

We Lived in Colorado

by Penny Randell

When considering the state of Colorado, it is momentous to recognize all the American Native Indians who have lived here since the Stone Age. As implied, the Stone Age meant there were only stone tools and weapons with no horses, nor knowledge of the wheel. Original inhabitants of what is now known as Colorado include the Apache, Arapaho, Cheyenne, and Ute nations, as well as the Pueblo and Shoshone tribes. Other Native American nations such as the Comanche, Kiowa, and Navajo often extended their territory into Colorado. Today the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain tribes are the only federally recognized tribes in Colorado.

Native Indians sought out Colorado because of its natural raw materials. Such offerings provided food, clothing, and housing pretty much for their taking. However, the history and way of life for these Natives was seriously stunted by European explorers that appeared as early as 1682. Indeed, the search for gold and silver spurred continual efforts to procure treasures plentiful in Colorado. This European occupation brought epidemics of diseases that the Natives had not developed immunities against, which resulted in huge losses in the overall Native population. Too, tax levies, enforced labor and enslavement lessened their numbers greatly.

Taking an in-depth account, we begin with the Apache nation. Bands of these Indians often extended their raids over Colorado territory, yet only one of these sub-groups, the Jicarilla, were considered permanent occupants of the State. Other Apaches hunted and engaged in war over parts of Eastern Colorado. It is believed that these tribes were originally Athabaskan from Canada who had traveled southward by way of the Rocky Mountains. It was not until the early eighteenth century that the Apache first received mention under their own name.

Arapaho Natives hunted and turned to war in Eastern Colorado as well, taking advantage of the plains both here and in Wyoming. They were considered allies of the Cheyenne tribe, and were somewhat linked to the Lakota and Dakota. No longer residents of this State, the Arapahoe bands once formed two tribes: The Northern and Southern Arapahoe. Beginning in 1878 the Northern tribe has lived with the Eastern Shoshone on the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. The Southern Arapaho live with the Southern Cheyenne in Oklahoma.

Much of Arapaho society was based on the warrior, for most young men eagerly sought this role. After horses were introduced to Colorado, these fighters became masters of such and accessed the horse for protection and a way to keep the peace in their own camps. Horses were often painted for spiritual empowerment, along with their riders' own faces and bodies. Bird feathers, especially eagle feathers, were worn during war as symbols of prestige and honor. Unlike their Cheyenne, Lakota, and Dakota partners, the Arapaho military societies were chosen according to age. They were also known to fight with the Pawnee against American forces, although eventually being driven out of Colorado.

One of the oldest cultures in the nation belongs to the Pueblo Indians. They are believed to be the descendants of three major cultures including the Mogollon, Hohokam, and Ancient Puebloans with history dating back 7000 years. These people evolved from a nomadic, hunter-gathering lifestyle to securing homes in the Four Corners region of Colorado, as well as New Mexico, Utah, and Arizona. Never truly abandoning their skill for hunting, they did expand into an agricultural

existence and even designed complex irrigation systems. They were considered advanced in many ways, especially in their building of apartment-like structures.

Besides this, they have long been known for their superb baskets and pottery.

Pueblo Indians are recognized for living in a clan system. They shared their land and homes with other tribes that all descended matrilineally. It was the women who owned the house, as well as the garden and all foods. Because of this, Pueblo women gained more respect than those of other Colorado tribes of the time. Nonetheless, these particular Natives lived in peril, for prior to European invasion, their traditional enemies were the Navajo, Comanche, and Apache tribes.

The Ute people have lived in what is now Colorado and Utah for centuries. In addition to their home regions in these States, they traveled great distances to Wyoming, Oklahoma, and New Mexico for hunting as well as to what they considered to be sacred land. Within these lands the Utes celebrated spiritual and ceremonial practices. Generally staying in family groups for hunting and gathering, they often met with other Native American tribes for these ceremonies and for trading. After contacting early Euro-Americans, they traded with them, too. By 1300 these Indians had settled into southwestern Colorado and southeastern Utah. Three hundred years later the Utes occupied much of what is present-day Colorado where they continued their hunter-gatherer lifestyle.

After the Ute acquired horses from the Spanish, their lifestyle changed greatly. Everything, including their tribal organization, was altered as they became adept horsemen and warriors. Raiding other tribes became common and their numbers increased. Prestige was based upon the number of horses owned and the ability to ride. They even practiced horse racing and were known to be excellent horsemen. However, once gold prospectors settled into Colorado, they lost most of their ancestral territory. Treaties were eventually instigated, allowing them to hold on to some of their land.

Today a walk in the woods often means discovery of a bent or twisted ponderosa pine tree that is not a work of nature. It is believed that Ute Indians used ropes made from natural fibers to bend limbs, altering them into different positions to create "prayer trees." Such trees are culturally modified for various reasons, including for burial posts. Knowledge of trees, the land in general and which crops to plant was passed on to the white man. The Ute helped the newcomers and aided in their overall success here in Colorado.

Upon researching such history and the American Natives, it becomes clear that the Natives were instrumental in the White Man's success in Colorado. Having lived here for centuries, the Natives became familiar with all the land and passed their knowledge onto us. We should forever be grateful for such and honor these pioneering people.