

Get Wild: Colorado's Trail of Tears

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A procession of Utes leaves Delta for a reservation in Utah.

Grand County Historical Association/Courtesy photo

The Ute Indians lived in Colorado's mountains for more than 10,000 years, wintering at lower elevations and traveling up to higher places like the Blue River Valley in the summer to enjoy the abundance of wildlife, fish and wild plants.

What do we know about those early summertime visitors here? Not much.

The native Utes had a long oral history but not a written language, and early European explorers and settlers left few written records of their encounters with the native inhabitants. Thus, in the first half of the 19th century, as U.S. and Spanish adventurers encroached into lands to the south and west, provoking increasing conflicts with the Ute bands who lived in those regions, the Blue River valley retained for a time its primeval character.

The 1850s in particular must have been a special decade of summer repose for the local Ute bands, the Parianuche and Yamparika (now called White River) Utes. Utah was granted U.S. territorial status in 1850 (before Colorado), and its eastern border extended all the way to the Continental Divide, meaning that today's Summit County was under Utah's jurisdiction. However, the Utah government's thin resources led to an absence of government intrusions, and Ute summers in the Blue River valley continued virtually untouched for a decade more.

Imagine the lives of the White River Utes, spending their winters at lower elevations on the Colorado and Yampa Rivers, and doubtless hearing of the growing strife to the west and south as settlers, traders and prospectors pressed in from the U.S. and Mexico. How they must have longed for their summer visits to the tranquil, verdant mountain valleys of today's Summit County. Many of us feel that way today, finding unflinching renewal and escape from the pressures of daily life in the exquisite natural beauty of Summit County.

Alas, the sanctuary was not to last for the Utes, as the 1860s brought rapid changes. In 1861, Colorado became a territory and a stage road was surveyed through Middle Park. In 1862, the Middle Park Indian Agency was established and the Homestead Act was passed, which increased pressure from outside agriculture, mining and commercial interests.


The pressure just kept building. In 1863, 13 Utes, led by Chief Ouray, were escorted to Washington, D.C., where they were compelled to sign a treaty that relinquished all lands east of the Continental Divide plus Middle Park. Many Utes didn't accept the treaty. Chief Colorow, who later lived in a cabin on the Lower Blue River, was a leader of the resistance.

The year 1868 was a milestone, as the U.S. convinced some Utes to move to a reservation; others balked. Founded on high-sounding principles (“[a mixture of benevolent humanitarianism and the conviction that the dominant agrarian culture was superior to anything indigenous people possessed](#)”), the practical application was quite different and perhaps best expressed by General of the Army William Tecumseh Sherman: “They will have to freeze and starve a little more, I reckon, before they will listen to common sense.” Sherman even encouraged the extinction of the buffalo as a means to force the Utes to move to reservations.

Matters deteriorated steadily, culminating in early September 1881, when 1,500 Utes, including Colorow’s followers, began a heartbreaking 200-mile trek west to the reservation under armed escort by U.S. soldiers. It was Colorado’s own version of the Cherokee’s Trail of Tears or the Navajo’s Long Walk. Within a year, settlers founded towns like Grand Junction, Montrose and Glenwood Springs, and thus this ancestral homeland of the Utes was obliterated.



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“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Bill Betz is a board member of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit EagleSummitWilderness.org.

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