**Those Who Came Before**

CDT hikers traverse ancient lands of a dozen Native American tribes from Apache in the southern border to Blackfeet and Nez Perce in the north. Systematically, they were removed from their lands by conquest and coerced into “treaties” and reservations. Often, these treaties were broken by white invaders and the government would scramble to offer a pittance to further reduce reservation lands yet again. More injustices followed with assimilation policies and immoral suppression of Native American culture. It is a long sordid history, but my aim today is to take a brief look back at the Utes who occupied the mountains of Colorado.

The Utes creation story says they have always been here thanks to the Creator who gave Coyote a bag of sticks and directed him to carry them forth. Coyote opened the bag, and people flew out including the Utes. Scholars believe the Utes probably arrived in what is now Colorado and surrounding states by 1500 AD, migrating from Uto-Aztecan ancestors in the Great Basin. They occupied the mountains and valleys of Colorado. As hunter-gatherers, their numbers were always low and they lived lightly on the land. They warred against nearby plains tribes, notably the Arapaho and Cheyenne. They fought over hunting territory, horses and slaves. The Utes were buffalo hunters and were among the first to trade for and domesticate wild horses descended from the Spanish from what is now New Mexico. This gave them an early advantage in hunting buffalo and warring against other tribes.

Colorado first saw white Spanish explorers followed by early white explorers and mountain men who trapped out beaver in the first half of the 19th century. Their numbers were few and had little impact on the tribes other than introducing the fur and alcohol trade. Whites also introduced European diseases unknown to the tribes including smallpox and venereal disease.

Gold miners arrived in Colorado in 1858 mining the banks of the South Platte near what is now Denver. Soon, the miners moved into the mountains seeking the source of the gold. The miners skirmished with all the tribes, seeking land to farm on the plains and gold in the mountains. Early gold district towns were founded in Central City, Cripple Creek, Leadville (silver), Lake City, Creede, and Silverton, to name just a few. As the mining towns grew, whites chopped down the forests for timbers for the mines and built homes and burned fuel those homes and mills. The sheer numbers of whites grew quickly and the government responded with awful massacres like Sand Creek and Meeker.

On the CDT near Marshall Pass, is Mt. Ouray 13,971’ and nearby Chipeta, 13,472’. Born in 1883, Ouray was a [Native American](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Native_Americans_in_the_United_States) [chief](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tribal_chief) of the [Tabeguache](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ute_people#Northern_Ute_Tribe_(Uinta_Utes)) (Uncompahgre) band of the [Ute tribe](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ute_Tribe), located in western [Colorado](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Colorado). Chipeta was his wife. He became a chief when the Utes claimed all of the Colorado mountains. (Incidentally, Mount Antero, Mount Shavano, Uncompahgre Peak and Tabeguache Peak - all 14ers, and Weminuche Wilderness are named after Ute Chiefs or Bands, and Pikes Peak was a sacred ceremonial place named *Tavakiev*, by the Utes. It means Sun Mountain). Mt. Blue Sky was recently renamed with consultation from the tribes from Mt. Evans governor of Colorado Territory who supported the Sand Creek Massacre and Ute suppression. Most of these high peaks crowd the CDT.

Because of his leadership ability, Ouray was acknowledged by the [United States government](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/United_States_government) as a chief of the Utes and he traveled to Washington, D.C. to negotiate for the welfare of the Utes. Raised in the culturally diverse town of [Taos](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Taos%2C_New_Mexico), Ouray learned to speak many languages that helped him in the negotiations with the whites. He carried a burden of grief over the loss of his five-year-old son who was abducted during an attack by the Sioux. During active mining and after the Civil War, some Ute leaders, including[**Chief Ouray**](https://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/ouray), agreed to the[**Treaty of 1868**](http://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/ute-treaty-1868). This founded a reservation that covered nearly all of Colorado west of the [**Continental Divide**](https://coloradoencyclopedia.org/article/great-divide)**.** Later treaties forced by miners resulted in ever smaller reservations on poorer lands.

I am attracted to Ouray because in some ways, he reminds me of my father who was born in Colorado about 40 years after Ouray’s death. Not that I ever knew Ouray of course; what I know is mostly white historians’ views of him. Ouray was a charismatic leader with great integrity, as was my Dad. Like Ouray, my dad was physically imposing, and others looked to him for leadership. People idolized my dad because he was an FBI agent, something of a novelty in those days. Besides that, he had Lakota Sioux ancestry, and made or had made several authentic regalia, replete with an eagle feather head-dress and bustle. He made a full-size tipi and tanned a cowhide for Indian drums. He took every opportunity to show off the costume and educate us all about Indians.

