

## Echoes of the Meeker Massacre: United States and Ute Relations

*By Ro Paschal*

Meeker is a small, quaint town located in the White River Valley in the northwest corner of Colorado. The White River meanders through lush mountain meadows and the surrounding peaks provide breathtaking scenery. For thousands of years the Ute people have called this place home, along with much of the Colorado Plateau.<sup>1</sup> Traditionally the Ute people were nomadic hunter-gatherers, moving throughout the region in small groups known as bands.<sup>2</sup> Bands were independent but bound together through language, trade, intermarriage, military alliances, and religious gatherings.<sup>3</sup> By the mid-1850s, their traditional way of life was abruptly disrupted due to American westward expansion. Land-hungry and driven by the discovery of rich minerals, the United States government passed a series of treaties that slowly shrunk Ute territory, eventually confining them to small reservations.

Indian agents undertook the task of Americanizing the Ute people, forcing them to settle on farms and alter their entire way of life. On May 15, 1878, Nathaniel Meeker accepted the position of Indian Agent for the Northern Utes at the White River Agency.<sup>4</sup> In his book, *The Utes Last Stand*, Al Cook captures Meeker's righteous attitude perfectly when writing, "Meeker was a dreamer of high ideals, force and initiative, with unbending religious precepts; a self-appointed Moses to lead the simple-minded Indians from sin to a joyous new heaven of civilization."<sup>5</sup> A rocky relationship between Meeker and the local tribe ensued over the next two years, eventually culminating in the killing of Nathaniel Meeker and numerous others at the White River Agency in 1879. Following the Meeker incident, the tribe found themselves being forced from their homeland and onto a smaller reservation.

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<sup>1</sup> "History: The Northern Utes," Utah American Indian Digital Archive, last modified 2008, <https://utahindians.org/archives/ute/history.html#:~:text=Anthropologists%20argue%20that%20the%20Utes,northern%20Arizona%20and%20New%20Mexico>.

<sup>2</sup> Brandi Denison, "Dirt Morality During Ute Removal," *Pacific Historical Review* 88, no. 2 (Winter 2019): 128.

<sup>3</sup> "History: The Northern Utes," Utah American Indian Digital Archive.

<sup>4</sup> Wilson Rockwell, *Sunset Slope* (Denver: Big Mountain Press, 1956), 166.

<sup>5</sup> Al Look, *The Utes Last Stand* (Denver: Golden Bell Press, 1972), 49.

Six years after the bloody encounter of the Northern Utes and Nathaniel Meeker, the small town of Meeker was founded. Half a century later, in 1938, the town hosted the inaugural Range Call Days. This event still occurs annually on the fourth of July, offering the town financial and social boosts. The celebration includes dances, parades, and rodeos, and it traditionally ends with The Meeker Massacre Pageant. Acting as the finale of the weekend, the pageant attempts to recreate the history of the land from the arrival of the Spanish to Nathaniel Meeker. The final scene is depicted in the first script as follows: “meanwhile at the Agency, as the flames mount high from the burning buildings, Mr. Meeker and his employees die, martyrs to the White cause. Triumphant, the Ute attackers seize the white women as hostages and melt away into the darkness, leaving only death in charge.”<sup>6</sup>

The pageant paints a vivid image of good vs. bad, white vs. Indian, conqueror vs. conquered. Since the inaugural pageant, the script has undergone numerous revisions and adaptations to changing mindsets and ideals. Apart from one year, 1988, the Utes have not participated in the events of Range Call Days. I argue that the pageant acts as a dam towards creating healthy and productive relations with the Ute Tribe; however, the reinstatement of basic rights to the land and open discussions with the tribe can build a base for healing and coexistence in the future.

Numerous attempts have been made over the course of the last 30 years to recognize the Ute Tribe in the White River Valley. Meeker’s local historian, Jay Sullivan, initiated much of this.<sup>7</sup> His cowboy exterior hid the inner workings of a forward and progressive thinker. During his time in Meeker, Sullivan headed the construction of countless monuments documenting both sides of history and giving a voice to an absent void.<sup>8</sup> Unfortunately, these well-intentioned efforts missed the mark at times. For example, at the dedication for the Ute

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<sup>6</sup> Carol Anthon, “Meeker Massacre Pageant to Celebrate 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary,” *Meeker Herald*, June 30, 1988, 9.

<sup>7</sup> Brandi Denison (Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of North Florida), in discussion with the author, November 2021.

<sup>8</sup> Denison, in discussion with the author, November 2021.

Warriors at Milk Creek, Kenny Frost, a Ute medicine man, told Jay that flying the American Flag above the monument was insulting.<sup>9</sup> Frost went on to share the story of what the Ute people had lost and what America had taken from them. These discussions are critical to have and should be held prior to action being taken. Along with these efforts, Sullivan pushed to have Meeker recognized as a National Historic Landmark and the construction of a peace barn. Ultimately, never materializing, these plans indicated that some people in the community desired change, growth, and recognition of the town's turbulent and complex history.

In 2008, two employees for the U.S. Forest Service organized the Smoking River Powwow.<sup>10</sup> The aim of the powwow was to re-establish relations with the Ute Indians and welcome them back to their ancestral lands. Loya Arrum of the Ute Tribe said, "It's time to bring the children here again, and take them around the land. In our history, we were told never to talk about [the Milk Creek Battle and Meeker Incident], because of fear. But it's time to talk about it. The children need to know."<sup>11</sup> Most attitudes towards this first powwow were positive, but within two years the event abruptly stopped. The national recession and departure of the organizers led to the discontinuation of the event. Once again, progress towards healing and understanding was halted.

