

COLORADO INDIANS

OVERVIEW

The American explorers and trappers who reached Colorado during the first half of the 19th century encountered two major groups of Indians. They found tribes of bison hunters occupying the eastern plains. The largest were the Cheyenne and Arapaho on the northern and central plains and the Comanche south of the Arkansas River. Bands of Pawnee and other tribes occasionally ventured onto the plains of eastern Colorado hunting bison. Indians less dependent on bison hunting occupied the mountains and western plateau lands. These were the Utes. Each tribe, in turn, was divided into bands that occupied separate hunting areas within these regions.

These tribes had themselves come from other places and had contested among themselves for living and hunting space. The Utes had migrated east from Utah and the Great Basin sometime before 1600. At one time they occupied most of Colorado. The Comanche were more recent arrivals, having moved into Colorado from the northern plains by the early 1700s. The Cheyenne and Arapaho came still later from the northeast, pushing the Utes back into the mountains and the Comanche into southeastern Colorado. These historic contests produced continuing tribal rivalries and conflicts.

FOOD, CLOTHING, SHELTER

The Indians of Colorado depended heavily on locally available resources for food, clothing, and shelter. They hunted game and harvested roots, seeds, and berries depending on the season. Hides from the animals they hunted furnished them with clothing. They constructed shelters from poles, brush, and hides.

For the Indians of the plains, bison were the single most important local resource. Fresh and dried bison meat was the main item in their diet, which they augmented with small game, roots, and berries. They lived in portable shelters made of bison hides, which allowed them sufficient mobility to follow the bison herds. Bison robes served as floor coverings for their teepees and as outer clothing for cold weather.

The Ute Indians who inhabited the mountains of central Colorado and the southern and western plateau lands were less dependent on the buffalo. They hunted a variety of game animals including deer, elk, and bear, in addition to bison. Their supply of bison came from annual hunting trips to the plains. They built shelters of poles and brush, called wickiups, as well as hide-covered teepees.

FAMILIES AND CHILDREN

Families played a central role in Indian tribal and community life. In the first place, the multi-family bands in which they lived most of the year were kinship based.

Families were extended in the sense that relatives usually lived close by, although usually in separate abodes. Grandparents, aunts and uncles played important roles in the raising of children. Elderly relatives provided child care while parents of young children went about their daily chores. Uncles and aunts helped prepare nieces and nephews for adult roles. Very young children led relatively carefree lives. Their older siblings had chores to do. Girls helped their mothers gather and prepare food. Boys watched the horse herds, learned to use a bow and arrows, and hunted small game.

WORK

Indian societies were primarily subsistence societies. Providing the family and the band with food, clothing, and shelter was the main purpose of work. Work roles, in turn, were gender based. Women ' s responsibilities included food preparation, gathering food, preparing food, dressing meat, making clothing, erecting and moving teepees, and caring for young children. Men were responsible for tending horses, making weapons, and hunting. Older children helped their parents by doing chores. Boys also contributed to the prosperity of the village by keeping watch on its horse herd.

While less important than hunting and gathering, Indians also acquired things they needed by trading. Principally, this meant trading buffalo robes and the skins of other animals in return for horses and European manufactured wares.

Making raids against other tribes also was a part-time occupation that contributed to a family or village's wealth. Raids were a reliable method of acquiring horses. Raids also were an approved way to demonstrate leadership and to display bravery and other personal attributes valued within Indian cultures.

COMMUNITY LIFE

During most of the year, the band or village was the ' center of Indian community life. Bands were large enough to provide protection from enemy raiding parties, but small enough to survive on limited resources the year round. Too large a band would exceed the resource capacity of a given area to carry it through the winter. Each band belonged to a larger tribal community.

Bands came together for tribal gatherings once a year, usually in the early summer. It was a time for celebrating having survived the winter, for tribal religious ceremonies, and for courting. For the plains Indians, the annual gathering involved large-scale buffalo hunts. The gatherings ended with individual bands separating to continue the summer hunt and to prepare for the coming winter.

RESERVATION LIFE

During the decades after 1860s, most of the Indians were pushed out of Colorado by the arrival of thousands of eastern miners, farmers, ranchers, and town dwellers. After several years of armed conflict, a massacre at Sand Creek, and Indian raids against white settlements, the Cheyenne and Arapaho finally agreed to leave eastern Colorado. The Treaty of Medicine Lodge in 1867 provided them with reservations in Kansas and Oklahoma. The northern Ute bands were removed to a

reservation in Utah in 1880. That treaty also assigned reservation land in the southwest corner of Colorado to three southern Ute bands.

The displacement of Indian tribes that occurred during the late-19th century was unlike that of any previous time when population pressures had forced tribes to move. This time it was not a question of finding new hunting grounds. Professional hunters were killing off the buffalo herds, while the choice bottom lands where Indian bands wintered were being occupied by white farmers. As a result, these semi-nomadic hunters and gatherers were forced to adopt a settled, agricultural way of life on reservations.

Adapting to reservation life was a difficult process for the Indians of Colorado. Acquiring new survival skills requires time. Yet efforts to "Americanize" the Indians as quickly as possible were unrelenting. Indian children were required to attend reservation schools as quickly as these could be made available. These schools emphasized learning English, acquiring farming skills, and adopting white values. Consequently, the transition to reservation life also led to cultural alienation and upheaval.