I want to share a story of his eagle feathers. When we lived in Wyoming near the Wind River Indian Reservation, the local fish and game officer found some dead golden eagles, apparently electrocuted on a powerline and, knowing my Dad was part Indian and federal law enforcement, brought him the carcasses. It is illegal for people other than Native Americans to possess eagle parts, so Dad called the federal magistrate who told him he could have them since he was on the rolls of the tribe in South Dakota. Instead, Dad donated them to Arapaho Indian friends on the Reservation who seemed glad to have them. Months later, to his surprise, they returned with a beautiful eagle head-dress and bustle they had crafted as gifts to him. Dad initially refused them, but the federal magistrate said to take them. In a way, I think he kept them to help educate people about Native Americans. When Dad passed, I initially loaned the eagle items and tipi to the Koshare Kiva (a renowned Indian museum in La Junta). A couple of years later, I found out they were just in storage, so I reclaimed them and donated them to some Cheyenne and Lakota Indian dancers who were performing locally. So, I closed the loop and repatriated them to Native Americans after nearly 50 years. I still have the rest of his regalia. My dad introduced me to camping in the Colorado mountains. As a family we traveled to Colorado every year where I fell in love with the mountains, forests and streams - places Ouray loved also.

Ouray was a man of keen perceptions and a talented diplomat, a negotiator and a peacekeeper; many believe Ouray was the greatest of all chiefs. He met with Presidents Lincoln, Grant, and Hayes and was called a man of peace because he sought to make treaties with settlers and the government. Ouray traveled Colorado by foot and wagon and by the early railroads in several visits to Washington D.C. Imagine his impressions of the train, the armies and the cities he visited even though he was himself somewhat worldly for an Indian. He saw Colorado become a state in 1876. Following the [Meeker Massacre](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Meeker_Massacre) (White River War) of 1879, he traveled in 1880 to [Washington, D.C.](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Washington%2C_D.C.) He tried to secure a treaty for the [Uncompahgre Ute](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Uncompahgre_Ute), who wanted to stay in Colorado; but, the following year, the United States forced the Uncompahgre and the White River Utes to [reservations](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Indian_reservations) in present-day [Utah](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Utah). At the end of a long, bitter struggle for the Mountain Utes, Ouray died shortly after in 1880. Miners and railroads had poured into Leadville, Salida, Creede, Lake City, and Silverton and were transforming the landscape. Like the bison, his people were all but gone from the state. Probably he was heartbroken. Ouray had a farm near Montrose on the Uncompahgre River at the Second Los Pinos Agency. He is buried in the cemetery in Ignacio.

Being part Native American, I often wonder what it was like to have your land and home stripped from you by invaders who slaughter you with guns and disease, don’t honor their own treaties, starve you from promised rations, and ship survivors away like cattle. I can’t help comparing Ouray with Martin Luther King Jr. Both were charismatic leaders of color who suffered hate with grace and preached non-violence. Ouray was not assassinated, but there was a constant threat on his life. Both died at a time of greatest despair for their people. Whereas Black Americans gained the vote in 1870, it took another 44 years for Native Americans to gain that right. Thinking of the history of this land makes for a somber, but richer hike. The scope of change on the landscape and lifestyle that has occurred in the century and a half since Ouray’s time is simply breathtaking. Our lives and landscape today would strain his imagination and mostly not in a good way.

Colorado’s population in Ouray’s time was estimated to be around 30,000-50,000 in 1865; Utes numbered only a few thousand. Our population was about 1.3 million when I was born and currently is just shy of 6 million, growing nearly five-fold in my lifetime. Prior to the pandemic, Colorado had the second fastest growth rate in the country of 1.85% which doubles every 37 years. At this rate, my children could see 12 million in the state and I shudder to think about my grand-children. Ouray would be appalled at a 150-mile-long megalopolis stretching from Cheyenne to Pueblo and every mountain valley filled with development. That kind of growth rate is unsustainable from an airshed, climate and watershed standpoint; our snowpack, forests, wildlife and ski areas will deteriorate. Our public lands, if they even survive, will be even more degraded by oil and gas development, grazing, overcrowding, motorized vehicles, logging and mining. Coloradoans will have to put the brakes on growth if we want to preserve the qualities we enjoy in our state. Ouray and his people lived in a time of a small, stable population that, included occasionally burning the forest to make it more productive, and was in harmony with the environment. We could take a lesson from that.

When you hike the CDT, Colorado Trail, when you ski or camp or hunt or fish or raft the rivers, remember the Utes who came before.

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Bio

Karl is part Lakota Sioux, an environmental scientist and Triple Crowner. He teaches wilderness skills for the Colorado Mountain Club and has served on the board of Wild Connections, a conservation non-profit in Colorado. He completed the CT twice and noted significant mortality in 2021 compared to 17 years prior. He is author of *Triple Crown Hiking Adventures* and the *Colorado Trail in Crisis* noted above. He has written for the Pacific Crest Trail Association, the Appalachian Trail Conservancy and the American Long Distance Hikers Association West. He speaks about climate change and long-distance hiking.