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ADMINISTRATIVE HISTORY

of the

BLACK CANYON OF THE GUNNISON
NATIONAL MONUMENT

Richard G. Biddleman
Colorado College
1965

"....we feel that this Monument is one
of the gems of the Service."

--Paul R. Franke, 1936

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FOREWARD

The following administrative history of Black Canyon of the Gunnison National Monument is based upon a variety of sources. Most important, perhaps, have been the documentary materials on Black Canyon at National Archives in Washington and the various monthly reports at Black Canyon itself and in the Superintendent's Office at Colorado National Monument (now Curecanti, Colorado and Black Canyon in Montrose). The monthly reports include reports by the rangers (both North and South Rim in some cases), reports by the supervisory rangers, reports by the superintendents, and special reports. Also a valuable source of information have been the regional newspapers, especially the old Montrose Enterprise and the contemporary Montrose Daily Press. A variety of pertinent magazine articles and books have been referred to, and personal communications, both written and verbal, with some of the historic figures associated with Black Canyon have afforded an enrichment of source material.

No history can be complete, and this one is no exception. However, the broad canvas has been painted for Black Canyon, with many of the major and minor details sketched in. Years ago Assistant Superintendent Paul R. Franke must have looked forward to that day when this history would be compiled.... "Remember," he wrote the two Monument rangers who in 1938 were writing the area's monthly reports, "the narrative report is also the history of the monument and years later it will be necessary to refer to it."

CHAPTER I
THE INDIAN PERIOD¹

Indians had never exerted much direct impact on the country which eventually was to become Black Canyon National Monument and indeed were long gone by the time the Monument was created in 1933. This, however, had been their realm for generations before the penetration of the first white men; and at least the Utes' claim to the land was to have an indirect significance which has lingered years after the last Indians disappeared.

Obviously there were aborigines in the area, if not at the canyon itself, prior to the advent of the Utes. Folsom spear points have been found in the region, and there are many ancient pictographs and petroglyphs. Certainly a Fremont culture existed regionally, while numerous (30-40) rock shelters are known whose origin is obscure but which at any rate are not Pueblo.² Unfortunately for the history of the Monument, few of the above finds were made within its boundaries.^{2a}

The University of Colorado's Anthropology Department has carried out an archaeological reconnaissance in the Uncompahgre Valley, as well as east of the Monument in the valley of the Gunnison River which will be inundated by reservoir water; and these findings should be available in late 1965. But regardless of new finds, no earlier Indian group will supplant the Utes in terms of regional importance.

Linguistically, the Utes, like the Paiutes, were Shoshonean and farther back were related to the Uto-Aztecan stock which also gave rise to the Aztec, Pima, Papago, Hopi, and Comanche. The

Utes had always been a Rocky Mountain-Great Basin tribe, unlike the Great Plains Cheyennes and Arapahoes, deadly enemies of the Utes, who came southwest into Colorado from Central Canada and the northern Great Lakes states prior to 1800.

The Utes were short, stocky, muscular, becoming portly in middle age. They were reputedly good looking for Indians but were generally dirty and filthy, according to some observers, and so dark-skinned that the Cheyennes referred to them as "Black Faces" or "Black Indians." The Utes called themselves "Nunt'z," meaning "The People," and the mountain country which they occupied they named "The Smiling Mountains." The word "Yutah," referring to them, eventually became corrupted to "Ute."

Historically there were three geographic bands of Ute Indians in the Rocky Mountain-Great Basin country, the group most closely associated with the Black Canyon area being the Uncompahgre or Tabeguache (pronounced Tabewatch) band.³ These Indians spent their winters along the Uncompahgre (originally "Acapagad'r," meaning "where the red light shines on the water;"⁴ the valley of the Uncompahgre was known as the "Valley of Fountains") and Garrison (=Tomichi) Rivers between present-day Montrose and Grand Junction, especially in Shavano Valley south of Montrose, traveling into the higher mountain country in pursuit of deer and other game during summers. This was their main contact with Black Canyon, which was known as the "place of high rocks and much water."⁵ They were more or less wanderers in historic times, and hence it is difficult to assess the aboriginal population of the group. It has been estimated at from 1000 to 3000 individuals at the time of first contact with whites; in

1845 it was estimated at 4,500, 5,000 in 1850.

