



Indian Affairs - Office of Public Affairs

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The actual celebration -- the throwing of a switch to turn on electric power at Puertocito -- takes place August 26, but the real significance of the event extends both ways in time from that date, according to the Department of the Interior's Bureau of Indian Affairs.

Puertocito is a remote Indian reservation in west central New Mexico, the home of the Alamo Navajos, a tribal group separated from the main or "Big Navajo" Reservation 100 miles to the north during the Navajo's struggles with Kit Carson and the U.S. Cavalry 100 years ago.

The reservation's 155 families live scattered over 52,000 acres in an arid region about 60 miles from the county seat of Socorro, N. M. A matriarchal society, they have survived through subsistence farming, grazing and performing seasonal labor at neighboring farms and ranches. They are named for a local spring, Alamo Spring, Alamo being the Spanish word for cottonwood.

In recent years this group has been strengthening its ties with the Big Navajo government and sends a representative to Navajo Tribal Council meetings at Window Rock, Ariz. In turn, the Big Navajo have put their self-help program -- the Office of Navajo Economic Opportunity (ONEO) -- to work at Puertocito.

With ONEO assistance the people of Puertocito, under a mutual-help program, constructed 60 new houses to replace the traditional single room hogans and shacks that had been their homes. Designed and built by the Navajos themselves, the buildings are constructed of native stone or adobe (mud) brick. By suburban standards they are exceedingly modest. By Puertocito standards they are a giant step forward.

As the building program progressed, the Alamo Navajos contacted the Socorro Rural Electric Cooperative, which agreed to bring in electric power if 100 families would subscribe. One hundred families did, and the power line, financed by a Rural Electrification Administration loan to the Cooperative, was started toward Puertocito.

At the same time the Bureau of Indian Affairs agreed to provide the materials, tools, and supervision for wiring the individual houses. A separate wiring plan was required for each house. ONEO provided local Indian labor under a manpower training program. The home wiring program began Jan. 21, 1967 and was completed April 29.

It produced, at a cost of \$156 a house, adequately wired dwellings -- meeting all electrical code requirements except for number of outlets -- and ten Navajos who earned \$1.25 an hour while acquiring the skills to make them qualified electrician's helpers. These men not only have increased employment opportunities in the area but have the skills necessary to maintain an electrical system which operates in ways completely mysterious to most residents of the community. Their first jobs are likely to come in the expansion of the new system to additional Indian homes.

For the future, the immediate impact of electricity at Puertocito is not difficult to comprehend. Electric

lights, refrigerators, washing machines, mixers and the many other genies of the kilowatt will move the Alamo Navajos a big step closer to a standard of living approaching the national average.

But much more than convenience and ease of living is involved. Through improved communications, especially television and radio, the aura of isolation that has compounded the difficulties of helping these people toward an understanding of the culture and habits of mid-century Americans will be reduced.

When Puertocito youngsters leave for Magdalena, 35 miles to the south, where they attend public school and stay in a BIA dormitory, they will have a better understanding of what to expect in this new environment. This understanding is expected to cushion the shock of this new experience and result in better school enrollment and attendance.

A similar acquisition of cultural understanding will assist the adults in the community as they press forward with the most difficult task of seeking economic and social equality for themselves and their community. The new ideas and new developments which have resulted from the improved working relationship with Big Navajo organizations should be accelerated as knowledge and understanding open new options for community improvement.

Actual day-to-day communications with the surrounding communities will be greatly improved by a two-way radio the Cooperative plans to install at Puertocito.

Indicative of the spirit of progress now in evidence at Puertocito is the work underway with the Indian Health Division of the Public Health Service to plan a water system for the community.

<https://www.bia.gov/as-ia/opa/online-press-release/electricity-arrives-part-new-life-alamo-navajos>