

Persimmon Hill



This is your Last Issue

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Late summer grazing in Southwest Colorado



HILLERMAN Co



A cholla cactus blooming near the Zuni Pueblo

PHOTOGRAPHY BY THE LATE BARNEY HILLERMAN

TEXT BY M.J. VAN DEVENTER

Tony Hillerman grew up reading whatever was available. And in the small town of Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, sometimes all the neighboring county library could provide was a biography of William Jennings Bryan or "The History of the Masonic Order in Oklahoma."

He also grew up in a pre-television culture where people were sometimes even too poor to buy batteries for their radios. So Hillerman and his family, and others in that rural community, sat on front porches and told stories. "In Sacred Heart, Oklahoma, being a storyteller was a good thing to be," Hillerman noted in a personal interview with *Persimmon Hill*.

That ability to weave a yarn and have an affinity with special places in the Southwest has served Hillerman well. He is the author of eighteen books, including *Skinwalkers*, *Talking God*, *Coyote Waits*, *Thief of Time*, and *Dance Hall of the Dead*, for which he won the 1973 Edgar Allen Poe Award for best mystery of the year. Other awards include France's Grand Prix de Literature Policiere and the Navajo Tribe's Special Friend Award. He recently signed a reported \$1.25 million contract with Harper and Row Publishers and sold film rights for three novels, including *Thief of Time*, to film star and producer Robert Redford.

The setting for all of his books is what he affectionately calls "Hillerman Country." It is a region of the Southwest he considers distinctly "American West." It is a land he loves, with its incredible western sky, its shapes and movements, its range of colors, majestic beauty, and its chameleon character that changes with every whim of nature. It is a land of "silent empty places that revive the spirit."

Yet, Hillerman didn't grow up planning to be a writer, even though he always has been a voracious reader. "It didn't dawn on me that real human beings wrote books," he said. "You had never seen one or knew of anyone who had seen an actual, real live author if you

lived in Pottawatomie County where I did. My goal was to get off the farm. Anything that got you off the farm was a success."

Today Hillerman's best-selling books are a long way from those early works he read growing up in Sacred Heart. But his detective stories give his audience a pretty authentic view of Navajo life, told through the eyes and lives of such fictional characters as Mudhead and Cochare, and Navajo policemen Jim Chee and Joe Leaphorn.

Of course, the idea of a Navajo policeman is as novel an idea today as it was when Hillerman crafted his first character almost three decades ago. But the Navajos appreciate what he's done for their culture. As Ernie Bulow notes in his book, *A Conversation with Tony Hillerman: Talking Mysteries*, "They call him a friend of the Navajo because of his respectful attitude toward cultural matters and the dignity with which he invests his Navajo policemen."

Hillerman said what drew him to the Navajo culture was the fact they are "people of faith. It's one of the things they have. I think my respect for religion shows in my books."

What also shows is Hillerman's respect for country boys. He recalls that when he was about nine, he realized there were two kinds of people in the world — "them and us, the town boys and the country boys. I grew up knowing that people who are different always identified with those of us who were country people. When I met the Navajos I recognized kindred spirits. Country boys. More of us. Folks among whom I felt at ease. I'm a red neck Populist, lower class. I'm uneasy among social consciousness people. I always felt much more comfortable with Two Gray Hills people than I did at English department cocktail parties."

Hillerman also realized during his youth how difficult it seemed for Indians to straddle two cultures. And he observes that the choices today for a young Navajo balancing his cultural life with that of a white-dominated society are difficult. "They suffer a lot of conflict between family values and the materialistic pagan culture in which they have to live," he said.

"Let me tell you a story to illustrate," Hillerman



Tony Hillerman, (left) and one of his Navajo friends at Big Mountain, Arizona

noted. "A true story. There was a young Navajo engineer who was torn between his job and the family custom of going to a curing ceremony when somebody comes home from war. The young Navajo agonized over the decision. He'd worked very hard to get an engineering degree and find a good job. But he went to the curing ceremony because it was very important in his culture. And he lost his job. That's cultural conflict."

Working so closely among the Navajo also has given Hillerman a perspective on the difference between the Oklahoma Indians he spent his youth with and the Navajos he now calls his friends. "Most of our Oklahoma Indians were uprooted. They had

been torn away from their culture and economic base, forced off their land and moved to Oklahoma. They were refugees. They lost a lot of their culture.

"The Indians in the Southwest were Spanish and they had souls. They were declared the people of reason. They had water rights and land grants and stayed in their pueblos. And their religion and culture stayed in place, unlike the Oklahoma Indians," he related.

