

# COLORADO INDIANS – FOOD, CLOTHING, SHELTER

## Food

What do these photos tell you about the food that these people ate?

### American Bison (Buffalo)

This is a bison or American buffalo. Millions of bison once lived on the Great Plains of North America. In the 1800s, they were the largest animal native to North America. An average buffalo cow provided about 400 pounds of meat. That was enough meat to feed one person for at least 200 days.



*Buffalo*

*Photo: Colorado Historical Society*

### More About This Topic

The bison lived on the blue grama and buffalo grass that grew on the plains. During the summer, when there was a lot of grass, the buffalo grazed in large herds. Some herds had several thousand animals. That was the best hunting season for the Plains Indians. The bison broke up into smaller herds during the winter, when there was less grass to eat.

## **Their Own Words**

"From the top of Pawnee Rock, I could see from six to ten miles in almost every direction. The whole mass was covered with buffalo, looking at a distance like one compact mass....I have seen such sights a number of times, but never on so large a scale."

*Source: Colonel Richard Irving Dodge, May 1871, quoted in Donald Berthrong, The Southern Cheyenne (Norman, OK: University of Oklahoma Press, 1963, p. 31.*

## **Drying Buffalo Meat**

The pole in this photo holds strips of bison or buffalo meat that are drying in the sun. Removing the moisture kept the meat from spoiling. Dried meat could be kept for several months.



*Drying meat*

*Photo: Colorado Historical Society*

## **More About This Topic**

During the summer, Indians dried meat to provide food during the winter. Summer was the best hunting season. Then the buffalo roamed the plains in large herds. They broke up into small herds during the winter and were more difficult to find.

## **Their Own Words**

"It took our women only a short time to cut up a buffalo. . . , using the wide knives they carried hung from their belts. The brains and the liver we ate raw. . . . The rest of the meat they cut into strips and hung from a pole set up between two forked sticks to dry."

*Source: Althea Bass, The Arapaho Way: A Memoir of an Indian Boyhood [by Carl Sweezy] (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1966), p. 29.*

## **Drying Pemmican**

The poles in this photo are covered with strips of buffalo meat hanging to dry and with pemmican. Pemmican is dried meat that was ground up, flavored and stuffed into buffalo intestines. Two lengths of pemmican are hanging from the end of the pole on the left.



*Pemmican*

*Photo: Colorado Historical Society*

## **More About This Topic**

Indians in Colorado also used buffalo meat to make pemmican. They made it by roasting dried meat, beating it into small pieces, then adding melted fat, bone marrow, and powdered dried wild cherries. This mixture was stuffed into intestine casings, much like sausage. Pemmican added variety to the Indians' meat diet.

## **Their Own Words**

"Some of this [dried beef] they pounded and mixed with dried fruits and covered with melted tallow. This we called pemmican. It made a fine food, and we never went hungry when we had it."

*Source: Althea Bass, The Arapaho Way: A Memoir of an Indian Boyhood [by Carl Sweezy] (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1966), p. 29.*

## Gathering Wild Turnips

This woman is holding wild turnips dug up on the plains. The turnips in her right hand are strung together on a cord. The bag in her left hand also is full of turnips. This photo was taken sometime after 1900, when the plains Indians lived on reservations. They still went out to harvest wild vegetables.



*Wild turnips*

*Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection*

### More About This Topic

The plains Indians did not live only on buffalo meat. They also gathered grass seeds and wild vegetables. The vegetables gathered on the plains included prairie turnips, Jerusalem artichokes, and Indian potatoes. The Ute Indians who spent part of each year in the mountains, also gathered berries, nuts, and acorns from the forests.

## **Their Own Words**

"Women and children are employed in gathering grasshoppers, crickets, ants, and various other insects, which are carefully preserved for food, together with roots, and grass seed. From the mountains they bring the nuts which are found in the cones of the pine, acorns from dwarf oaks, different kinds of berries, and the inner bark of the pine, which has a sweet acid taste, not unlike lemon syrup."

*Source: Warren Angus Ferris, Life in the Rocky Mountains (Denver: The Old West Publishing Co., 1940), p.?? [from Pettit, The Utes, 12].*

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## **Clothing**

*What do these photos tell you about the clothes these people wore?*

### **Children's Clothing**

The Ute Indian children in this photo are wearing traditional items of clothing. The dress of the girl in front is made of deer skin fringed at the bottom. The boy at the right is wearing a fringed leather shirt or jacket. The boy with the feathers in his hair is wearing a chest plate made of bones. All are wearing deerskin moccasins.



