
Berton Isaac Staples: Vermont Merchant—Indian Trader

By Susan Goss Johnston

He looks like a clerk—or perhaps a professor—tall, thin, gray-haired, wearing a fully-buttoned suit and tie, stiff white collar, and prominent round glasses. Photographed with him are three Native Americans in full dress. Is this a 1920s tourist photo? Or is there another explanation?

Berton Isaac Staples, oldest surviving child of Guy Beckley and Helen Sarah (Lawrence) Staples, was not yet six years old when his father died in 1879, leaving his family in financial difficulties. Bert and his brother, Don, were apprenticed to their guardian, Pearl D. Blodgett, and both boys worked while they attended school.¹ Bert, bright, hard-working, and ambitious, completed his public school education and continued on, attending Goddard Seminary, a private preparatory school in Barre, Vermont.² At the age of eighteen, he went to work as a clerk for H. Z. Mills in Barre, and he discovered that he had a flair for design and an excellent business sense.³ He left Barre for a decorator's position with Lougee Brothers & Smythe's dry goods store in St. Johnsbury, Vermont, rooming there in the home of Dr. Harry Bullard – and his sister, Miss Rebecca Bullard.⁴ Bert's personal popularity, and his marriage to Rebecca, made him a part of St. Johnsbury society. When he opened his own dry goods store in 1910, Berton I. Staples' Ready to Wear Shop, his career as a successful merchant appeared assured.⁵



¹ Declaration for Widow's Pension, 14 April 1879; Helen S. Staples, widow's pension certificate no. 189,493; Pearl D. Blodgett (guardian), minor's pension certificate no. 236,935; service of Guy B. Staples (3rd Ind. Batty., Vt. Lt. Art., Civil War), pension certificate no. 172,588; Case Files of Approved Pension Applications of Widows and Other Dependents ..., 1861--1934; Civil War and Later Pension Files; Department of Veterans Affairs, Record Group 15; National Archives, Washington, D.C.

² Prentiss C. Dodge, compiler and editor, *Encyclopedia, Vermont Biography: A Series of Authentic Biographical Sketches of the Representative Men of Vermont and Sons of Vermont in Other States* (Burlington, Vt.: Ullery Publishing Company, 1912), 320; digital images, *Google Book Search* (<http://books.google.com/> : accessed 14 May 2014).

³ "Barre Bundle," *Argus and Patriot* (Montpelier, Vermont), 29 April 1891, p. 3, col. 5; digital image, Library of Congress, *Chronicling America* (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/> : accessed 12 May 2014).

⁴ United States Bureau of the Census, *1900 U.S. census, Caledonia County, Vermont, population schedule.*, CD-ROM T623-1690 (Salt Lake City, Utah: Heritage Quest, 1998), St. Johnsbury Village, ED 54, p. 203B (stamped), sheet 16 (penned), dwell. 320, fam. 405, Berton I. Staples in the Harry Bullard household.

⁵ "Local Gatherings," *St. Johnsbury (Vermont) Caledonian*, 30 March 1910, p. 4, col. 5; digital image, Library of Congress, *Chronicling America* (<http://chroniclingamerica.loc.gov/> : accessed 12 May 2014).

Bert had asthma, however, suffering from attacks so severe that recovery took weeks at a time. In 1912, doctors told him that if he remained in Vermont, he would die. His only hope of recovery lay in a change of climate, specifically the warm, dry climate of the American Southwest.⁶ So, he and Rebecca left Vermont, and Bert took a job as assistant manager of a large store in Fort Morgan, Colorado. His health improved, and in 1917, the Staples moved to Thoreau, New Mexico, where Bert joined fellow Vermonter, C. B. Weeks, vice-president of the McGaffey Contracting Company. Bert took over as manager of one of the McGaffey stores in Thoreau.⁷

This store probably had little resemblance to the elegant dry goods store Bert created in St. Johnsbury. He served as postmaster, dealt with loggers, miners, and railroad men, and interacted with the Navajo Indians on the nearby reservation.⁸ He became fluent in the Navajo language and became fascinated with the ancient Navajo arts of sand painting, weaving, and silver work. His metamorphosis had begun.

On a railroad siding not far from Gallup, N. M., there had been an accident. A Navajo Indian was crushed between two cars; his legs were cut off near the hips. Because it was only an Indian, nobody cared much except a Mr. Staples, employe of a lumber company. The freight train continued its journey; Mr. Staples stayed with the Indian.

With barbed wire he bound the man's amputated legs, and at the nearest station sent a telegram, forging the name of an official of the railroad which stopped the fast train there. The Indian was rushed to Gallup.

That night the Navajo died, but word of Staples' deed spread swiftly over the reservation by that word-of-mouth telegraph which among the Indians seems quicker than wires.⁹

The Navajo people had been watching Bert Staples ever since he came to New Mexico. This action confirmed what they suspected: Bert Staples was that rare man who truly respected the Native Americans. In fact, they believed that he “had been born a Navajo, but had been retained in the East by the pale faces.”¹⁰ Berton Isaac Staples was initiated into the Navajo rituals and made a full Navajo in a nine-day ceremony in 1923.¹¹

What do you see in this photograph? Three Navajo Indians and a Vermont merchant? No. You see four Navajos: silversmith Hostien-Aulson-Begay-Utsida, weaver A-Heh-Bah, sand painter Denie-Chili-Begay, and standing behind them is Chissie-Nez, “The Tall Apache,” “the man who keeps his word.”¹²

⁶ “Personals,” *St. Johnsbury Caledonian*, 7 August 1912, p. 8, col. 3; notices of Staples’ illnesses are found in newspaper notices beginning in 1896.

⁷ *Ibid.*, *St. Johnsbury Caledonian*, 22 October 1913, p. 8, col. 3; 25 April 1917, p. 6, col. 1.

⁸ “U.S., Appointments of U.S. Postmasters, 1832-1971,” database and digital images, *Ancestry.com* (<http://ancestry.com/> : accessed 10 May 2014), Berton I. Staples entries, McKinley County, New Mexico, various towns and years, 1918-1926; citing *Record of Appointment of Postmasters, 1832-1971*, National Archives microfilm publication M841 (145 rolls).

⁹ “A Friend of the Indian,” *Evening World-Herald* (Omaha, Neb.), 21 January 1932, p. 6, col. 2; digital image, *GenealogyBank* (<http://www.genealogybank.com/> : accessed 10 May 2014).

¹⁰ “Former Vermonter Joins Indian Tribe,” *The Springfield (Massachusetts) Sunday Union and Republican*, 7 April 1929, p. 20A, col. 4.

¹¹ “B. I. Staples Initiated into Tribe,” *The Caledonian-Record* (St. Johnsbury, Vt.), 11 December 1923, p. 1, col. 4; digital images, *Genealogy Bank* (: accessed 10 May 2014).

¹² “Former Vermonter Joins Indian Tribe,” *The Springfield Sunday Union and Republican*, 7 April 1929, p. 20A, col. 4.