2012 marked the tribe's return to the White River Valley. The river valley produced the Capitol Christmas Tree.<sup>12</sup> Representatives from the Colorado, Utah, and New Mexico Ute Tribes honored the tree before harvesting and participating in the sacred ceremony in Washington, D.C.<sup>13</sup> This signaled one more step in recognizing the Utes' connection to the

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<sup>9</sup> Jay Sullivan (Meeker local historian), in discussion with Craig Paschal, September 2021.

<sup>10</sup> Jeff Burkhead, "Smoking River Powwow exceeds expectations," *Herald Times*, July 31, 2008, <https://www.theheraldtimes.com/smoking-river-powwow-exceeds-expectations/meeker/>.

<sup>11</sup> Burkhead.

<sup>12</sup> Katelyn Jerman, "Ute Tribe in Rocky Mountain Region Honors 2012 Capitol Christmas Tree," *U.S. Department of Agriculture*, February 21, 2017, <https://www.usda.gov/media/blog/2012/11/02/ute-tribe-rocky-mountain-region-honors-2012-capitol-christmas-tree>.

<sup>13</sup> Jerman.

White River Valley they had been forcibly removed from over a century earlier. After 80 years, the pageant finally dropped the misleading and false title. In 2016 the “Meeker Massacre Pageant” underwent a name change, now simply called the “Meeker Pageant.” Recent articles suggest the possibility for Ute inclusion in Range Call Days, but one can only hope that it is not for an anniversary as it was in 1988.

Throughout my discussions with tribal members and Ute historians, the conversation tended to circle back to the idea of healing and possible steps forward that can be taken. Pageants, powwows, and other events are insufficient. Intentions are well-meaning, but lasting impacts do not resonate. I had the pleasure of talking with Dr. Brandi Denison, Associate Professor in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies at the University of North Florida. While discussing steps towards healing, Dr. Denison said, “What I would like to see for Meeker is for leaders to go to the reservation. Learn and ask what they want. That could go longer in terms of establishing a relationship.”<sup>14</sup> Her ongoing studies indicate that a huge measure in healing would be reinstating the hunting and fishing rights of the Northern Ute Tribe in the White River Valley.<sup>15</sup> This requires cooperation with the tribe and the National Forest Service. Reinstatement would mean a reconnection to sacred lands and the ability to practice their traditional way of life.

As Loya Arrum mentioned, the events of the Meeker Incident and the Milk Creek Battle are not discussed by the Ute Tribe. Similar attitudes are upheld by the individuals who now live on the ancestral land. One of the first steps toward recovering from the past must be recognizing, acknowledging, and accepting the history of the area. Regina Lopez-Whiteskunk, a leader within the Ute Tribe, agrees and emphasizes the importance of teaching history rather than erasing it, even if it is painful. Whiteskunk shared, “[Our history] is too horrific to teach the truth to our world and children, but you are not above yourself to

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<sup>14</sup> Brandi Denison, in discussion with the author, November 2021.

<sup>15</sup> Brandi Denison, in discussion with the author, November 2021.

reenact the events?”<sup>16</sup> Whiteskunk struggles to grasp the inherent value of the reenactments of the Meeker Pageant. She adds, “No matter how it’s done, the Utes are never the winners.”<sup>17</sup>

Representation also serves as another invaluable action in the healing and reconciliation process. Dr. Denison discussed her current involvement in the organization, Right Relationship. Their mission statement is as follows, “We are Boulder-area residents, friends and allies dedicating efforts and resources to Indigenous peoples and issues. We seek to learn, support, and lead efforts to facilitate and create contemporary opportunities while attending to historical inequities that persist today. We do so within the principles of right relationship with Indigenous peoples, other organizations, and local governments.”<sup>18</sup>

Organizations such as Right Relationship emphasize listening and creating relationships before acting, something to consider regarding tribal relations with local communities.

Regina Lopez-Whiteskunk currently works with the Montezuma Land Conservancy (MLC) as the Cross-Cultural Program’s Manager.<sup>19</sup> She travels extensively throughout the Southwest, like her ancestors, sharing the Ute culture through song, dance, and presentations. Discussing her current life and mission, Whiteskunk said, “I live a very traditional lifestyle and some people look at me confused on what I am saying. And I say I am basically a Ute in constant migration. I might not move according to seasons the way my ancestors did, but I do move according to where I am being called.”<sup>20</sup> Her efforts educate outsiders and emphasize the importance and essence of our relationships with the land. Right Relationship and Regina Lopez-Whiteskunk represent progress in relationships, education, healing, and restoration.

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<sup>16</sup> Regina Lopez-Whiteskunk (MLC Cross-Cultural Programs Manager), in discussion with author, November 2021.

<sup>17</sup> Lopez-Whiteskunk.

<sup>18</sup> “Our Mission,” Right Relationship Boulder, accessed March 24, 2022, <https://rightrelationshipboulder.org/>.

<sup>19</sup> “Meet Our Staff,” Montezuma Land Conservancy, accessed March 24, 2022, <https://montezumaland.org/staff/regina-lopez-whiteskunk/>.

<sup>20</sup> “Regina Lopez Whiteskunk,” Moab Museum, accessed November 18, 2023, <https://moabmuseum.org/profile/regina-lopez-whiteskunk/>.

The ways in which the past is remembered directly influence actions and attitudes in the present. Events such as the “Meeker Massacre Pageant,” now known as the “Meeker Pageant,” perpetuate historical trauma through the disregard for the loss and pain that the Utes experienced. The process of developing healthy relationships is slow and complex but may be our nation’s only hope for renewal and restoration from a bleak and dark history. Proper education, listening to our neighbors, affirming truth, reinstating ancient rights, and equal participation within organizations are starting points for writing a new history with the Ute Tribe.

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