



SHARON HEIST

Civil War Researcher, Lecturer, Author

Born in northern Michigan, spending much of her life on the Navajo Reservation in the Four Corners of the Southwest and currently in SE Arizona, somehow she found her way to Western Massachusetts where she gained degrees in nursing and liberal arts and was then awarded a full scholarship to Smith College, graduating with a BA in Anthropology, Magna cum laude, Phi Beta Kappa, with Honors. It was her college experiences at Smith where her love of history became a true passion. Researching the small town she was in led her to the study of the Abolitionist movement, the Underground Railroad in New England and the many Black families that “didn’t exist” in the hill towns. Similarly, she became more invested in learning her own culture and history.

Once back home on the reservation, she became involved with the school system and Dine Community College, which exposed her to the joys of teaching others. She became a frequent speaker and advocate for incorporation of culture into the curriculum, as well as within the Indian Health Service, working closely with medicine men and elders to allow them to bring teaching to broader audiences. Similarly, through Bennie McRae and others she began to learn about the United States Colored Troops (USCT). The more research she did, the stronger her belief that their stories MUST be told - and so began the work that is turning into a history of the USCT, from the voices of the people who were there, soldiers, slaves, men and women, North and South. The work drives her to learn all she can about them, through their letters and deeds, genealogical records, military records, newspapers and family histories, in order to bring them to life so that others may be inspired to add to that knowledge and pass it on, in ever-widening ripples until the truth can no longer be denied.

She is also a seamstress and quilter, first learning to sew at age four and currently adding reproduction clothing to her interests. (Okay, it’s really a way to indulge her love for fine fabrics-laces, velvet, satin...)

This winter, she and Bennie McRae will publish their combined research on the myth of the Black Confederate, and she hopes to also be finalizing a volume on the Department of the South.

Sharon serves on several Boards, including the United States Colored Troops Living History Association, Arctic to Amazonia, The Power of Changing Woman (Navajo) and is a frequent speaker on the USCT in the Civil War, Native American history, reproduction clothing from the 1840’s to 1890’s, and the Black Regulars during the Indian Wars. She is also a consultant for several tribes, schools and individuals. When not otherwise occupied, she will be found at home in her beloved mountains, exploring cemeteries, historic sites and used bookstores or being able to cook and bake for friends - or possibly doing a mean two-step or tango.