

THE HISTORIC STRATER HOTEL PRESENTS

ROOM 412: SOUTHERN UTE INDIAN TRIBE

Buckskin Charley & Leonard C. Burch

COLORADO'S FIRST RESIDENTS

The Southern Ute Indians are the oldest continuous residents of Colorado. The earliest Utes arrived along the eastern slopes of the Rocky Mountains speaking a language called Shoshonean, a dialect of a Uto-Aztec language. Other

MUCH OF THE
SAN JUAN
SKYWAY
FOLLOWS
TRADITIONAL
UTE TRAILS.

Native American groups who speak Shoshonean are the Paiutes, Goshutes, Shoshones, Bannocks, Comanche's, Chemehuevi and some tribes in California. It is speculated that the arrival of the Utes to Southern Colorado is the reason for the Anasazi relocating to sandstone caves in the region.

The Utes were originally broken up into seven distinct bands; the Mouache, Capote Weeminuche; Tabeguache (also called Uncompahgre), Grand River

Utes (also called Parianuche), Yamparicas (also called White River) and the Uintah.

The Mouache and Capote bands make up the present day Southern Ute Tribe in Ignacio, Colorado. The Weeminuches are now called the Ute Mountain Utes of Towaoc, Colorado. The Tabeguache, Grand, Yampa, and Uintah now comprise the Northern Utes on the Uintah-Ouray Reservation concentrated around Fort Duchesne, Utah.

Before reservations and consolidation, the seven bands roamed freely in search of food. The bands were broken up into smaller family units for most of the year as food was scarce. Groups would follow their regular circuit throughout the year based on where they knew they could find food. Both Vallecito Creek and the Los Pinos River provided routes to the North, and Bakers Park - where present day Silverton is

located. Toward the end of the nineteenth century the present day Vallecito reservoir was a favorite recreation area for the tribes, as were the hot springs where present day Pagosa Springs is located.

As food and warmth were harder to come by in the winter months, it became a great time for social occasions, full of festivities and dances. As a result, this was typically the time when marriages would take place. For four days in the Spring, when the first thunder was heard, the Utes would gather together and hold the bear dance.

Ancient and Important Tradition Kept Alive—The Bear Dance

The Bear Dance is the most ancient of dances and is still practiced today. After the Bear Dance the bands would again break apart to follow migrating herds. The Bear Dance is special to the Ute People. It is said that

two brothers were out hunting and became tired. They sat down to rest when one of them noticed a bear facing a tree that seemed to be dancing while trying to climb the tree. One brother went on to continue the hunt but the other stayed behind to watch the bear. The bear taught the dance to the young man along with a song. The bear instructed the young man to return home to his people and teach them the song and dance - to show respect for the spirit of the bear, and to make them strong like the bear. The Bear dance symbolizes the end of winter and the strength needed to emerge from it.

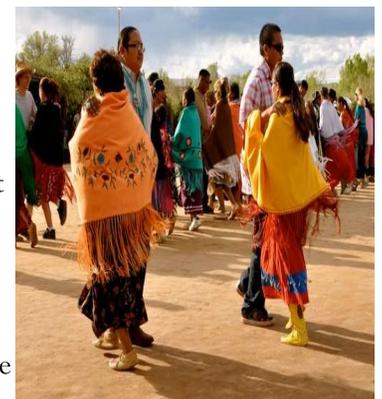


Photo courtesy of Jeremy Wade Shockley

BUCKSKIN CHARLEY | 1840-1936

Adjusting to life on the reservation was hard for the Ute people. Used to leading a nomadic lifestyle they were now forced to learn to farm the land and live as the white man lived. These events caused the seven bands to merge into three bands – the Weeminuche, Capote and Muache. A school was built in present day Ignacio for Ute children to learn like the white settlers. It was hard for elders to understand how their children would gain practical, applicable knowledge in this school setting. During this time the Capote band, now known as the Southern Utes, was led by Tribal Chief Buckskin Charley. Buckskin Charley was Capote band of the Ute tribe from 1880 until his death in 1936. He succeeded Chief Ouray as the official treaty negotiator between the Ute tribes and the United States government and was one of the first in the Tribe to learn fluent English, although newspapers frequently write about how only those that knew him could really understand him.

As a child, his mother often found him playing with indigenous frogs. It was then that he was given the native name “Mah-kotch-ah-wuh”, meaning Horned Toad. He carried that name until he reached his early twenties. After becoming acquainted with some white soldiers on the frontier, he quickly proved his skill in hunting. He took part in a very successful deer hunt and afterward, made lovely buckskins for the soldiers. It was then that one of the officers dubbed him *Buckskin Charley*.

