklaces, concha buttons and buckles, all hand-fashioned from silver and adorned with bits of turquoise. The shiny trinkets are traded at the post.

Bouncing over the purple sage, we passed two huge blocks rising like giant red tombstones—and tombstones they really are. Mitchell Butte and its neighbor Merrick are named for two unwelcome prospectors who sought secret silver mines in the 1880's. They tried to worm the location from Navajo chiefs. Younger braves became suspicious. One night they crept up to the prospectors' campfire and murdered the plotting Mitchell near the base of the butte that bears his name.

Merrick escaped and hid among the tumbled rocks at the base of another monolith (Plates II, VI). Forced out by thirst and starvation a few days later, he was killed by the Indians.

Many other buttes earned their names from their resemblance to various objects, such as Rooster Rock, the Old Indian, Elephants Feet (Plate VII), and others. Meridian Butte is located on the 110th meridian.

Our Indian guide led us to Echo Cave, a huge cavern gouged from a sandstone cliff. In answer to our single shout, 16 distinct "halloos" came bounding back.

One late afternoon the Navajo took us hunting for rabbits. The rabbit fry that night under the moonlight was delicious. But we found nothing else to hunt. The arid Valley supports little natural life. The only wild creatures seen, besides the few rabbits scampering about the sagebrush, were a horned "toad" (really a lizard) and a collared lizard sunning itself on a warm stone. Rarely, among the rocks, we found small Arizona prairie rattlesnakes. Bird life was at a minimum, though we saw a cliff swallow now and then and occasionally a circling hawk.

The soil of the Valley is fertile—if you can water it. Our Indian guide took us to see the Navajo's attempt at irrigation. There we examined his corn crops and his melons. Some enterprising individuals had even grown potatoes, beans, and tomatoes!

Natural vegetation in Monument Valley is mainly sagebrush, scrub juniper and piñon, and a few small cacti.

Nevertheless, in springtime, after a light rain or perhaps even a snow storm (Plate V), the Valley suddenly becomes a garden of gorgeous wild flowers. Mile after mile of blue lupine, brilliant red pincushion and beavertail cactus blossoms, and the yellow and pink of the yucca brightens the drab desert. Thousand-foot waterfalls cascade down mesa sides as the snow melts. Such phenomena last only a few hours.

With the advent of the war, a new industry came to Monument Valley. Deposits of valuable vanadium ore were found in the cap rocks atop some monoliths. Navajos have been mining this essential commodity and starting it on its way to the steel mills. Their product improves the "shootin' irons" of Navajo braves fighting the Japs overseas.

Monument Valley is not a national park or a national monument. As a part of Navajoland, it is still remote and unspoiled. The Indians want it to remain that way; it is their last frontier.†

* See, in the NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, "Beyond the Clay Hills," by Neil M. Judd, March, 1924; and "Encircling Navajo Mountain with a Pack-Train," by Charles L. Bernheimer, February, 1923.

† See "Indian Tribes of Pueblo Land," by Matthew W. Stirling, NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC MAGAZINE, November, 1940.