Navajo Code Talkers: Making and Breaking Barriers

Process Paper

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In sixth grade, we (Greta and Maddi) thought it would be a fun idea to create a National History Day project together. But it wasn't until this year, one year later, that we came up with an idea for our topic: the Navajo Code Talkers. The reason why lies in a family trip and a Burger King. Greta had traveled with her family across the country to Arizona, near the Navajo Nation. By chance, they had stumbled across a Burger King that held a display about the Navajo Code Talkers and their story of struggles, achievements, and rewards. That planted the seeds for the beginnings of this project. We investigated many other potential topics but quickly realized that was the Code Talkers were the best topic for us.

Together we began our research by combing the internet for a variety of sources. We searched far and wide and in unexpected corners such as the digital version of the "Library of Congress" we found valuable information. The website about the Code Talkers, "Native Words Native Warriors" gave us some of the best first-hand information. We also tried to collect as many physical resources as we could, including the *hugely* helpful book "Code Talker" a Memoir by Chester Nez, one of the last surviving original Navajo Code Talkers. We also traveled to the archives at the University of Wisconsin Green Bay where we had access to numerous databases and found many new primary sources like an article from the "Marine Corps Gazette" an exclusively military newspaper.

We chose to create a website for our project because it seemed the best way to showcase the information relating to the unique situation of the Code Talkers. Since their mission was so secretive, there aren't many photographs or other visuals recording their work. A documentary would have required more video footage and pictures than what we found. However, we found enough information to add interactiveness to our website. We didn't want to do a performance since neither of us are experienced actresses, and we preferred the technical aspects of a website to the more crafty aspects of an exhibit. We thought a website would be a perfect inbetween for us. After many trials and errors, we were able to combine a layout that reflects the Navajo Code Talkers' culture with the dark blue theme of the Marines. We also included as many pictures of the Code Talkers as we could find as well as some audio/video clips from interviews.

We've packed our information together to create a detailed, yet simple project that we are proud of. It connects to the theme because the Navajo created a linguistic barrier that could not be broken by the enemy. In order to do that, many cultural barriers had to be broken by the Navajo as well as by the U.S. military. As we worked on this project, we pondered if breaking and eliminating barriers was (is) always a good thing.