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NATIVE AMERICANS: THE REGION'S FIRST SETTLERS

Prehistoric People and
Southern Arapaho Predated
White Settlers



An Arapaho family poses for a photographer in the 1880's after being moved to a reservation in Indian Territory (Oklahoma). Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, X-33850

The lure of gold brought whites in 1858 to the Boulder Valley and its tributaries in what was to become Colorado. But someone already called this region home and the differences between these two groups set the table for a conflict of cultures.

Evidence abounds that the first Americans existed in the Boulder Valley for thousands of years before the white settlers. An archaeological site at the Goodhue Farm site where Rock Creek flows under Highway 287 has been determined as occupied 6,200 years ago. Many Folsom and Clovis spear points have been discovered in our area, along with countless stone rings that outlined tepees and fire pits.

One prehistoric site exists near Marshall and there are tepee rings near

Dowdy Draw. Both these sites are only a few miles from Superior, as is the Goodhue Farm site. Archeologist Peter Gleichman believes that there were undoubtedly prehistoric camps along Coal Creek. Perhaps the cozy setting adjoining Original Superior appealed to them as well as to later white settlers.

Later American Indian people who populated Colorado east of the Rocky Mountains were the Southern Arapaho, Southern Cheyenne, Kiowa and Comanche. The Arapaho and Cheyenne, too, were migrants to this area; they had taken up residence in what is now Colorado only since the early 1800's. Their origins were in what is now Minnesota. As whites moved west, indigenous people were displaced, and they, in turn, displaced other indigenous people who moved then even farther west in order to maintain their traditional lifestyle.

Thus, the Southern Arapaho entered the Boulder Valley. They had found it to be a good winter hunting ground in their earlier seasonal migration and also enjoyed the therapeutic use of natural hot spring waters, such as those at Eldorado Springs. Being nomadic, the Arapaho resided in a large area beginning just east of Boulder Canyon along Boulder Creek ranging clear out to present day Brush, Colorado, including the confluence of Cherry Creek and the South Platte River (present day Denver).

Boulder author Margaret Coel painted this vision of Southern Arapaho camp life:

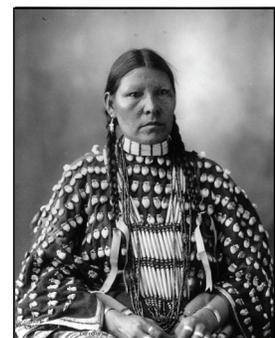
"Dogs played around the doorways; ponies grazed in the open spaces; children romped with the dogs and climbed on the ponies, women sat on the ground sewing

moccasins or beading pouches; men straightened arrowwood or strung bows or combed and dressed their long hair.



Arapaho men in pose prior to a Sun Dance ceremony in Wyoming during the 1880's. Perhaps Arapaho camps in the Boulder Valley looked like this one. Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, X-32362

As hunters, the Arapaho followed game animals, especially buffalo, deer, and antelope. This put them into conflict with the Utes who, as a result, became the traditional enemies of the Arapaho. Historically, the Utes, a Shoshonian people, crossed the Rockies from their Western Slope homes to hunt buffalo in the east. They disliked finding the Arapaho hunting what they thought was their prey and needing to compete with the Arapaho for the game.



The Arapaho lady, Freckled Face, posed for the photographer in all her finery in 1898. Denver Public Library, Western History Collection, F.A. Reinhart. X-32363

"People seeing the beauty of the valley will want to stay, and their staying will be the undoing of the beauty."

—The Curse of Chief Niwot

Although this quote attributed to Left Hand is marvelously prophetic, it is most likely legend rather than fact.

The Arapaho were not just hunters and warriors. Their name is traced to the word used by the Pawnee for them: Tirapihu, or trader. Their knack for trading resulted in both a name (Arapaho) and extensive contacts outside this area which contributed to an Arapaho ability with languages and diplomacy.

The personification of these hallmarks was an Arapaho who, even as a child in his cradleboard, was observed to favor the use of his left hand when reaching for objects. Born in the early 1820's was the future chief Left Hand, also known by the Arapaho language version of his name, Niwot.

