

## The Winds Erase Your Footprints book reviews

The author, **Shiyowin Miller**, was a close friend of Juanita. In 1939, with Juanita's help, she wrote the main draft of this chronicle. Navajo artist **Chester Kahn**, grew up in a hogan, also in the 1930s. His illustrations depict the land, people, and culture of that time.

### 1930s story provides timeless message

1. The "cross-cultural" experience was more than a politically correct ideal for Juanita Standly, a white woman who married a Navajo in the 1930s.

"The Winds Erase Your Footprints" chronicles the life of Juanita and Luciano Platero, who met in Tinsel Town, but traveled to the deserts of New Mexico and for a "Hollywood" romance involving hardship and hope. The book is derived from the notes of Juanita, as set down by her close friend, Shiyowin Miller (born Virginia Miller), the adopted niece of Sioux Chief Standing Bear.

While the jacket blurb leaves one fearing an amateurish attempt at writing, the book itself is well-written and does not disappoint. It is clear and concise, yet gives the reader the feeling of being in Juanita's shoes. It pulls one inside and enlightens at once. On the whole, it is a very nice surprise.

The mistake lies in approaching "Winds" with an "oh-how-quaint" attitude. Juanita was not trying to prove a point, and Luciano was not trying to shock his family by engaging in an inter-ethnic relationship. They were two human beings in love, and that's that.

It is love, not spite, that makes a person abandon everything she ever knew to live a life she never dreamed possible. It is love that compels a woman to adapt -- and cheerfully -- rather than complain. Did Juanita speak Navajo? No. Did she know their ways? No. But did she learn? Yes.

Patience and a strong grip on reality also helped Juanita and Luciano "tough it out." Lu lost a lucrative job as a trading post artisan when he said he could not make a bracelet identical to an older one a woman brought in. ("How could I explain to those women that designs are like growing? You can't grow back to when you were shorter.") The lack of understanding -- and his unwillingness to sell out his beliefs -- cost him the job when times were tight. New work was a long time in coming.

So they lived in a "hogan". They saved for furniture. They scrambled for jobs. (Juanita got one as a cook -- she left her children in "daycare" with her sisters-in-law and nieces). They ate "three shriveled potatoes" and counted it a feast. And they never forgot their family. These are solid values much touted today.

Juanita was not the only person to receive an education about other cultures. Luciano's family understood that their ways were not, at first, Juanita's, and tried to bridge the gap. She was welcomed, but they feared she would be frightened of their spiritual beliefs, and hid them from her.

Her sister-in-law's younger children were fascinated by her, having never seen a white person before. Her mother-in-law, Shimah, was amazed that a person could have "straight and dark hair like ours" and not be Navajo. Once, Shimah berated Luciano because she believed he had allowed Juanita to drown her "despair" over being separated from "her people" in booze. It was, she believed, her son's fault for not taking better care of his wife's happiness. (Juanita had simply been exhausted by a long day pounding the "pavement" in Albuquerque).

"Winds" on many levels is a journey through time, given through one woman's voice. There were hard times and happy times -- often one in the same. There were wolf scares, the big event of a Chapter House meeting, Christmas gifts of oranges, visits from white relatives, day school tales, and visits from Standing Bear, who, perhaps ironically, knew, like Juanita, what it was to feel out of place on the reservation.

There were moments too, that have since passed into history. Juanita recalls the "big meeting" held to discuss Indian rights, following proposed legislation in Congress. The tales jolt readers into reality, and reminds us that it wasn't until 1924 that Native Americans were even accorded citizenship.

"Winds" is an important chronicle that has too long been hidden from the mainstream. Read a little. Learn a lot.

*The Cortez Journal*, Arts & Entertainment, November 7, 2002  
Review by Katharhynn Heidelberg

2. This diamond in the rough is a "secondhand memoir," written by Miller about Juanita Standly, an Oklahoma bookkeeper, who in 1930, married Luciano Platero, a Navajo silversmith, in Hollywood and went to live with him at Canoncito on the Navajo reservation. Platero died in 1936. A quiet, unpretentious story that rings with authenticity.

(J.C. Martin, *Southwest Books of the Year, Best Reading in 2002*, December, 2002).

3. *The Winds Erase Your Footprints* with its fascinating, insightful, biographical narrative, offers a crystal snapshot of daily life among native ways and would be a very welcome addition to any Native American Studies collection or supplemental reading list.

(James Cox, Reviewer, *Wisconsin Bookwatch*, January 2003)

4. When I lived not far from the Alamo Navajo Reservation in south-central New Mexico, I knew an elderly white woman named Juanita who was married to a Navajo man. Now I've "met" the same woman when she was young and married to her first husband, also Navajo. *The Winds Erase Your Footprints* is the story of her life between 1930 and 1936.

