

FIRST DRAFT

Historic mountain pass remains important to Ute tribes of today

In 1912, 75 Ute Indians rode into Manitou Springs to dedicate and bless the Ute Trail and Ute Pass, with the support of white citizens of the town. The trail connected Colorado's Front Range with South Park and the San Luis Valley.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

This month, a portion of that ride was re-enacted by Ute leaders. The trail and springs at Manitou were rededicated and given fresh blessings.

Ute Pass and Ute Trail have an important history that long predates the 1912 ceremony or the recent rededication, however.

In 1820, Maj. Stephen Long, a topographical engineer for the U.S. Army, noted that "a large and much frequented road passes the springs (in what is now Manitou Springs) and enters the mountains," to the north of Pikes Peak. It was used by both Indians and migrating bison, he said. Historian Celinda R. Kaelin said the trail "was of great importance to the Ute Indians as it was one of their major 'salt roads.'"

It connected the salt beds in South Park to the trading centers at Taos and Santa Fe, she wrote.

Moreover, the trail was likely used for thousands of years prior to the 19th century. Prehistoric projectile points from 10,000 years ago have been found at the Florissant Fossil Beds on the west side of Ute Pass.

When the Utes rode down the trail in 1912, they "sang, laughed and whooped with great joy," as they approached Manitou Springs, according to a plaque near the eastern end of the trail.

There was also singing, drumming, prayer and laughter on Oct. 9, 2022, as leaders from the Southern Utes, Ute Mountain Utes and the Ute Tribe in Utah gathered, along with officials from the city of Manitou Springs and nearby communities.

They met to rededicate the trail and to offer blessings at one of the many springs in Manitou. It was also an opportunity, in recognition of Indigenous Peoples Day on Oct. 10, to welcome Utes back to Manitou Springs, said the town's mayor, John Graham, in a proclamation he read to the gathering.

Kenny Frost, a Southern Ute, a Native American consultant, Ute historian and expert on sacred sites, said his great-grandfather, Chief Nanice, was a Ute leader of the Utespated in the 1912 ride and trail dedication. He was a powerful leader for all the Utes, Frost said.

However, because he spoke only Ute, not English, he wasn't named by the U.S. government as a Ute chief, as were Ouray and Buckskin Charley.

Even so, Nanice took part in the 1912 dedication because, "The springs here were sacred to the Ute people," Frost said.

So, too, were nearby Garden of the Gods and Pikes Peak.

In fact, Frost said, it is time to change the name of Pikes Peak to Tava or Deva, a shortened version of the Ute phrase meaning "where the sun comes up."



FROM A HIGHWAY INFORMATION PLAQUE NEAR THE TOP OF UTE PASS

Ute tribal members ride down the Ute Trail toward Manitou Springs to dedicate the trail in 1912.

"Zebulon Pike never made it to the top of that mountain," Frost explained.

He also suggested that Lookout Mountain near Denver be renamed in honor of Chief Colorow, who stopped there frequently with his Ute band while traveling to the Front Range.

Jonas Grant Bullethead, a member of the Ute Tribe in Utah and a historian of the Johnson-White River and Bullethead families, said he learned during the weekend ceremonies in Manitou Springs just how important the Ute Trail was for his ancestors.

"It was one of the main trails they used to get from the plains to the mountains."

He also gained new information about the sacred nature of Pikes Peak and Manitou Springs to the Utes.

Christopher Tabbee, an Uncompahgre Ute representative on the Ute Tribal Council in Fort Duchesne, Utah, said he hoped that "a lot of our tribal people who don't know about this trail and these springs can come here now and see them."

He added, "Everybody here is sharing in the blessing," including more than 100 non-Indians who attended the Oct. 9 ceremonies.

Tabbee noted that his ancestors worked hard "to keep this trail open for war and to hunt buffalo."

They had to work hard because enemy plains tribes frequently tried to take over the trail.

Colorado Springs pioneer Irving Howbert said that every spring for generations, Indian tribes from the plains tried to gain control of the rich grasslands in South Park. When they encountered Utes, there were inevitable battles, "with success generally on the side of the Utes, who were better fighters."

Kit Carson witnessed a great battle between the Utes and Comanches in a meadow near Florissant, about 30 miles west of Manitou Springs, in 1852.

In 1779, Utes used the trail and pass to lead then-Spanish Gov. Juan Bautista de Anza, of New Mexico, and his Army onto the plains near present-day Pueblo, where the Spanish defeated a large band of Comanches under Chief Cuerno Verde.

In addition, according to Kaelin, "Colorado's Ute Indians jealously guarded their buffalo trail to South Park, building a series of small, circular forts of rough rock, without mortar, and about chest high throughout the Pike's Peak backcountry."

Ute Pass and the Ute



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

Southern Ute Tribal Member Kenny Frost rides down a portion of the Ute Trail near Manitou Springs on Oct. 9 in a partial re-enactment of the 1912 ride. Christopher Tabbee, a member of the Ute Tribal Council from Fort Duchesne, Utah, walks with him. Other Utes follow behind.



BOB SILBERNAGEL/Special to the Sentinel

Utes bless the trail and nearby hot springs in Manitou Springs on Oct. 9. Left to right: Joy Grant Bullethead; Jonas Grant Bullethead; John Grant Bullethead; Leallen Blackhair; unidentified Ute woman; Kenny Frost.

Trail were used most by the Ute bands who lived closest to the region, the Tabeguache and Moache. The Tabeguache later became known as the Uncompahgre Utes after treaty requirements pushed them from the San Luis Valley to the Western Slope.

In the winter of 1874-75, Chief Ouray and a band of 600 Tabeguache Utes camped in the meadows near Florissant for several months, said Kaelin.

But once they acquired horses, all of the Ute bands were known to travel great distances — south to New Mexico, Oklahoma, Texas and even Mexico; east into Kansas and Nebraska; north to Wyoming, the Dakotas and parts of Idaho; west through Utah to Nevada and California.

And members of all the bands were believed to have journeyed over Ute Pass on occasion.

By the time of the 1912 ride and dedication, Native combat in the region had ended. The Utes had been moved onto two small reservations in Colorado and larger ones in Utah.

Gold and silver miners enlarged the Ute Trail and Ute Pass to make it a wagon road to mining districts, begin-

ning in the 1860s.

The Colorado Midland Railroad built a line over Ute Pass in the late 1880s to serve the mining district near Cripple Creek.

And, by the 1930s, the railroad was replaced by U.S. Highway 24, by which modern travelers can journey from Manitou Springs, over Ute Pass and into South Park.

But the Utes haven't forgotten the route that was so important to their ancestors.

"Our people are here today to bless this trail and springs," Frost declared, "because our Ute people today are still strong and proud."

Sources: Author interviews with Kenny Frost and Jonas Grant Bullethead; "An Account of An Expedition from Pittsburgh to the Rocky Mountains," by Major Stephen H. Long; "Ute Pass History," by Ute Pass Historical Society at www.utepasshistoricalsociety.org.

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