

High Country News

FOR PEOPLE WHO CARE ABOUT THE WEST

A misguided investigation ends an era in Arizona

Andrea Lankford | OPINION | ESSAY | May 2, 2011 | *From the print edition*

Calling the National Park Service case against Billy Malone "misguided" is a kindness. Others use words like "corrupt" or "fiasco" when speaking of the bungled federal investigation that cost taxpayers nearly a million dollars, ruined the reputation of one of the last old-time Indian traders and may have transformed an authentic Indian trading post into nothing more than a gift shop.

This upsetting story begins in 1965, when National Park Service historian Robert Utley proposed to agency director George Hartzog that the Hubbell Trading Post, which was about to be designated a National Historic Site, would best be operated as a "static exhibit, with period merchandise on the shelves."

Hartzog, it's reported, erupted into a "colorful" tirade and cursed Utley's suggestion. No way was the trading post on the Navajo Reservation going to be "another goddamned dead embalmed historic site." Congress agreed, and the agency's mandate was to manage Hubbell Trading Post as a living, breathing trading post with an authentic Indian trader running the place. It would sell everything from tools to Navajo rugs and serve the community instead of catering to tourists.

Some equate "living history" with Civil War re-enactors marching across the battlefields of Gettysburg. But the Hubbell Trading Post was supposed to be different. The Indian trader and his Navajo patrons wouldn't need costumes, because the trading post wasn't "living history" as much as it was history still living.

In 1981, Billy Malone accepted the trader position at Hubbell Trading Post, and the Park Service felt lucky to have him. The gentle and soft-spoken Malone was born in Gallup, N.M., but lived on the reservation most of his life. Married to a Navajo woman

for over 40 years, he was a white man who lived like a Navajo, spoke the language and understood the local customs.

An Indian trader in the 21st century works under unique circumstances. Many of his suppliers and customers don't have bank accounts; they buy and sell on a cash or barter system, and the trader is expected to hold valuable rugs or jewelry as collateral for no-interest loans. It has been this way for over a century.

Over time, Malone became wedged between the demands of a modern bureaucracy run by the federal government and the needs and expectations of a traditional culture. It is true, and Malone admitted it, that he resorted to some creative monetary exchanges to support local artists and maintain his inventory. Instead of a computer, he recorded transactions on hand-written notes tucked into the pockets of his Western shirts.

Yet, in spite of his eccentric business practices, or perhaps because of them, Billy Malone maintained a reputation for being one of the most trusted traders on the reservation.

But where most saw an honest man caught between two cultures, a few imagined criminal behavior. When they reported their suspicions to Park Service law enforcement agents in 2004, the resulting raid ended Malone's long career.

Paul Berkowitz chronicles what happened next in his new book, *The Case of the Indian Trader: Billy Malone and the National Park Service Investigation at Hubbell Trading Post*. Berkowitz was a special agent for the Park Service assigned to clean up the mess made by the agent who initiated the case against Malone. As the lawman uncovered more and more disturbing facts behind the case, Berkowitz declared, "I thought we were supposed to be the good guys."

Berkowitz's findings led to an internal investigation headed by the Office of Inspector General and convinced U.S. attorneys to drop all charges against Malone.

This case is a glaring example of what can happen when sloppy investigators, a cult-like federal agency and powerful people combine forces against a humble man. Malone has filed a civil suit against the agency, but the trader's health and finances have suffered, and Berkowitz says he doubts the lawsuit will provide any "sense of vindication and justice."

Perhaps the saddest outcome of this case is the death of authenticity at Hubbell Trading

Post. When officials fired Billy Malone, they probably fired the last real Indian trader to work at the historic site. The current trader is reportedly a decent fellow with decades of retail management experience and bureaucracy-friendly accounting habits. But he doesn't live on the reservation and he doesn't speak Navajo.

Rest assured, he and the ones who follow will still dress the part. Park Service guidelines for Hubbell's trader-manager include instructions to "wear clothing appropriate to the persona of an Indian Trader."

Andrea Lankford is a former park ranger and the author of Ranger Confidential: Living, Working and Dying in the National Parks. She lives in the Sierra Foothills of California.

Note: the opinions expressed in this column are those of the writer and do not necessarily reflect those of High Country News, its board or staff. If you'd like to share an opinion piece of your own, please write Betsy Marston at betsym@hcn.org (<mailto:betsym@hcn.org>).

Copyright © High Country News