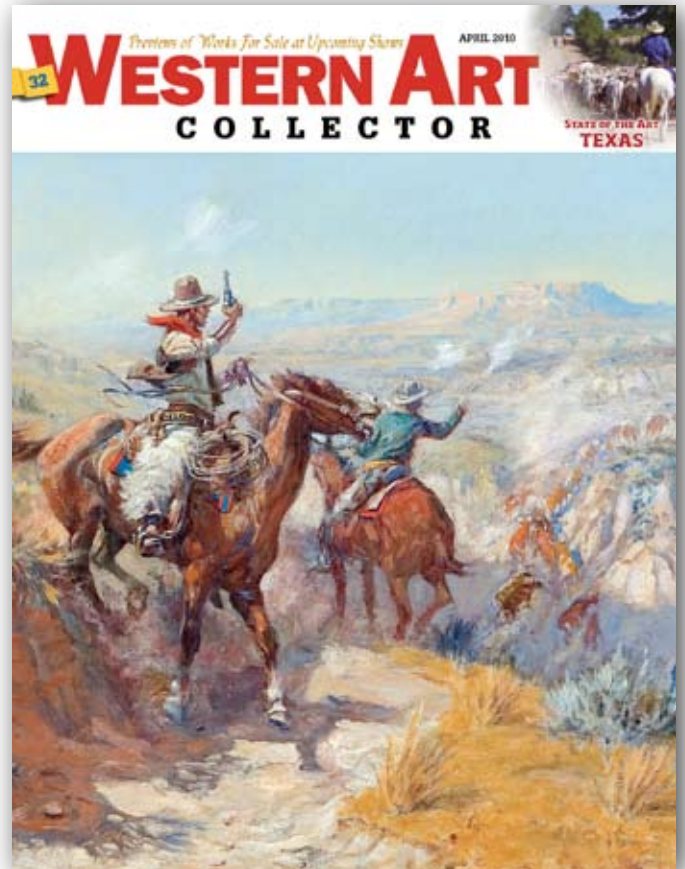


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COLLECTOR



# More Tips and Tales From a Rug Junkie

## PART II: Building a collection

By Dave Hodges

In February, five reasons for collecting Navajo weavings were considered. They were: artistic value, fun, educational, interesting myth and lore, and investment potential. This month's continuation will include tips on weavings to collect, what to watch for, where to find them, and more tips for the collector, i.e. "rug junkie."

Before we get into different aspects of collecting, we may ask, "What exactly is a collection?" It is the act or process of bringing together something for study, comparison or exhibition.

How will you know what rugs to collect? Our first recommendation is to acquire what you like. When you see one that really grabs you, you grab it. The more you observe and learn, the more you will get a feel for what you like. After a few years, you may find your choices changing as experience and knowledge grow.

Andrew Nagen always told me, "On a scale of 1 to 10, always buy 8s or better. Spend the most you can comfortably afford, and then stretch yourself a little more." That was among the best advice he gave us, pushing our weavings into a higher overall quality. We still adhere to that rule today. It is good advice for any collector to follow, no matter what he collects.

Some people like new weavings and some like old. A more serious collector might want older, historic blankets from the early classic period, 1800 to 1860, or late classic period, 1860 to 1870. There are the Germantowns and Transitional period weavings from the 1870s to the early 1900s that fall into categories of their own. Some people collect regional rugs, be it Ganado, Crystal, Teec Nos Pos, Two Grey Hills, or whatever else they like, from the trading-post era. We once appraised a collection consisting of one weaving from each trading post or region, with several from each of the collector's favorites. Other options may include saddle blankets, chief blankets, or child's blankets. Many collectors consider the 1950s the break point between new and old. Some very high-quality weavings are being made by today's weavers; they are tightly woven and with great colors and designs. There are people who collect in all price ranges, dictated by their level of seriousness, perhaps their pocketbook, and their comfort zone. Many people choose only rugs that fit into their home décor.



This "Plate Rug" is from J.B. Moore's (Crystal Trading Post) 1911 catalog, plate XXVIII. The storm pattern depicts the center of the universe connected by lightning to the four sacred mountains at each corner, also water bugs and whirling logs with corn silk, denoting food and water.



Rocky Mountain Camp Company, 1916: Dave Hodges' grandfather, Erwin J. Ward, on the right, in front of "Tent City" camp headquarters. His business was taking tourists by horseback and touring cars to view the Pueblos, Bandolier, and other sites in the Santa Fe area.

There are several things you should watch for when selecting a rug or blanket. The first being whether it is "the real McCoy." I overheard a friend of mine, who specializes in American Indian beadwork, advise a new collector, "When you buy a piece you really like and want, it is not quite so important that you may pay too much, what is important is that it is real."

Lately, I have been hearing about fake Navajo rugs from Ukraine that are fooling people. They have a feel that is stiffer, coarser, and scratchier than should be; perhaps goat hair is mixed into the yarn. We may have encountered one for sale a few years ago that was represented as a 1880s "child's blanket." The pattern looked OK, but the blanket just did not feel quite right, the color choice was slightly questionable, and it had a peculiar smoky odor. Something did not seem right, whatever it was, and however tempting, we declined the offer.

