

COLORADO INDIANS – COMMUNITY LIFE

Village Life

What do these photos tell you about how living in an Indian village was like?

An Indian Village

This is what an Indian village looked like. The men on horseback may be getting ready for a hunt. Women and children are talking in front of a tepee. There always were lots of dogs running loose in Indian villages.



Village

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Indian villages were built in a circle, which was left open on the east, the direction of the rising sun. The day began shortly after sun-up with the village crier shouting out news and the chief's orders for the

day. The news might be that the camp was to remain where it was for a certain number of days or that a dance was to be held that night.

Their Own Words

"Our circle of lodges was open to the east, and each one of the lodges within the circle also opened eastward, to the dawn of light and to the sunrise. That was the way the Arapaho had been taught to build their lodges, at the beginning of time, and that was the way we had always built them."

Source: Althea Bass, The Arapaho Way: A Memoir of an Indian Boyhood [by Carl Sweezy] (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1966), p. 9.

A Busy Indian Village

This is a busy village. Men are gathered for a meeting in a circle. Women are carrying water and wood. Children are playing and resting.



Indian village

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

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Women and girls had the same chores each morning. The first chore was to get fresh water from a nearby stream. Then they cooked the morning meal, usually boiled meat. Later they went out together

in twos and threes to collect fire wood. After that, they might go out to dig roots or prairie turnips. Men hunted, went on raids, and repaired their bows and arrows. They did very little work in camp.

Their Own Words

"Dogs played around the doorways; ponies grazed in the open spaces; children romped with the dogs and climbed on the ponies; women sat on the ground sewing moccasins or beading pouches; men straightened arrowwood or strung bows or combed and dressed their long hair."

Source: Carl Sweezy, The Arapaho Way: A Memoir of an Indian Boyhood of Carl Sweezy as Told by Althea Bass (New York, 1966), p. 26.

An Ute Camp

This is a Ute camp at Ignacio, Colorado. The photo was taken in 1890, after the Utes had moved to a reservation there.



Ute camp

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

A village made up of tipis was more than just a place to live. It was a special way of life for the Utes, Cheyennes, and Arapahoes of Colorado. It kept people together and close to nature. Many Indians lived in villages made of tepees even after they settled down on reservations.

Their Own Words

"Almost every act and custom among the Arapaho was part of their religion. The placing of our lodges in a circle open to the east, and the opening of each lodge on the eastern side, was religious. A man saw dawn when he woke, and prayed to the Man-Above and to Grandfather Sun and to the Four Old Men. He was thankful for the new day, and for the grass and the stream and the game that were outside his tipi."

Source: Althea Bass, The Arapaho Way: A Memoir of an Indian Boyhood [by Carl Sweezy] (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1966), p. 70.

A Large Ute Camp

This photo shows 75 or so Ute tepees pitched in a large camp. Different Ute bands met together each spring or early summer in a camp like this one.



Large Ute camp

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

More About This Topic

Each Indian tribe was made up of several bands of a dozen or more families. They came together once a year during the spring or early summer for a Camp Circle. It was a big social and ceremonial event. For the Arapaho and Cheyenne, the main ceremony was the Sun Dance. For the Utes it was the Bear Dance.

Their Own Words

"Numbering some two hundred or more lodges...erected in parallel lines, [the village] covered a large space of the level prairie....Before each lodge a tripod of spears supported the arms and shields of the Yuta Chivalry [Ute warriors] and on many of them, smoke-dried scalps rattled in the wind."

Source: George Frederick Agastus Ruxton, Wild Life in the Rocky Mountains (New York: Outing Publishing Co., 1924), quoted in Jan Pettit, Utes: The Mountain People (Boulder, CO: Johnson Books, 1990, revised edition), p. 60.

Ceremonies

What do these photos tell you about how Indians held ceremonies?

An Ute Snake Dance

The Ute Indians loved to dance. They had many different dances. Some, like the Sun Dance were part of religious ceremonies. Others were social dances. These included the Circle Dance, Dog Dance, and Coyote Dance.