The themes of cultural differences and cultural conflict are woven through many of Hillerman's mystery novels.

Hillerman's first encounter with the Navajos was in July, 1945, and represented a good glimpse at cultural differences. He had just gotten home from World War II, had a bad eye and a gimpy leg. He'd found a job driving a truckload of pipe from Oklahoma City to an oil well drilling site north of Crownpoint on the Navajo Reservation. "Suddenly a party of about twenty Navajo horsemen (and women) emerged from the piñons and crossed the dirt road in front of me," Hillerman related in *Talking Mysteries*.

"They were wearing ceremonial regalia and the man in front was carrying something tied to a coup stick. These were a far cry from the cotton-chopping, baseball-playing Pottawatomies and Seminoles from my past. I was fascinated. Forty years later, I am still fascinated."

Hillerman has since been privileged to observe many of the Navajo ceremonies. But the dramatic impact of that first experience with their culture lingered for

Ship Rock, a 7,178-foot high pinnacle in New Mexico



*A basalt dike, relic of an extinct volcano, produces a waterfall
in southwest Colorado's San Juan Mountains.*





Formations on the Jicarilla Reservation let the imagination play games with nature.

years in his memory.

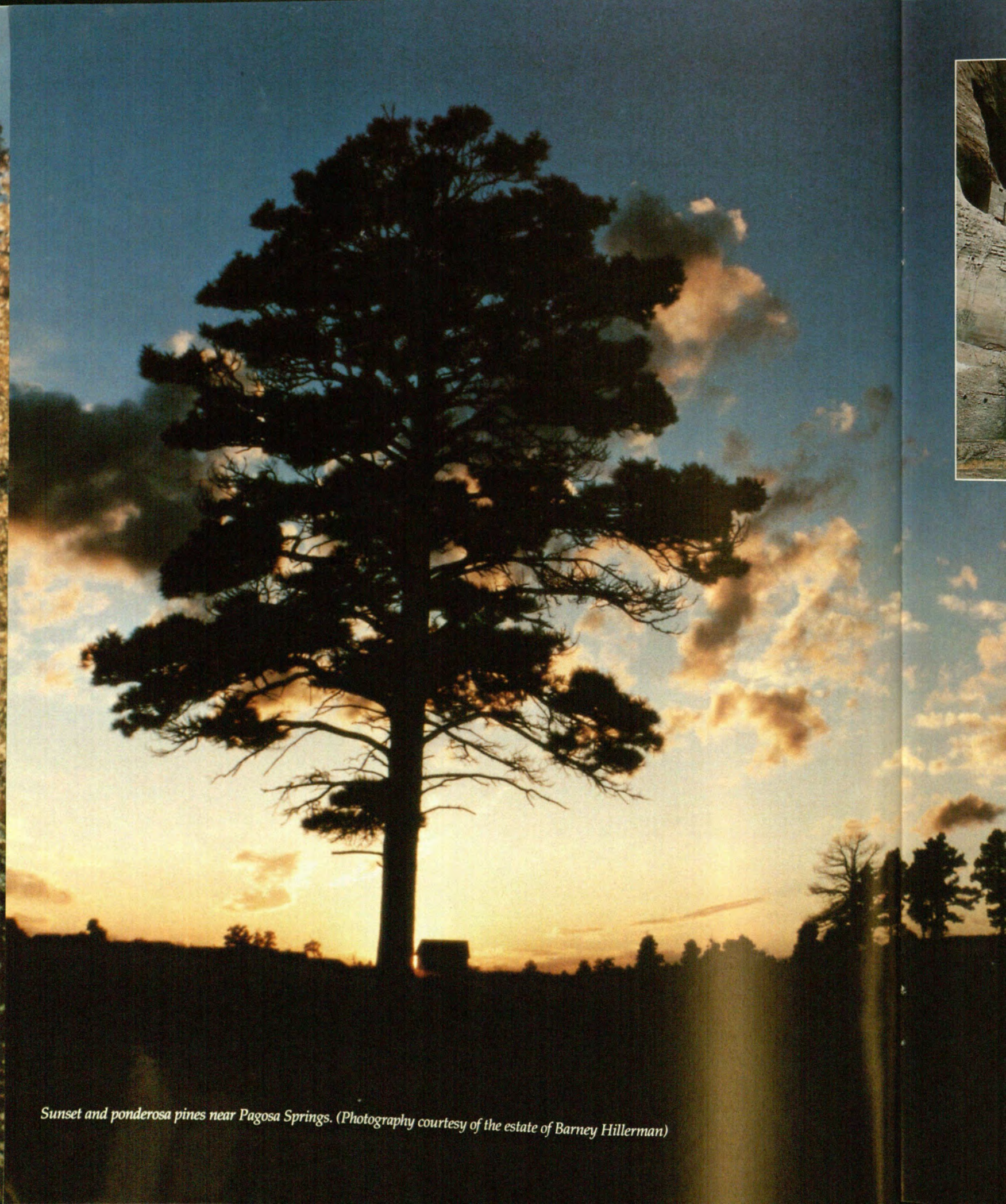
In 1951, after he had earned a degree in journalism from the University of Oklahoma and was working for United Press International in Oklahoma City, he was transferred to the Santa Fe Bureau. In that setting, he was surrounded by the Santo Domingo, Santa Clara, San Juan and San Ildefonso pueblos. But it was the "country boy" Navajos he was drawn to — one hundred and fifty thousand of them scattered across their huge complex of reservations in Arizona, New Mexico and Utah.