*Children's clothing*

*Photo: Colorado Historical Society*

### **More About This Topic**

These were the children of Severo, a chief of the Capota band of Utes. He was one of the Ute chiefs who went to Washington D. C. in 1880 to sign a peace treaty.

## Ute Buckskin Dress

This is a Ute dress made of buckskin. The upper part of the dress is decorated with animals and designs made of colored beads. The sleeves and the bottom have buckskin fringes. This dress belonged to the wife of Ignacio, a Ute chief. Her name was Lauriano-I-You.



*Buckskin dress*

*Photo: Colorado Historical Society*

### More About This Topic

Indian women used animal skins to make their dresses. A dress like the one in the photo used two or three deer skins.

### Their Own Words

"The women's finest costume was a fringed buckskin skirt, smoked or white, cut straight and long, and a straight buckskin jacket. These were trimmed in several ways: with rows of elks' teeth, with beaded or painted designs, or with strings of beads or jingles added to the fringe."

*Source: Althea Bass, The Arapaho Way: A Memoir of an Indian Boyhood [by Carl Sweezy] (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1966), p. 36.*

## Ute Buckskin Shirt

This photo shows the back of a Ute shirt. It was made from the skin of a buck or male deer. It is decorated with colored beads sewn to a white background and by a buckskin fringe. The shirt belonged to Ouray, a Ute chief.



*Buckskin shirt*

*Photo: Colorado Historical Society*

### More About This Topic

Men wore shirts during the winter to help them keep warm. During the summer, men wore only a breech cloth made of hide.

## Indian Child's Dress

This dress was made for an Indian child, probably an Arapaho child. It is made of deerskin. The top is decorated with colored beads. It has a leather fringe on the sleeves, down the sides, and at the bottom.



*Child's dress*

*Photo: Colorado Historical Society*

## **Ute Moccasins**

This is a pair of Ute moccasins. They are made of buckskin stitched to a rawhide sole. The ties also are rawhide. They are embroidered on top with designs made of colored glass beads.





## *Moccasins*

*Photo: Colorado Historical Society*

### **More About This Topic**

Moccasins were very practical. The rawhide soles could be replaced when they wore out. Winter moccasins had a loose piece of leather that was drawn around the ankle and tied to keep out snow. Decorating moccasins and other clothing was a form of Indian art.

### **Their Own Words**

"When the women were not busy with other things, they had handwork to do. The Cheyenne and the Arapaho women made the finest of moccasins. Whether they were made of strong, smoked elk skin or of soft, dressed buckskin, they always fitted the feet they were made for, and were decorated in designs that suited the line of the foot."

*Source: Althea Bass, The Arapaho Way: A Memoir of an Indian Boyhood [by Carl Sweezy] (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1966), p. 29.*

## **Buffalo Robe**

This is a robe made from the hide of a buffalo bull. Buffalo robes were used as bed covers in the winter and as warm wraps to wear outdoors. The bare hide shown in this photo is decorated with painted designs. The hair side of the robe is against the wall.



## *Buffalo robe*

*Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection*

### **More About This Topic**

Buffalo provided Indians with clothing to wear as well as meat to eat. They used the soft hides of buffalo cows and calves to make clothing. The hide of the buffalo bulls was heavier and thicker. They used it to make robes like the one in this photo and tipi coverings. When buffalo were scarce, they made robes of rabbit, coyote, and wolf skins.

### **Their Own Words**

"As long as the buffalo roamed the plains, it supplied us with nearly everything we needed. . . We had never wasted any part of the animal when we killed it: its hide made our lodge coverings, robes for our beds, and for clothing, and shields and parfleches; its paunch made pails and bowls; its tail and hooves made ornaments; its horns made spoons and tools; its sinews made stout cords. . . ."

## **Ute Blankets**

This photo of a Ute woman shows some of the ways that Colorado Indians used blankets. She is wearing a very fine blanket as a cape. Behind her are colorful blankets used to decorate the wall. She is standing on a blanket used as a rug. This woman also is wearing a decorative belt and is holding a beaded pouch in her left hand.



*Blanket*

*Photo: Denver Public Library, Western History Collection*

### **More About This Topic**

As buffalo became scarce, Colorado Indians used blankets as robes and bed covers. The blankets came from Mexico and from the Navaho Indians in Arizona. The Indians of Colorado got these blankets through trade.

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## **Shelter**

*What do these photos tell you about the kinds of shelters these people lived in?*

### **Ute Tipi**

By the early 1800s, most Indians in Colorado lived in tepees. They were made of buffalo or elk hide and tall poles. The tepees in this photo were part of a Ute Indian village.



