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Red Shirt, The Life and Times of Henry Lafayette Dodge

Lawrence D. Sundberg

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Henry Lafayette Dodge has long been a familiar name in 19th century American Southwestern history. As one of the earliest and most effective Indian agents to the Navajo, he has been portrayed as a congenial, sympathetic and compassionate advocate for the tribe--a veritable role model. The Navajo knew him as Red Shirt, a man they came to respect, appreciate and trust. Those who knew Dodge admitted, although often grudgingly, that he had unrivaled influence over the tribe. By today's sensibilities, Henry L. Dodge was hardly a role model. In his youth, he was irresponsible, hot-headed and violent. As an adult, he was sued for assault and battery, land fraud, breach of promises and misuse of public funds. He apparently couldn't be trusted with money, his own or others'. Finally brought down by scandal, he fled Wisconsin in the dead of night, abandoning his career, his wife and his children, leaving them nearly destitute. How then should history assess him? Honestly: precisely as he was, an ambitious and imperfect man. The honest telling gives a straightforward account of not only Henry L. Dodge, but what became the veritable mythology of the West, from the bawdy old French Missouri river towns to the raucous lead mining districts of southwest Wisconsin, through the slaughter of the Winnebago and Black Hawk wars to the invasion of New Mexico and the chaos of the Indian frontier; it is a gritty personal tale of the true West.

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