

Neil, Lilakai Julian (1900–1961)

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Lilakai (Lily) Neil was the first Navajo to become a Seventh-day Adventist and the first woman to become a member of the Navajo Nation Council.

Early Life and Conversion

Lilakai Julian was born into the Navajo Nation on October 10, 1900, near Crownpoint, New Mexico. Her parents were Hosteen (c. 1852-1918) and Ahkenapah Morgan Julian (1874-c. 1952).¹ “Old Julian,” as Lily’s father became known, was reputed to be wealthy, with a large stock of horses, cattle, sheep and goats.²

Lily gained a strong command of English and became a Christian through her education at the Dutch Christian Reformed Mission in Rehoboth, near Gallup, New Mexico.³ Some time during the latter months of 1916, curiosity about new missionaries who observed the Sabbath on Saturday, not Sunday, led Lily to visit a Seventh-day Adventist couple, Orno and Agnes Follet, who had just located near Smith Lake, about 10 miles from Lily’s home, to begin gospel work among the Navajo.⁴ After some Bible studies with Agnes Follett, “Lilikai” became “our first Navajo convert,” reported Orno Follett in the February 22, 1917, issue of the *Review*. Though he slightly misspelled her name, Follett described Lilakai as “exceptionally bright” and briefly pointed out the moral courage she demonstrated in stepping away from deeply-rooted traditions of her people in order to follow the truth she had come to understand.⁵



Lilakai Neil

From Violet May Cummings, *Along Navajo Trails* (Review and Herald, 1964).

Lily soon joined the Folletts at what became known as Lake Grove Mission, helping Agnes take care of household responsibilities and with the mission work as a translator. She was baptized on August 19, 1917, at a camp meeting held in Albuquerque, New Mexico. At the urging of several people who met her at the camp meeting, and with transportation and school expenses quickly arranged for by the Folletts, Lily went to the Boulder-Colorado Sanitarium for nurses training that would equip her to be a medical missionary among her people.⁶

A few months later, though, she returned home without completing her course. She explained that it was not because of problems with her training program in Boulder, but because she wanted to give her ailing father grandchildren before he died.⁷ Accordingly, Lily married John Neil (1893-1977), a trader, also identified as a Bureau of Indian Affairs agent in some sources, on July 10, 1918, in Crownpoint.⁸ The couple's daughter, Ruth, was born in 1919. Hosteen Julian died before his granddaughter was born, but not before summoning Orno Follett to tell him "the good story" of redemption one last time.⁹

Advocate For Her People

Lilakai Neil taught at government-run schools and became an advocate for her people, especially for educational opportunity and more effective social services. In 1946, she became the first woman to serve on the Navajo Tribal Council, elected to represent District 19.¹⁰ In that capacity, Neil wrote a letter in 1947 to the General Director of Indian Education at the U.S. Department of the Interior, calling the federal government to account for its failures to make good on its promises to her people. Historians have cited this letter as a prominent example of Native American activism for justice in the years immediately following World War II.¹¹

Neil's specific concern was a pattern of unfairness, despite assurances and short-lived improvements, toward the community she represented, due in part to its location just outside the borders of the Navajo Reservation. Yet she framed her plea in the broader history of the United States government's interaction with Native Americans:

Weren't we here when the White men came? And we faught [sic] them to be sure, but it was our home and our country, and they made treaties with us, just to stall us off until other ways to get by could be devised, and it has finally simmered down to where neglect seems to be the only solution

Delineating the cruel dilemma in which American Indians found themselves, Neil observed that "we are held as wards of the Government, then neglected," and thus unable to attain the goal of self-reliant citizenry. All that the federal government could "boast" about after 100 years of control over the Navajo people was "about 10% of the savage tribe being educated . . . and this 10% are far below their White Brothers and no great effort is being made to help matters."

Especially in view of the massive amounts being expended for aid to European and Asian nations that had just fought against the United States in World War II, Neil pled in concluding her letter, “Will you try to help us get these little children from this immediate community, into school and give them a chance? Please.”¹²

Circle of Light

In 1932, when ill-health and financial constraints had forced Orno Follett to close the Lake Grove Mission, Lily assured him that she would continue working to show her people the love of Christ.¹³ In her advocacy to better their social and material conditions, she never lost sight of that broader mission. Indeed, she had a remarkable dream in that connection—exactly when is not clear, though one source implies that it took place during the years of World War II. In the dream, Lily saw a mass of dark clouds that descended towards her, gradually becoming lighter. The clouds then parted, revealing the figure of Jesus, surrounded by a circle of light. Then:

Just outside the circle, feet were trudging by. Large feet in moccasins. Occasionally one would turn and come into the circle, but mostly they stayed out of the circle and were in darkness.