Prior to contact with white man, the Utes are presumed to have been village-dwelling sedentary Indians, although not agriculturally inclined like the Pueblo Indians to the south. They were a mountain hunting tribe, well known for their prowess with bows and arrows, and later guns. Their bows, of juniper, pine, or other native woods, were six-footers, the arrows two to four feet long, made of shrub branches such as serviceberry tipped with flint or obsidian, later with metal. A good Ute hunter could shoot arrows about as fast as a white man could shoot bullets from a revolver, with deadly accuracy up to 200 feet.

The Utes ~~primarily~~ ^{primarily} hunted for deer ^{and} rabbits, secondarily for elk, antelope, and bighorn sheep; and these forays undoubtedly took them to the vicinity of Black Canyon. They were superstitious, however, and believed that no one could follow the river through its dark chasm and come out alive. Hence, their activity presumably was restricted to the rims, where their scattered artifacts have been found, and this activity was only on a periodic basis. There was an Indian trail into Red Rock Canyon, and the main crossing of the river was done at that point, when necessary.

Presuming that the Monument area was primarily used as a casual hunting ground during summer and fall by the Utes, it is interesting to conjecture on the hunting techniques used here. Deer, the common big game, may have been killed in a drive, like that used with bison on the Great Plains. The animals were driven into deep pits within sagebrush or other brush

enclosures and then slaughtered. Remains of what may have been deer enclosures (= "game traps") have been found in the Serpent Point area and elsewhere on the canyon's North Rim. Undoubtedly deer were also hunted individually by stalking. Rabbits were generally hunted communally. They were driven into nets, burned out of brushland cover (as might have happened in the Black Canyon brushland), or chased with dogs. Jack rabbits were occasionally hunted on horseback.

The meat of animals killed would be cooked over coals, broiled, or jerked. Rabbit meat, to be boiled, was put into waterproof baskets in which the water was heated by hot rocks. The broiled entrails of the larger mammals were considered delicacies. Some hides and smoked meat were taken to Denver the latter half of the last century for barter.

The Utes, unlike the Pueblo Indians to the south, made some use of fish for food, though apparently doing limited or no fishing within the confines of the Black Canyon out of deference to superstition and inaccessibility. In the valleys to north and south, however, fish may have been caught in willow weirs or shot with arrows, eaten fresh or boiled, or boned and dried for winter use.

The Utes were not agricultural Indians and made relatively little use of plant material as food. They did partake of fruit in season, especially the serviceberry and chokecherry which abound in the canyon area, probably used the Gambel's oak acorns, yucca fruit, camas and other roots, the large seeds of rice grass, undoubtedly other plant material as well. For example, they used Nicotiana attenuata for tobacco. Special baskets were made for collecting and processing plant materials. If not eaten fresh, fruit would be dried and then stored in

baskets in underground pits. Chokecherries were often mashed with the pits and dried into balls for later use. pemican, a winter staple of the Indians, was made from dried serviceberries or chokecherries, fat, and venison, formed into blocks. Pinyon nuts were undoubtedly used by local Indians, being parched in hot ashes and then shelled. Any grinding of nuts and acorns was done by means of metates or mortars and mullers, a Great Basin technique.

With the availability of Spanish horses by at least 1640, the Utes were able to make hunting forays into the bison country of the Great Plains, and their material, though not social and religious, culture began to assume the nature of the plains tribes. As a case in point, the lance, a seven-foot stock tipped with flint, came into use both for hunting and in war. The quest after bison brought the Utes into conflict with the Arapahoes and Cheyennes, and frequent skirmishes took place. The Utes were considered brave and excellent warriors, alert and aggressive, and warred not only with the tribes above but also with the Navaho, Kiowa, Apache, Comanche and Shoshoni. Locally, there developed occasional antagonism between Utes and encroaching whites, especially in the second half of the last century.