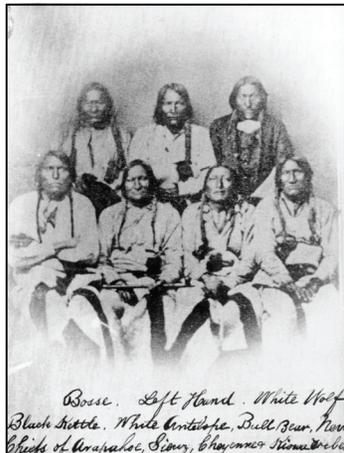
Left Hand thrived in the cosmopolitan environment of the Southern Arapaho. Through the interaction of trade, he learned many other Indian languages and didn't need to rely upon sign language as others did. He also learned English and was quite adept at communicating with whites.

Left Hand was also physically impressive. The Arapaho tended to be tall and slender and Left Hand fit that characteristic. He was described by a contemporary as:

" . . . the finest looking Indian I ever saw. He was over six feet tall, of muscular build and much more intelligent than the average Indian . . . [He was] the only Indian I ever saw who did not braid his hair; it hung loosely over his shoulders. When wearing his war bonnet and full warrior's regalia, he looked every inch a chief."

The august chief was aware of two important trends. First, the Arapaho and Cheyenne had been promised the land between the Platte and Arkansas Rivers by the Treaty of Fort Laramie

of 1851. White pilgrims were flocking into this area in spite of the Treaty. Second, Left Hand witnessed the depletion of his people from a population of many thousands to a few hundred due to the onset of disease and warfare, largely the result of the white invasion.



Did Left Hand Die at Sand Creek?

There is a bit of controversy over Left Hand's fate. Although Left Hand appears in photographs, recent scholarship indicates the pictures were mislabeled (as in the 1864 photo above) or of a second, younger Arapaho who took on the name Left Hand. The Left Hand who lived in Oklahoma and died in the 1880's was the younger man. Boulder County's Niwot did not survive the massacre. Since he was never photographed, artistic depictions of Niwot are the product of the artists' imagination.

These developments were on his mind when, in the fall of 1858, Left Hand found a band of gold seekers in the midst of one of his favorite places, the Red Rocks at the mouth of Boulder Canyon. Conditions between the Aikens Party and the Arapaho were tense that autumn and exacerbated when another chief, Bear Head, gave the prospectors an ultimatum to leave within three days. However, the tension abated when Bear Head received a vision in which he saw the waters of Boulder Creek rise to flood stage and when they receded, only the whites remained. Apparently, Bear Head interpreted

this vision as pointing out the futility of fighting the white onslaught.

Left Hand then moved his people away from the Boulder Creek site. Another treaty in 1861 guaranteed the Arapaho and Cheyenne hunting ground in eastern Colorado. In the meantime, all Colorado Indians were receiving blame for "depredations" or raids against white settlers along the Platte River. Territorial Governor John Evans told them to move to the eastern Colorado reservation for their own protection, which they did.

At that point, November of 1864, one of the greatest tragedies in all of American History took place: the Sand Creek Massacre. Colonel John Chivington and the Colorado Volunteer Cavalry mercilessly attacked an encampment of Cheyenne and Arapaho, killing 150 people, mostly women, children and old men. Ironically, many of the Colorado Cavalry were from the Boulder area and trained at a fort near Valmont

Chiefs Black Kettle, White Antelope, and Left Hand all did what they were instructed to do in order to prevent such an attack, but to no avail. White Antelope and Left Hand both died alongside their brothers and sisters at Sand Creek in November of 1864. In yet another twist, the survivors moved to a reservation in Oklahoma only to be attacked and massacred in an equally deplorable incident, this time at the hands of Lt. Col. George Custer along the banks of the Washita River in 1868.

The legacy of The People in Boulder County is great: the town of Niwot, Niwot Ridge, Left Hand Creek, and the various Arapaho place names. Their heritage is treasured.

~Written by Larry Dorsey~

Sources: Margaret Coel, [Chief Left Hand, Southern Arapaho](#); Tom Noel and Dan Corson, [Boulder County, An Illustrated History](#); Phyllis Smith, [A Look at Boulder: from settlement to city](#); interview with Peter Gleichman; interview with Margaret Coel.