Have you read the book by Malcolm Gladwell titled *Blink*? The author talks about an intuitive feeling you develop with experience. About a year later we watched that same blanket sell in an auction to an unsuspecting purchaser who probably is very pleased with it, and for his sake, we hope it is real.

There are definite ways to identify a genuine Navajo weaving, and with experience you can almost tell a block away just by looking at the design, the use of colors and general character. First, you need

to understand the basic construction of a Navajo rug. The warp is the foundation on which the colorful weft is woven. Any weaving done on an upright Navajo loom has a vertical and continuous warp. One very long cord of wool yarn is wrapped around and around two poles set apart the length the rug will be. This cord winds across the poles the width the rug will be, so the length and width are pre-set. Both poles are later removed when the warp is strung onto the loom. The warp cord within a 30-by-60-inch rug at 10 warps/inch will be about 1,500 feet long. On either end of a Navajo rug you can see each warp cord turning back into the weft, heading toward the other end.

Mexican and Hispanic weavings are made on a horizontal loom. Each cotton string warp cord is individual, strung on the loom from end to end, and is longer than the finished weaving will be. Fringes are created at each end where the warp strings are cut to remove the weaving from the loom, and are generally knotted. When trying to imitate a Navajo, each cut warp is buried back into the piece from 1 to 2 inches, after it has been removed from the loom. Upon inspection you can find these ends or see and feel the ridge created where they end.

A couple of Navajo exceptions do have fringe. Gallup throw rugs were made for tourists, and to save time near completion of the rug, the continuous warp was cut at the top near the loom, then knotted and fringed on that end. Germantowns often have colorful yarn fringes



Child's blanket c.1880-1885. Dave and Carmen point to the indigo-blue dye used on this child's blanket.

on either or both ends that were added after the weaving was complete. Cotton string was also a common warp material in many Germantown weavings, and in other weavings around the turn of the century, but it was still continuous.

Navajo weavings generally have tassels comprised of four strands of yarn, sometimes six, on each corner. Two strands come from the selvedge cords running along the edge, either buried within or intertwining with a given number of wefts, and two strands crossing the ends, intertwined with the warp turns. At each corner these are tied and knotted in Navajo fashion when the weaving is finished. The weaver may then add a bundle of "augmented tassels" after the completion of weaving.

"Lazy lines" are diagonal lines woven into the face of the weave indicative of Navajo weaving, although some Zuni also wove them in. Since it is easier to work back and forth within the width of the weaver's batten, the weaving is built up in sections ending on a diagonal slant at each turn back of the weft. When the batten is moved over, the weft is then joined on this slant as the weaver builds up this portion of the weaving. Some attribute this weaving technique to added flexibility and strength. Navajo saddle blankets often have many and very long lazy lines.

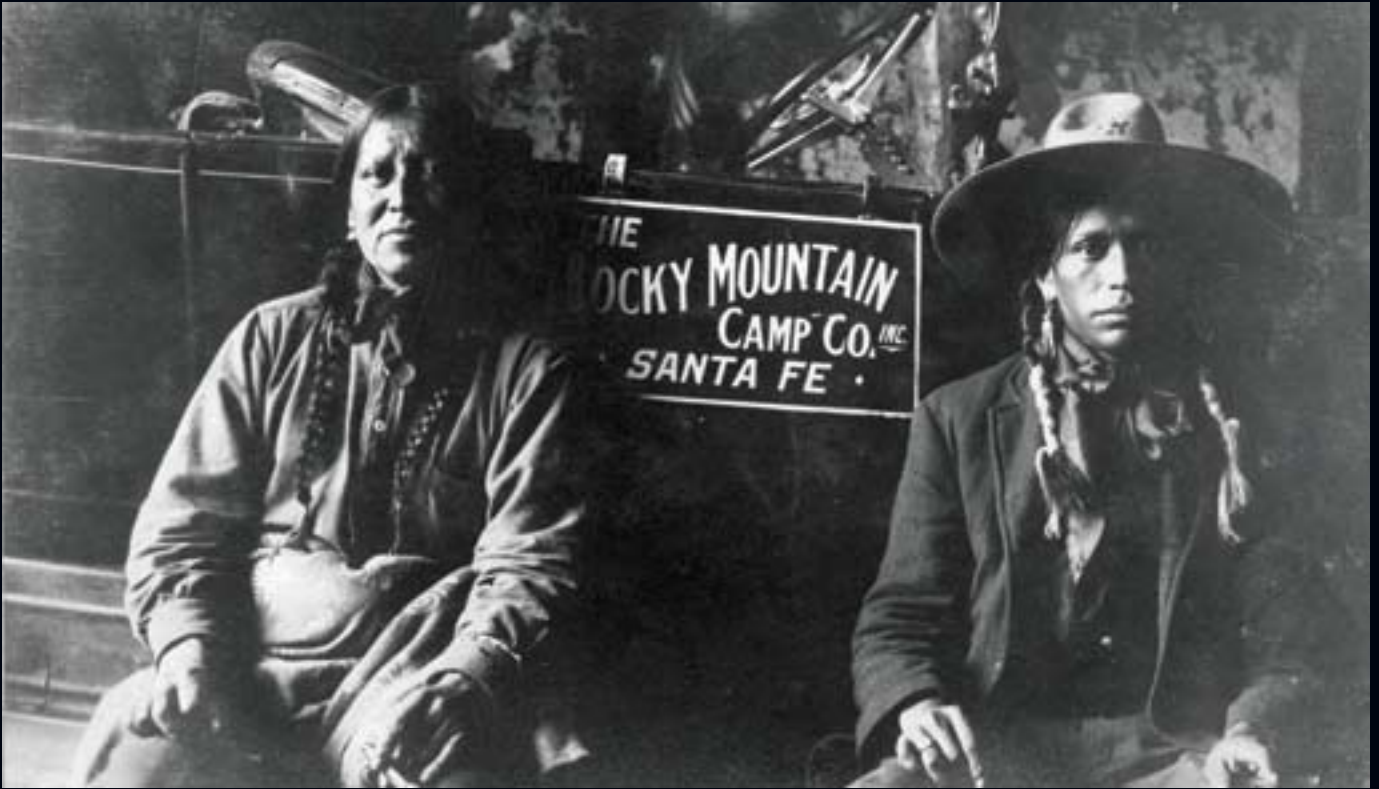
Almost all handspun yarn from the Southwest is "z" spun yarn whereas most commercial yarn is "s" spun. That is the direction of the yarn twist using the center legs of the figures "z" or "s" for reference, upward right for "z" and upward left for "s". Most old Navajo rugs are made of single-ply handspun yarn with the exception of a few made of commercial yarns. The Spaniards first introduced commercial yarns into the Southwest for trade purposes in the late 1500s. A commercial Saxony yarn of Merino wool was used sparingly in the 1840s. Most well-known are the Germantown yarns, introduced and used frequently in the late 1860s. Commercial yarns were used more after the 1960s and are quite commonly used today.