Buckskin Charley led the rescue of women and children who were abducted during the infamous Meeker Massacre in September of 1879. He was given the Rutherford Hayes Indian Peace Medal by President Benjamin Harrison in 1890 and rode with Geronimo in Theodore Roosevelt's 1905 Inaugural Parade. He was said to be a great story teller and even had a few written about him; the

1904 *Daily Journal* from Telluride recounts how he once “charmed a grizzly bear”. He was well thought of by settlers, government officials and his people. The *Durango Democrat* wrote that “Buckskin Charley is not disposed to allow the average citizen to view him in the light of an ordinary mortal. He is the push on the pine and always will be with the Ute’s...” in an article written on August 13, 1902.

Suite 234 at the Sky Ute Casino in Ignacio is named in his honor with a plaque on the wall that reads “of all the of his accomplishments, he was most well-known and respected for his manner of helping others cope with the difficult adjustment of life on the reservation. He was an advocate for the Southern Ute people until his death in 1936, but remains a legend to the Tribe for all of time”.

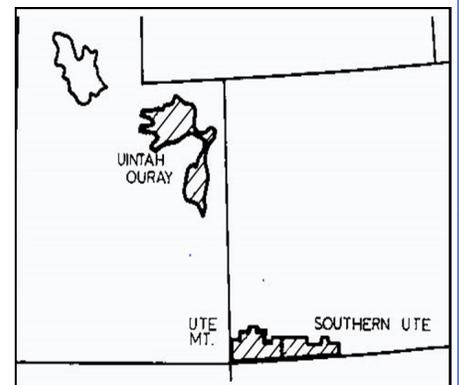


THE WORD
“UTE” MEANS
LAND OF
THE SUN.

“THE UTES MUST GO”

In 1849 the Utes signed a treaty of peace and recognized the existence of and jurisdiction of the United States and shortly after, in 1859 the gold rush hit Colorado, again, dramatically changing the Ute way of life. Miners and settlers demanded that the Utes be removed from areas of interest.

The headline “The Utes Must Go” frequented headlines and advertisements across the state. Over the next twenty years, settlements and negotiations would diminish the Ute land base to a thin sliver of land along the Colorado New Mexico border.



LEONARD C BURCH | 1933-2003

In 1966, at the age of 33 the youngest chairman in the Southern Ute's Tribal history was chosen – Leonard C Burch; born “Shining Star” in 1933. Burch had served four tours of duty with the US Air Force in Turkey, and returned home in 1959 to marry his high school sweetheart, Irene Coolidge, a Navajo Tribal Member with whom he would go on to have seven daughters. He was elected during a time of great struggle and poverty for the Ute people – but there was hope.

During the previous decade natural gas had been discovered on Southern Ute Land. Burch realized that the key to his people's prosperity lay in the earth and teamed up with other Tribal leaders to start the *Council of Energy Resource Tribes* and later led the Southern Ute People in a project to regain their energy profits by creating the Red Willow Production Company - still in operation today and one of the first Native American natural gas providers in the United States. Though it had a tough start and stiff competition with corporate giants like Exxon and BP, it has become one of the largest natural gas providers in the region. Though his efforts serving as Chairman for more than 32 years, Leonard C Burch was able to bring the Southern Ute people out of their impoverished state to a place of prosperity, and paved the way for other tribes all over the county. In a statement given to the Denver Post, U.S. Senator Ben Nighthorse Campbell said, “I invite anyone who believes that one man can't make a difference to take a drive south-east of Durango and witness what Leonard C Burch helped to create.” Under his leadership, the Southern Ute Tribe emerged from relative poverty to become a major economic force in the Four Corners Region and the largest employer in La Plata County. Fueled principally by successful development of the Tribe's natural gas resources, the Burch era saw countless examples of community development and improvements in education, health and social programs available to tribal members.

Leonard C. Burch Day, a day of recognition was established on December 10, 1996 and is celebrated each year as a Tribal holiday.



Throughout his life he was invited by five separate United States Presidents to attend conferences on Indian policy at the White House. During his tenure he appeared innumerable times before Committees of Congress on matters affecting the Tribe and Southwestern Colorado. He successfully obtained passage of federal laws permitting the Tribe to consolidate land holdings within the reservation while addressing complex jurisdictional issues. The gaming compact between the State of Colorado and the Tribe and a taxation compact among the State of Colorado, the County of La Plata and the Tribe were each negotiated during his tenure in office.

He received numerous awards in recognition of his lifetime achievements and contributions, including the Durango Area Citizen of the Year Award (1997), the 15th Annual Martin Luther King Humanitarian Award (2000) and the Council of Energy Resource Tribes' Achievement Award (2002).

“He was my friend and my brother,” said tribal attorney Frank Maynes. “It will take some time for the people to appreciate the magnificence of his accomplishments. When the history of Leonard

Burch is written, he will be known as the tribe's Chief Ouray of the 20th Century.”

Leonard C Burch died at Mercy Medical Center on August 1, 2003, at 69 years old.



Left to right: Leonard C. Burch, Sam Maynes, and Gordon Allot, former U.S. Senator from Colorado, circa 1970.