*Tipi*

*Photo Credit: Colorado Historical Society*

### **More About This Topic**

The plains Indians made tipis of buffalo hides. Buffalo hide was thicker and stronger than other hides. The Utes, who lived in the Rocky Mountains, killed fewer buffalo. Instead of buffalo hides, they used elk skins for their tipis. The tipi would require 10-12 elk hides. The hides were sewn together with thread made of sinew. Tipi hides were tanned and greased to make them waterproof.

### **Their Own Words**

"One who has never lived in a lodge [tepee] would scarcely think it possible for seven or eight persons to pass a long winter agreeably in a circular room, ten feet in diameter, having a considerable portion of it occupied by the fire in the center. Indeed, they are as comfortable as they could wish to be. I moved from a lodge into a comfortable log house, but again returned to the lodge, which I found much more pleasant."

*Source: Warren Angus Ferris, Life in the Rocky Mountains Denver: The Old West Publishing Co., 1940), p.?? [here from Pettit, The Utes, 22].*

### **Tripod**

The tepee in this village has a tripod in front made of three short poles. Indians placed blankets and other things on tripods like this one to keep them off the ground.



*Tripod*

*Photo: Colorado Historical Society*

### **More About This Topic**

The Cheyenne and Arapaho also used tripods to set up their tipis. The first step was to tie 3 strong poles together to make a tripod. (The Utes used 4 poles.) The tripod held up the other 8 or more poles that were leaned up against it. Then the hide cover was stretched over the poles and staked down at the bottom.

## Chief Little Raven's Tipi

This tepee belonged to Little Raven, an Arapaho chief. The decorations on the sides show important events in his life. The objects in front are his war shield hanging on a spear and a coup stick that he carried into battle with him.



*Little Raven's tipi*

*Photo: Colorado Historical Society*

### More About This Topic

A traveler on the plains could identify an Indian tribe by its tipis. The tipis of each tribe were made in a slightly different way. The Cheyenne tipis were "white as linen," while those of other tribes were darker. They mixed white clay into the tanning solution to make the hides white.

### Their Own Words

"The tipis of the Cheyenne and the Arapaho were taller than those of other Indians. Anyone traveling the prairies long ago knew one of our villages as soon as he saw it, even before he was near enough to recognize the people or the designs on the chief's tent or the shields and trophies hanging outside."

*Source: Althea Bass, The Arapaho Way: A Memoir of an Indian Boyhood [by Carl Sweezy] (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1966), p. 13.*

## Ute Man Next to His Tipi

This photo shows a Ute man standing beside his tepee. Next to the tepee is a shield hanging from a pole. This is a ceremonial shield. It probably was used in the Sun Dance ceremony. It is similar to shields that warriors used in battle.



*Ute man and tipi*

*Photo: Colorado Historical Society*

### **More About This Topic**

The best wood for tipi poles was cedar, as it did not rot when exposed to rain and snow. As good lodge poles were not easy to find on the plains, the women took good care of them.

### **Their Own Words**

"Every warrior had his own specially decorated shield. The toughest part of the buffalo hide was used to make a shield; this when soaked in water and dried slowly, became so thick and hard that few arrows could go through it. In nearly every village, there was a painter who decorated the shields of the men in his village with the design and in the colors that were each man's special protection and power."

*Source: Althea Bass, The Arapaho Way: A Memoir of an Indian Boyhood [by Carl Sweezy] (New York: Clarkson N. Potter, Inc., 1966), p. 33.*

### **Brush Shelter**

The two shelters in this photo are made of poles and brush. Unlike tepees, these are permanent shelters. They cannot easily be moved from one place to another. The Ute Indians used shelters like these before they became buffalo hunters and lived in tepees.



*Brush shelter*

*Photo: Colorado Historical Society*

### **More About This Topic**

The Utes also built temporary camp shelters that were called wickiups. These were dome-shaped shelters covered with willows, bark, grass or reeds. They were large enough for about 5 people. They quit using them after they became buffalo hunters and lived in tipis.

### **Brush Windbreak**

The Indians in this photo have piled brush beside their tepees as a temporary shelter. It provides shade from the sun and helps break the wind that blows across the plains.



*Brush windbreak*

*Photo: Colorado Historical Society*

**More About This Topic**

Indians in Colorado sometimes used piles of brush as temporary camps and as a windbreak for their winter camps. The brush was piled up and covered with skins and earth.