Close-up showing "Lazy Lines," indicative of the Navajo style of weaving and the selvedge corner tassels.



Close-up of warp cords turning back into the weave and the thicker augmented corner tassels.



Two Indian guides who worked for the Rocky Mountain Camp Company.

Rugs with damage of any kind should be avoided. This includes fading, A-B sided rugs, moth damage, stains, odors, or fugitive dyes that have bled. Although most damage can be repaired and restored, it might not be economical. Some colors that bleed will come out easier than others and some not at all. Ganado reds usually come out, tomato reds may, some blacks with a reddish-tint will come out, blacks with purplish tint might not, and blues and greens will not come out. Weavings should be square from end to end and side to side with an even weave throughout. The design should be fairly symmetrical and pleasing with colors strong and vivid. It is best to stick to rugs that have nothing wrong and need no explanations or excuses.

One rule you should live by is "Never buy a rug from a photo." Photos always seem to look good, but you just can't see such things as warp snags, urine stains, moth damage, and especially not odors, no matter how good the photo. Just don't do it unless you have the right of refusal. A photo should be a tool used only as a starting point.

Dealers and auctions are two major sources to buy and sell Navajo weavings. First, let's talk about auctions. Reputable auction houses often have an expert appraiser to identify and evaluate consigned pieces. These weavings are normally well represented. You should inspect the inventory beforehand, do your homework, figure out what it is worth, set your top bid and stick to it. Or, have an expert go and represent you at the auction.

Now, what about dealers? Keep in mind the old saying, "If you don't know jewelry, know your jeweler." The best place to begin your Navajo rug experience is to find a good dealer to work with, someone who has been in business long enough to be established, is reliable, and who has a passion for the product. They are the most knowledgeable. Find somebody you like and trust. After all, in the end, it's all about trust.

A reputable dealer knows that he may be re-selling any given piece

for a variety of reasons. The collector may want to change the caliber, age, or value of his collection as he becomes more knowledgeable and sophisticated, or he might leave heirs who have no interest. At any rate, it is in a dealer's best interest to keep his prices fair. This is simply good business, not to mention ethics.

When is a good time to collect Navajo weavings? Why not now? Start by reading a couple of good books on the subject. Then find and study as many weavings as possible, talk to knowledgeable people, and learn all you can. When you get a feel for what you like, purchase the best you can afford at the time. To further your knowledge, we recommend these two books, *The Navajo Weaving Tradition* by Kaufman and Selser, and *Blanket Weaving in the Southwest* by Joe Ben Wheat.

Although there are various reasons for and methods of collecting, the first should be a love and passion for the beauty of the weavings. There are distinct developmental phases involved as a collection develops. Normally a collection is begun by accident, or shall we say, innocently, rather than as an outright decision. First one little rug, then another, and another, then one more valuable, and as interest grows, quality and sophistication develop, and all of a sudden it's a full-blown collection. Maybe you laugh off some guilt, start to hear inner voices of confession and a nagging worry of an addiction, until finally you hear the words, "My Dad is a rug junkie!" But you know what? Who cares. I still get great joy every day when I pause and look at the rugs hanging on our walls.

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