Snake dance

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

Their Own Words

"Our musical instruments—drums, rattles, and whistles—were all made by the men of the tribe.... Hand drums, the kind used at many of our dances, were small and were made by stretching a skin over a frame and fastening thongs at the back so the drum could be held in one hand and struck with the other.... Our whistles were made of eagle or wild turkey bones hollowed out and notched in such a way as to make different whistling sounds."

Source: Althea Bass, The Arapaho Way: A Memoir of an Indian Boyhood [by Carl Sweezy] (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1966), p. 34.

An Ute Bear Dance

The Bear Dance was the Ute's most important dance. It was held each year at the Ute's spring camp meeting. Spring was a time to renew friendships, to visit relatives, and welcome new children born into the tribe. The Bear Dance took place outdoors in a big corral lined with brush about chest high. Music was provided by men rubbing notched sticks over a wooden box, which made a sound like bears growling. The dance took place over 4 days, lasting longer each day.



Ute bear dance

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

Their Own Words

"[The spring camp meeting was] a time for a new beginning, the starting of new friendships and renewal of old friendships. A time of remembrance of long ago days, and long ago friends and relatives. A time of giving thanks to the Creator for the time of survival during the harsh and cold winters."

Source: Annabelle W. Eagle, quoted in Jan Pettit, Utes: The Mountain People (Boulder: Johnson Publishing, 1990), p. 93.

Painting Of a Sun Dance Lodge

The sun dance was a religious ceremony of the plains Indians. It was held once a year when the Cheyenne or Arapaho bands came together. It took 8 days to complete. The ceremony was held in a special lodge open to the sky. It included pretend battles fought by warrior societies, singing, and dancing. In one part of the ceremony, the dancer had to free himself from a rope attached to his chest by wooden pins.



Sun dance lodge

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

Their Own Words

"All through the long summer day I walked about the pole, praying to all the spirits, and crying aloud to the sun and the earth, and all the animals and birds to help me. Each time when I came to the end of the rope I threw myself back against it, and pulled hard. The skin of my breast stretched out as wide as your hand....All day long I walked in this way. The sun blazed down like fire. I had no food, and did not drink; for so I had been instructed."

Source: A young Cheyenne, quoted in Donald J. Berthrong, The Southern Cheyennes (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963), p. 44.

Entertainment & Sports

What do these photos tell you about what kind of entertainment and sports Indians engaged themselves in?

A Squaw Race

Horse racing was a favorite sport of Colorado Indians, as they had always needed fast horses for hunting and raiding. They raced two horses at a time to find out which was faster. Declaring a winner might take several races.



Squaw race

Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection

Their Own Words

"After cattle are killed the Indians all go into horse racing, where there is quite a number of dollars and blankets and moneys exchange hands. They are very earnest in their races."

Source: Dairy of Private Peter Tawse, may 17, 1880, quoted in Jan Petit, Utes: The Mountain People (Boulder: Johnson Books, 1990), p. 120.

A Game Of "Shinny"

Shinny is a form of field hockey. It was an ancient Ute game played by two teams with a ball and curved wooden sticks. To win one team had to get the 4-inch ball over the other team's goal line. The shinny field was about 250 feet long.



Game of "shinny"

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

A Foot Race

Being a fast runner was important to people who hunted for a living. While buffalo were hunted on horseback, rabbits and other small game were hunted on foot.



Foot race

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

Playing Cards

Games of chance were popular among the Ute Indians, especially stick games. These games used sticks that were flat on one side and round on the other. The round sides was marked with different numbers of lines. The players tossed the sticks. The toss with the most number of lines that were turned up won.



Playing cards

Photo: Colorado Historical Society

Their Own Words

"There are three parts: sticks like cards, counting sticks, and the round rock....The card sticks are held in the hand and dropped on top of the rock. The number of lines showing on the fallen sticks is the count. You take a counter to keep track of your lines. We grew up playing this. All night long we used to play it."

Source: Sunshine Smith, a Ute elder, quoted in Jan Pettit, Utes: The Mountain People (Boulder: Johnson Books, 1990), p. 96.