Then, as I watched, small feet started going by with the large feet. Many of the small feet paused, turned, and came into the circle. The little feet—the children, danced with the light and were happy. I understood that the moccasin feet represented my people, and that the circle of light meant truth.¹⁴

The dream thus held out the hope that younger generations of Navajo would be more open to the gospel than the older. It inspired Neil and members of the Farmington (New Mexico) Seventh-day Adventist Church with the conviction that an Adventist mission school should be established near Crownpoint. Such a school would help meet the need she passionately expressed in her 1947 letter discussed above. At the same time, it would help bring Navajo children into the saving light of the gospel.

A setback came in 1951 when an automobile accident nearly took Neil’s life. She had just returned from Oklahoma where she had been a tribal representative at a governor’s council on the welfare of Native Americans in the Southwest. Already exhausted by this trip, she set out again, this time for Window Rock, Arizona, where she was to give a speech at tribal headquarters, and fell asleep while driving on icy roads. In a coma for 47 days after the accident, Lily fought back and gradually regained basic physical and mental capacities. Though never fully restored to her former vigor and mental clarity, Neil continued to inspire members of her Farmington Church in efforts that led to establishment of La Vida Mission in 1962 (see separate article on La Vida Mission).¹⁵

Legacy

After suffering a series of strokes, Lilakai Julian Neil died in 1961.¹⁶ She never physically saw the mission that her “circle of light” dream inspired, but La Vida Mission has continued as her living legacy. In addition to a school,

clinic, and community center, a house of worship was constructed in 1978 and later named the Lily Neil Memorial Chapel.¹⁷

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NOTES

1. "Lily Julian," *FamilySearch*, accessed November 16, 2022, <https://www.familysearch.org/tree/person/details/L15H-6XW>.
2. Orno Follett, "Our First Navajo Convert," *ARH*, February 22, 1917, 19.
3. Violet May Cummings, *Along Navajo Trails* (Washington, D.C.: Review and Herald, 1964), 10.
4. Frank W. Hardy, "Follett, Orno (1882–1960)," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, accessed November 14, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=D9AX>.

5. Barbara Starrett, "Circle of Light," Chapter 6, La Vida Mission, n.d., accessed November 16, 2022, <https://lavidam0.securelytransact.com/about/history>; Follett, "Our First Navajo Convert."
6. Starrett, "Circle of Light," Chapters 7.
7. Ibid., Chapter 8.
8. The marriage date and locale are given at "Lily Julian," *FamilySearch*, Details page but no sources are attached. Starrett, "Circle of Light," Chapter 1, identifies Neil as a "white trader" who "later became an agent for the Bureau of Indian Affairs." U.S. Census records give John's occupation variously as a garage repair man (1920), sheep owner (1930), all attached to "Lily Julian," *FamilySearch*.
9. Starrett, "Circle of Light," Chapters 7 and 8.
10. Cummings, *Along Navajo Trails*, 10-11; Donna Martinez and Jennifer L. Williams Bourdeaux, eds., *50 Events That Shaped American Indian History: An Encyclopedia of an American Mosaic* (Santa Barbara, CA: ABC-CLIO, 2017), 462; "Famous Navajo," Native-Americans.com, accessed November 17, 2022, <https://native-americans.com/category/native-american-chiefs-leaders-quotes/famous-navajo/>.
11. See, for example, Paul C. Rosier, *Serving Their Country: American Indian Politics and Patriotism in the Twentieth Century* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 2009),
12. Lilly J. Neil to General Director of Indian Education, Department of Interior, September 8, 1947, in Peter Iversen, ed., *"For Our Navajo People:" Diné Letters, Speeches & Petitions, 1906-1960* (Albuquerque: University of New Mexico Press, 2002), 103-105.
13. Starrett, "Circle of Light," Chapter 10.
14. Ibid., Chapter 1.
15. Ibid., Chapter 11; Cummings, *Along Navajo Trails*, 11, 13; Frank W. Hardy, "La Vida Mission," *Encyclopedia of Seventh-day Adventists*, January 29, 2020, accessed November 17, 2022, <https://encyclopedia.adventist.org/article?id=4CC5>.
16. "Lily Julian," at *FamilySearch*.
17. Hardy, "La Vida Mission."

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