

FIRST DRAFT

Colorado Wickiup Project suggests revision of state's history is much needed

The long-accepted version of Colorado history is that Ute Indians from the state's Uncompahgre and White River bands left Colorado in 1881, when they were pushed out of their long-held homeland and forced onto the Uintah-Ouray reservation in northeastern Utah.

That event certainly occurred, but there is growing evidence that not all the Utes in those two bands left the state in 1881. Some may have lived as inconspicuously as possible in their beloved "Shining Mountains."

"Over half the sites we've firmly dated (using tree-ring data) are post-1881," said Curtis Martin, principal investigator with the Colorado Wickiup Project, a group of researchers who have spent the past decade examining the remnants of old Ute wickiups and other wooden structures throughout north-central Colorado.

Wickiups were small wooden shelters made by standing tree limbs together in a conical pattern and covering them with brush. Some were free-standing and some were built leaning against an existing tree or rock formation. Most were much smaller than the hide-covered tepees that were adopted from Plains Indians. "Think of them as a bedroom, with just enough room for a man and his wife and their dog," said Martin.

The researchers have examined wooden Ute structures from the Uncompahgre Plateau to Rocky Mountain National Park, with many in the Colorado River and Piceance basins.

It's long been known that Utes from Utah made seasonal visits to this region of Colorado well after white settlement occurred. Newspapers such as The Daily Sentinel regularly reported on the activity of the visiting Utes.

But the research by the Wickiup Project indicates many of the Utes in Colorado were more than seasonal visitors, well into the 20th century.

"We have some in the Piceance Basin that we dated to 1914 and 1916," Martin said. "This blew our minds, because as archaeologists we were always taught that if we had a Ute site, it was dated somewhere between 1500 and 1881."

Not all the examined sites are that recent. One dated to 1795. And one, which Daily Sentinel photographer Chris Tomlinson and I visited with the Wickiup Project team earlier this month, was occupied sometime between 1800 and 1860, Martin said. There is no tree-ring data for this site, but metal arrowheads and a metal awl found by researchers John Lindstrom, Holly Shelton and Martin, as well as by earlier research teams, give archaeologists a reasonable time frame for when it was used.

Holly Shelton and Curtis Martin of the Colorado Wickiup Project, document the remains of a wickiup set against a juniper tree earlier this month.

CHRISTOPHER TOMLINSON/
The Daily Sentinel



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John Lindstrom, of the Colorado Wickiup Project, examines a fire ring earlier this month.

TIPS ON WICKIUPS

If you find what you believe are wickiups or other Ute structures while exploring:

1. DO NOT disturb any of the items.
2. Photograph the items if you have a camera.
3. Determine the approximate location on a map. If you have GPS, locate as accurately as possible.
4. Contact the public lands agency on which the site is located. (If on private property, and you have the landowner's approval, contact members of Colorado Wickiup Project).
5. Contact members of the Wickiup Project through Dominquez Archaeological Research Group, Inc. at Grand River Institute, 245-7868.

The metal indicates the Utes already were trading with Europeans or Americans, but that didn't occur on a large scale in this region until trading posts began to spring up in the early 19th century. And the metal arrowheads suggest it wasn't much later than 1860, because after that time, Utes had largely abandoned their bows and arrows in favor of guns.

Most of the more recent sites, and many from before 1881, are well removed from major trails and large water sources.

"From the Utes, we've learned a lot about these structures," Martin said. "We also learned how Ute settlement patterns changed after European contact and particularly after 1881. They moved away from rivers and trails."

The Colorado Wickiup Project is an effort of the Dominquez Archaeological Research Group, which is a nonprofit organization associated with the Grand River Institute, a private archaeological business in Grand Junction.

The Wickiup Project receives funding primarily from the



CURTIS MARTIN/Special to The Sentinel

A researcher holds a metal arrowhead found at a wickiup site earlier this month.

Colorado Historical Society State Historical Fund and federal agencies such as the Bureau of Land Management, the U.S. Forest Service and the National Park Service.

"Everything we do, we do in conjunction with the Utes," Martin added. His group primarily has worked with Ute cultural experts from the Ute Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation in Utah.

The project began when Carl Connor, owner of Grand River Institute, decided to create the nonprofit organization, which could conduct archaeological work purely for research purposes.

The researchers in the Wickiup Project began by examining archaeological reports the state of Colorado has that listed some 200 known wickiups. Then, each summer, they began conducting fieldwork to examine the sites listed in the reports. They found many of them weren't the remnants of actual wickiups, but were small lean-to shelters used for storage, or single tree branches positioned for hanging clothes and other items. There were also tree platforms, mostly used for storage or hunting, but in one case, for holding a body. And there were brush fences used to corral livestock or funnel wildlife to hunters.

All of those structures together are now known by the awkward term "Ephemeral Aboriginal Wooden Features." The sites where they exist are being mapped with GPS, and the structures documented and described. Artifacts are recorded and described. Information about them is provided to the public lands agencies where the structures mostly remain, to the Museum of Western Colorado and to the Ute Indians. They are helping all of us to better understand the people who lived in this part of Colorado for many centuries before white settlers arrived. And to realize that some of the Utes stayed here long after white communities had been established.

Have a history question or column idea for Bob? Email Bob. Silbernagel@gjsentinel.com.

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