

Native Americans fight to keep Big Mountain

By Paul Sturtz
Of the Emerald

Last month, "Broken Rainbow," a film about Navajo and Hopi resistance to forced relocation from the Big Mountain area in Arizona's northern desert, won the Academy Award for best documentary feature.

At the same time, many Americans drawn by stories of these traditional people threatened with removal to cities like Flagstaff, Ariz., have traveled down to the area to lend support.

In late March, Queksta, an Okanogan Indian from Canada who now lives in Veneta, spent two weeks in the Big Mountain area. She says she felt an obvious connection and responsibility to her Indian elders.

"It felt like I was going home. I was put right to work cooking. Because of my background, I was feeling welcome."

Shannon Kelley, a University senior, says that seeing "Broken Rainbow" inspired her to travel the 1,200 miles to the Big Mountain area. Unlike Queksta, she was a little more anxious about her reception.

"It felt really good to be accepted by them because I was apprehensive about what they would think of me being a white person," Kelley says.

Congress, believing there was an intertribal dispute, passed a law in 1974 that set up a barbed wire fence between the Indian communities and provided for removal of the Navajos from the joint-use area.

Land-lease procedures were simplified, which paved the way for easier coal mining in the area. A relocation commission was set up to remove what was estimated to be 3,300 Navajos, but which now is estimated to be closer to 10,000.

Now with 1,000 to 2,000 "high priority" people facing forcible removal by July, attention has been increasingly focused on the Big Mountain area.

Although the relocation law has been in effect for 12 years, publicity and support has only intensified during the last three years.

"It's so blatant what's going on," Kelley says. "You can work on a million different issues, but this seems like the root of all things going wrong in this country."

Queksta and Kelley both portray the Big Mountain people as a simple culture tied to a traditional relationship to the land. They don't recognize white laws, they said, they only answer to nature's laws.

Queksta says the people are born there and die there. "When a child is born, the umbilical cord is buried right on their home. That's their attachment to the land."

"The elders felt like nobody cared. They are so thankful for people coming. You can just tell by the way they shake your hand," Queksta says.

Supporters bring supplies, chop wood for fires, clear land, cook meals, take care of the

children and act as security during meetings.

While the politics of the region have intensified only recently, the Indians have a history that stretches back hundreds of years before recent laws. Unlike other tribes that have been relocated in places like Oklahoma, the Navajos and Hopis have remained in one place.

In 1400 A.D., the Navajo people arrived in the northern desert of Arizona and settled east of the Hopi Indians. While their sources of livelihood in the sacred Big Mountain area were different, both cultures had a spiritual belief in the land as a living being that sustained all.

The plot continued through the mid-1800s when Kit Carson and his cavalry cornered 8,500 Navajos and had them march to their deaths.

Over the years, the Bureau of Indian Affairs has set up tribal councils whose pro-development leaders have leased away uranium, oil and coal rights to the area. These leaders have profited from royalty payments received from mineral leasing. Big Mountain supporters say.

The tribal councils often are linked to mining companies like Peabody Coal Co., they say. Although some Indians protested the scars mining left on land considered sacred, the tribal councils had the power to sell off land rights.

The Hopi Tribal Council even hired a public relations firm from Salt Lake City, which also represented utility companies in the Southwest, to stage a fake range war to make it appear that there was a Navajo-Hopi conflict, Big Mountain supporters say.

The traditional people Queksta dealt with have no intention of leaving. Queksta departs for Big Mountain Tuesday so she can help prepare for a gathering planned next week in Big Mountain. After the gathering, Big Mountain support groups expect to escalate pressure on Congress to repeal the relocation law.

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