

FIRST DRAFT

PAPER TRAIL

New book explores early travel history in western Colorado

Travel routes across the Western Slope developed centuries ago, then slowly evolved into our modern ground transportation system, and the Ute Indians were critical in developing the system we now use in western Colorado.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

"The Utes laid the groundwork" with an extensive trail system they established in Colorado even before they acquired horses in the early 17th century, said historian and author David P. Bailey.

Bailey is a historian and writer specializing in western Colorado history. He served as history curator at the Museum of the West, a division of the Museums of Western Colorado, for 28 years. Bailey wrote the documentary "Distant Treasures in the Mist." He has served as a documentary film presenter and consultant with organizations such as National Geographic, the History Channel, the Travel Channel, the Mysteries of the Museum television series, and the BBC.

His latest book, "Navigating Western Colorado: Early Expeditions and the Birth of Transportation on the Frontier," was published by The History Press and released this month.

The books traces the development of Ute trails into trapper pathways and of horse trails into the first wagon roads across western Colorado. It also explores how the Utes lived prior to the arrival of horses, then after they acquired horses. Additionally, it examines Spanish and American explorers, military expeditions and people's life on the trails.

Mountain men expanded on the Utes' trail systems by widening and improving many of the trails so they could better move their pack horses and mules, which carried furs to trade and supplies to sustain them in the backcountry, Bailey said.

They were followed by explorers who began turning the trails into roads for wagons and carts, people like Capt. John Gunnison and Col. William Loring. Others, like Edward Beale and his journalist cousin Gwinn Harris Heap, produced narratives, drawings and maps.

The Utes' eagerness to trade with the Spanish and Mexicans from New Mexico, and later the Americans, allowed the Euro-Americans to move through this region relatively unmolested. It wasn't until the outsiders began making permanent settlements here that conflicts erupted.

"The Utes were a powerhouse in the region" when Europeans first arrived and into the late 19th century, Bailey said. "They could probably have destroyed Santa Fe if they'd wanted to. But they wanted to trade."

They sought guns, ammunition, metal goods, beads, tobacco and certain types of food that were unavailable to them in their mountain homes.

In exchange, they offered their famous tanned deer and elk hides, plus furs and meats. Occasionally, they sold Indian slaves they'd captured and then taken to Santa Fe or places where fur traders and emigrants congregated.

Horses and mules were also trade items, but in the early years of Spanish occupation of New Mexico, Spaniards were forbidden from trading them to Natives. But the Spanish inadvertently fostered the Ute horse culture by forcing Ute servants and slaves to care for their horses.

By the late 17th century, the Utes had acquired enough horses to have substantial herds of



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A drawing of the Lake Fork of the Gunnison River by Gwinn Harris Heap, who was part of the Edward Beale expedition across western Colorado in 1853. Heap, who was Beale's cousin, published a journal of the expedition in 1854, complete with a map and his drawings of various locations during the journey. The drawing on the cover of David Bailey's book is also one of Heap's.



PUBLIC DOMAIN THROUGH WIKIMEDIA COMMONS

Portrait of John Gunnison, a member of the U.S. Army's Corps of Topographical Engineers, who led an 1853 expedition that brought the first wagons across western Colorado.

their own. They traded them to other Native groups, to Europeans and Americans. In the process, they introduced the Spanish, Mexicans and Americans to their vast trail network in western Colorado, eastern Utah and parts of eastern Colorado.

One of the most important north-south trails ran from northeastern New Mexico, into Colorado's San Luis Valley, then over Cochetopa Pass to the Gunnison Valley, then west to the Uncompahgre Valley and north to the Grand Valley.

"Cochetopa was so important" in the early days of Spanish and American exploration of the region, Bailey noted. It was a relatively gentle pass over the Continental Divide, where winter snows were generally light.

Antoine Robidoux used Cochetopa Pass to carry trade goods from Santa Fe and Taos to his trading posts, Fort Uncompahgre near today's Delta, and Fort Robidoux in eastern Utah.

Decades later, when Americans sought a middle route for a transcontinental railroad, Cochetopa Pass and the trails to the Grand Valley attracted multiple exploring expeditions.

John Fremont made several

trips through parts of Colorado, including one in 1853 looking for a railroad route. But he was late in that regard.

Capt. John Gunnison of the Army Corps of Topographical Engineers began his expedition across Kansas, Colorado and Utah early in 1853, searching for a rail route to the Pacific. Accompanying him were 18 wagons, the first known to cross western Colorado, including an instrument cart that had an early version of an odometer called a viameter, Bailey said.

Paiute Indians killed Gunnison in western Utah in October 1853. His second-in-command, Lt. Edward Beckwith, completed the journey and the expedition report.