"I love the Navajo Reservation," he said. "It's as big as all New England, a landscape of fantastic variety, a land, as someone said, *of room enough, and time*. I need only drive west from Shiprock and into that great emptiness to feel my spirit lift. And writing about it gives me the excuse to go.

"For some reason, which has never seemed sensible in fiction, I seem to need to sort of memorize the places in which my plots take place," Hillerman said. "Whatever the real motive, it is my habit to visit the places where I want my fictional events to happen, to stand in the dust, breathe the air, consider the sounds and the smells, watch the light change when the sun goes down, notice the trap-door spider emerge from her hole for her twilight hunt and the bats collecting insects before the moon rises, and listen to the pair of coyotes in coyote conversation on the mesa behind me. Most of it never reaches the page, some of it is modified to fit, but I seem to need such memories when I write a scene.

"When I was writing *The Blessing Way*, I climbed down into Canyon de Chelly, puddled around on its quicksandy bottom, and collected a headful of sensory impressions — the way the wind sounds down there, the nature of echoes, the smell of sage and wet sand, how the sky looks atop a tunnel of stone, the booming of thunder bouncing from one cliff to another."

Many such settings are featured in the book, *Hillerman Country*, which includes commentaries by Hillerman, and photography by his late brother, Barney Hillerman.



Sunset and ponderosa pines near Pagosa Springs. (Photography courtesy of the estate of Barney Hillerman)



Cliff dwellings in Canyon de Chelly.

Hillerman reminisces about the experience of working on the book with his brother, reliving the sibling tension that always existed between them. "When you're the little brother, as I was, you learn about pecking order. I made elaborate notes to tell Barney how to do the book and how to shoot the photographs. I'd look at the finished photograph and say, 'I thought I asked you to shoot it this way.' He'd say, 'Oh yeah, I meant to read all that stuff.' But when the publisher changed the press run from twenty thousand to fifty thousand copies, I acquired a different viewpoint of Barney."

That self-effacing attitude also was evident when Hillerman said, "There are thousands of people who know more about the Navajo than I do, and that doesn't even include the Navajo. But I've been lucky to gain the confidence to get inside the minds and feelings of the Navajo."

Hillerman's novels, which always involve a murder, are based on continual research. "I'm always looking for stuff. I think a lot of writers are like bag ladies, going through life, collecting odds and ends, saving them so they can use them later. You end up with a whole attic full of the strange little things you see. And every person you meet could become a character. Maybe I'll use the stuff. Maybe I won't. But I'm always looking for it. And I'm always working on more than one book at a time.

"Writing is really hard. And a book usually doesn't start out with much of a plot. Maybe a few characters, like Mudhead and Cochare. I work from an idea and develop sub-plots. As time goes on I'll figure out a way to have a plot and then I'll go back and fix things in the earlier chapters. But while I make up characters and plot, it's very important for me that the facts must be accurate."

Much of that respect for authenticity comes from his fifteen-year stint as managing editor of the Santa Fe *New Mexican*, and later serving as a professor and chairman of the journalism department at the University of New Mexico in Albuquerque. It was during his tenure there that he began writing his award-winning murder mysteries, which have made the *New York Times* bestseller list four times and been translated into thirteen different languages.

Have Hillerman's numerous books had an impact on the Navajo culture?

He pondered the question for a long time, uneasy about taking too much acclaim for himself.

"Well," he says slowly, stalling again to phrase just the right answer. "I think maybe I've had some small effect. I'm aware of the richness and value and depth of their culture and their religion. And I guess if I've achieved anything, it's that I know some Navajo kids who feel a lot better about themselves for having read my books." 🐾