

History does not record with certainty how peaches found their way to the canyon. But based on the theories of some archaeologists and historians, author Rose Houk offers one possibility in her book *Navajo of Canyon de Chelly, In Home God's Fields*.

She writes that Navajos from the canyon visited the Hopi villages -- where peach trees thrived following their introduction by the Spanish in the 1600s -- and returned to plant peach seeds around White House Ruins in Canyon de Chelly, and at Antelope House in Canyon del Muerto, a side canyon of de Chelly.

Aided by runoff from the Chuska Mountains, these trees flourished, as did other crops. Some have described Canyon de Chelly as the Navajos' breadbasket, for its traditional abundance of corn, wheat, alfalfa, melons, pumpkins and beans.

But National Park Service ethnohistorian Tara Travis writes that the canyon's peach orchards have been its "most notable harvest," remarked upon by travelers, writers and scientists.

When Indian agent Henry Dodge recounted his trip through the canyon for the *Santa Fe Weekly Gazette* in 1853, he described a wide, rich valley of crops, including "peaches that grow abundantly and of a superior quality."

Ten years later, the peach orchards played a key role in the US government's war with the tribe.

To drive Navajos from Canyon de Chelly and herd the tribe into exile at Fort Sumner, New Mexico, Army Col. Kit Carson ordered the peach trees destroyed, along with other crops and livestock.

In the summer of 1864, Capt. John Thompson and his men rode through the canyon, torching every peach tree they could find. In all, they destroyed some 4,000 fruit trees, including apple, pear, plum and apricot trees -- all of which the Navajos usually refer to simply as peach trees, because peaches are their favorites.

The devastation hit the Navajos hard. Not only had they lost a vital food supply, but perhaps more importantly, they'd lost a source of pride -- a living symbol of tribal independence and tradition.

"The stories of our ancestors tell us that the peach trees meant everything to the Navajo people," says 76-year-old Francis Draper, who was born in Canyon del Muerto and still operates a ranch there. "They provided to us every day, all year around."

Following the war and right up to the present, the Navajos who tend the canyon's orchards have been on a roller coaster ride between abundance and scarcity.

Houk writes that according to many Navajos, the trees had mostly regenerated by the 1890s, and by the 1930s, canyon peaches had again become highly coveted trade items, given in exchange for meat, baskets, leggings, coffee, even livestock. W.W. Hill, an early 20th-century ethnographer, noted that a sack of dried peaches was worth five sheep.

But bad economic conditions produced another decline that left the orchards fallow and neglected.

That began to change in 1986, when Colorado schoolteacher Bill Johnson, working through his nonprofit corporation, Trees for Mother Earth, began replanting fruit trees in Canyon de Chelly.

In a 15-year period prior to his death, Johnson planted an estimated 5,000 fruit trees in the canyon, and some 15,000 more in other areas around the reservation, according to Chinle resident Wanda Clark, one of Johnson's volunteers, and a founding member of a Navajo sister organization called Diné Trees of Life.

With her help, and that of Francis Draper, the canyon's orchards enjoyed a minirevival, in some places coming to the same abundance that existed before Carson.

Today, however, the pendulum has swung low once more, and Draper says that his orchards, and those of his neighbors, have fallen victim to grasshoppers. Moreover, adds Travis, writing on the National Parks Service Web site, the trees are threatened by erosion, drought and advancing exotic vegetation, problems that park managers are currently trying to solve.

But if the past is any indication, the canyon's peach trees will thrive again, and continue to stand as symbols of Navajo freedom, tradition and endurance.

"The Navajos never forgot their peach trees, and I know they will come back if we replant them the right way, and have enough water and irrigation," says Draper. "I know it. I know we will live on our peaches again." Written by Leo Banks