Juanita Standly, with long dark hair and a trace of American Indian blood, met Luciano Platero in California in the late 1920s when the two were part of a mixed-race group of young people interested in improving awareness of Indian ways. Juanita performed traditional dances with the group, which was led by Oglalla Sioux Chief Luther Standing Bear. Luciano was a silversmith and an occasional movie extra.

After they married they moved to Luciano's family home at Canoncito, a small area of Navajo reservation land just west of Albuquerque. Juanita gradually became part of her husband's family and community, had two daughters and lived the simple, satisfying, geographically isolated life of the Navajo in the early 20th century. She and Luciano were central figures in the newly opened Canoncito day school, doing housekeeping, maintenance and driving for the government school until Luciano died in 1936.

The book affectionately details various aspects of Juanita's experience as an open-minded, adventurous young woman who in many ways seemed born for the life she encountered at Canoncito. ...the story follows the major events of the couple's life together. It was not written by Juanita, however, but by a slightly younger female friend - also white with a trace of Indian ancestry. Shiyowin Miller began writing Juanita's story a few years after Luciano died. Miller worked on the book for much of her life with assistance from her daughter.

Juanita was pleased with the accuracy of Miller's depiction of her experience and Juanita's daughters also saw in the book an authentic description of Navajo life at the time. As such, the story offers a compelling look at a world far removed from our own...melded with the attractions of Indian ways: simplicity, close-knit family and community, spiritual depth and the untamed beauty of the land.

It's not a story to charge through, but to amble along in, like the pace of the era and lifestyle it evokes.

(Gussie Fauntleroy, Santa Fe writer.)

**5.** The way in which this book came to be published is nearly as interesting as the biography itself. The author, Shiyowin Miller, was born Virginia Ann Potter in 1913. She and her mother moved to Los Angeles where she became a dancer on stage and in the movies. She joined an Indian dance troupe where she met Juanita Standly, also a dancer and the subject of the biography.

Juanita, born in 1905, was a native of Missouri who arrived in California via Oklahoma and Texas. A white woman, she married Luciano Platero, a Navajo man, in 1930 and the two of them moved to Platero's ancestral home at Canoncito (now To'Hajiilee) west of Albuquerque. They remained among the Navajos until Luciano's death in 1936 after which Juanita moved to Albuquerque. In 1939, Shiyowin and Juanita began work on the story of Juanita's observations of her life with the Dine. For the years that followed, until her death in 1983, Miller and her daughter, Dolores, continued polishing the manuscript. Dolores finally got the book published last year (2002).

Juanita Platero was a remarkable woman. She moved from the "civilized" society of southern California to the relatively primitive community of Canoncito at a time when things were worse than usual. The Great Depression had just begun and the poverty that accompanied it exacerbated the difficult life-style normally experienced on the reservation. She suffered hunger and cold and privation with her husband and his people, living with none of life's conveniences: electricity, running water or an automobile. They not only survived, but also thrived, and the love they shared is at the heart of this story.

There is a bit of undercurrent about the wolf clan, or ma-itso, the evildoers in Navajo life. Luciano says this about them: "The wolf clan is as old as the Navajo tribe....Some men turned certain powers, which should have been used for good, toward evil things. Corn pollen, used for blessing, is used by the ma-itso as a warning to a person marked for death. And death does not come in a usual manner...Sometimes the victim meets with a mysterious and fatal accident."

There are hints throughout that the ma-itso are skulking about, wearing wolf skins, but nothing is certain. When Luciano was killed in a truck-train collision, though, many of his relatives believed that the ma-itso were responsible, perhaps because he'd brought an outsider into the tribe, a woman who wore denim pants. None of the Navajos held it against Juanita, however, and she remained closely associated with her in-laws for the rest of her life. In fact, she built a house on reservation property that had been allocated to her husband. Author Miller actually lived in that house for a period of time in 1940.

Along the way, Luciano and Juanita had two daughters and they built a happy and successful life. Juanita's view of the Navajo people is entirely positive, and the book is a treasure-trove of detail about their customs, ceremonies, superstitions and religion.

This book is a must for people with an interest in Navajo life, especially in the early 20th century. It is also recommended for those who like a good love story.

(Don Bullis, Books In Review, [Rio Rancho Observer](#))

**7. *The Winds Erase Your Footprints*** by Shiyowin Miller is the true story of a Navajo man, Luciano Platero, and his Anglo wife, Juanita Standly. They met in California and married there in 1930. Shortly thereafter they decided to move to Luciano's home in Canoncito (To'hajiilee) on the Navajo Reservation. The book written by Juanita's friend, describes their life at To'hajiilee. Juanita could speak no Navajo and her mother-in-law could speak no English, but they lived together and got along well for decades. The book reports on their adventures rounding up rabbits chasing wolves, hunting ducks, and herding their animals. It is recommended for both Indian history and Indian literature classes. Naturegraph Publishers, PO Box 1047, Happy Camp, CA 96039 -- Dean Chavers, [The Native Scholar](#) 2003