Edward Beale was a former U.S. Navy officer traveling west to become the commissioner of Indian Affairs in California. He agreed to take the Cocetopa Pass route to assess it as a possible railroad route.

In 1854, Beale's cousin Heap published the expedition's journal as a book called "Central Route to the Pacific." It was popular with the public and encouraged people to travel here. It contained a detailed map and Heap's drawings from the journey.

In 1858, Col. William Loring

chose a similar route when he built a wagon road for the Army from Camp Floyd on the west side of Utah Lake to Fort Union in northeastern New Mexico.

Bailey's book includes information on the clothes the explorers wore, the weapons they carried and the food they ate, such as the dried potatoes carried by the Loring expedition, an early version of today's dehydrated potatoes.

"I want readers to take away a sense of excitement and discovery from this," he said. "I hope they will want to know about how people lived, and the endurance they had."

That endurance was displayed when members of the Gunnison expedition disconnected their horses and mules from their wagons while traveling near the Black Canyon of the Gunnison.

"The Gunnison Expedition's soldiers and civilian employees had to lock the wagon wheels and hoist and lower the wagons with ropes," Bailey wrote. "They were forced to carry the wagons and the ambulance surrey wagon over sections of extremely rough terrain."

"Can you imagine doing that?" Bailey asked later.

Bailey said he conceived

the idea of the book with the intention that it would be ready for this year's sesquicentennial. "I knew there were books planned for the Front Range, but I wanted something for the Western Slope."

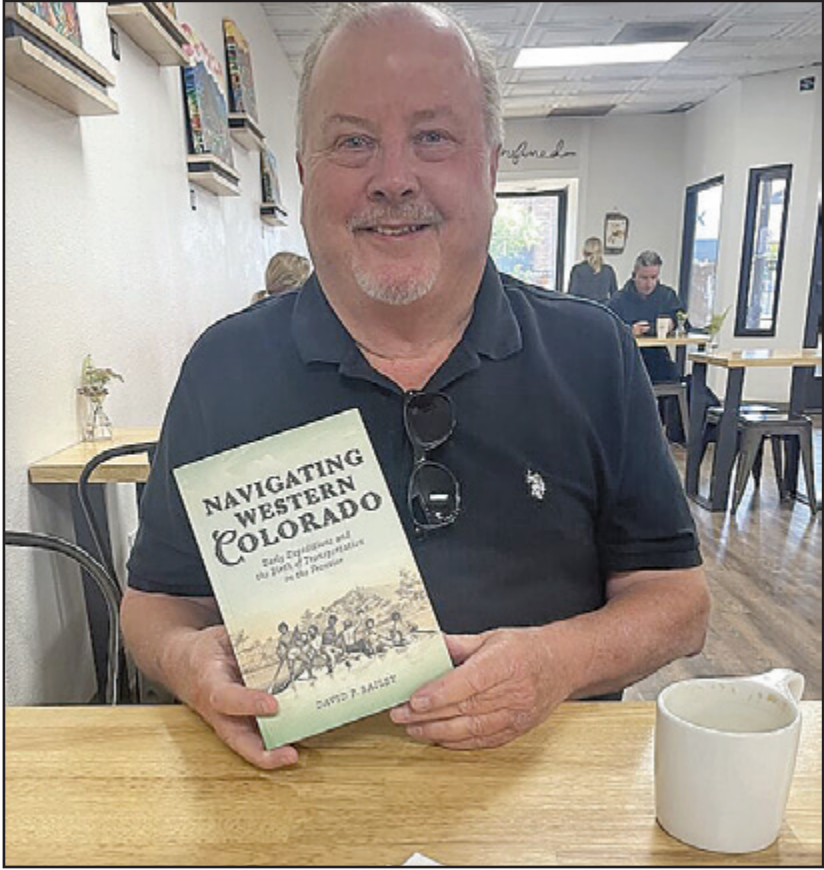
He said he spent about four years conducting research for the book, often accompanied by his wife, Debbie. "It was fun," he said. "We went to a lot of the places I wrote about," including Santa Fe, Abiquiu and the Chama Valley, in New Mexico, and following several early Ute trails through Colorado. They traveled over Cochetopa Pass and along parts of another north-south trail that began near today's Durango.

Bailey also reviewed Spanish, Mexican and American documents and maps in places such as Santa Fe and Monterey, California.

"Navigating Western Colorado" is available at the Museums of Western Colorado, Grand Valley Books, Out West Books and Barnes & Noble in Grand Junction, and Lithic Books in Fruita.

Sources: Author interview with David Bailey; "Navigating Western Colorado," by David P. Bailey.

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BOB SILBERNAGEL

David Bailey holds a copy of his latest book, "Navigating Western Colorado: Early Expeditions and the Birth of Transportation on the Frontier."