Originally, the Utes lived in tepees covered with elk hide or in brush-covered framed wickiups, the latter especially during summer months. As they began to assume Great Plains traits in later years, they began using bison hides for tepees. The Utes were notoriously poor tepee builders, their nickname among neighboring tribes being "Bad Lodges." Their tepees were

smaller than most Great Plains tepees, with fewer and shorter poles, a larger smoke hole, and a higher door. The foundation for the tepee was four poles, usually of aspen which would have been available in the Monument area, with a total of eleven poles for support of the covering and two poles to regulate the smoke hole. Since the Black Canyon region was undoubtedly used for transient hunting, it seems unlikely that any extensive tepee villages were ever pitched here, but brush wickiups may have been used.^{5a} Certainly in the valleys to north and south both tepees and wickiups were employed, and tepee rings have been reported not too far from the Monument.

For clothing in the early days the Utes depended upon deer, elk, antelope, and mountain sheep hides and rabbit pelts. Strips of rabbit fur were sewn together to make wraps and also for blankets. Blankets and robes were also made from elk and deer hides. The big game pelts were dressed by the women and made into clothing. The flesh was removed with rough fleshers, then the hair scraped off with a deer-skin bearing tool. Next the hides were wetted, stretched, dried, rubbed with wet deer brains, and finally smoked or softened by pounding with a stone.

The men wore shirts or robes, deerskin leggings, breech-clouts and elkhide moccasins unless on war raids, when they wore only the breech-clouts and moccasins. Head gear was worn only at ceremonials. The hair, never cut, hung in two braids on their chests. The women wore belted leather gowns extending below the knees, moccasins and leggings, and

basket caps. They wore their hair unbraided. With the availability of buffalo, that hide came into common use for many items of clothing, such as moccasins made from the hide turned hair-side in.

For housekeeping, the Utes wove good baskets of a variety of sizes and shapes from willow. Those used for water were water-proofed with pinyon pitch, some of which might have been obtained from the Black Canyon pinyon groves. Wooden bowls were occasionally used, probably made of cottonwood. Limited quantities of poor grade pottery were also utilized. The Utes were accomplished at making a variety of buckskin pouches which were often nicely decorated. Utensils such as awls, hide scraper handles and knife handles were made of bone or horn. Among the Utes, the women made the clothing, provided utensils for the lodge and household, cooked the meals, looked after the children, and were primarily concerned in camp-moving. Meanwhile, the men hunted, made raids into enemy territory, wrought weapons, and conducted most of the ~~ceremonials~~ ceremonials.

In 1861 the Gunnison band of Utes was given an agency at Conejo by the territorial governor of Colorado, and Lafayette Head was appointed the first agent. The Treaty of 1863, ratified the next year, set the Uncompahgre Utes on a reservation which included the present area of the Monument as well as other Colorado country west of the continental divide. This treaty, signed by ten of the Tabeguache leaders including Oyray, guaranteed that the Utes, in exchange for land given up, would receive from the federal government 150 cattle annually for five years, 1000 sheep annually for two years, then 500 sheep

a year for three more years if during this period the Indians showed an interest in ranching and agriculture. There was promise to furnish a blacksmith and to give the band \$10,000 a year in goods and \$10,000 in provisions for ten years. On all of these promises the government defaulted:

The Treaty of 1868 united the Ute bands, and Chief Ouray was named by the government to head the nation at \$1000 a year salary.⁶ In all, the Utes entered into eight treaties with the United States Government during this period. By 1882, shortly after the local region had been thrown open to white settlement, most of the Colorado Utes had been moved to reservations in Utah, thus curtailing direct Indian influence in the Black Canyon region.

In retrospect, it would seem likely that the main use the Utes made of the Black Canyon area was for hunting and perhaps some collection of plant materials. They did use Signal Hill, south of the Monument near the West Portal of the Gunnison Diversion Tunnel, for exchange of signal fires in years gone by; and there has been an unlikely rumor that the fire scar on the North Rim's Fruitland Mesa dates to a fire set by Utes to drive out the white men.

Strangely enough, the Utes' most significant impact on the Monument came long after the Indians' departure. The Ute Indian Treaty of June 15, 1888, guaranteed the Utes a remuneration of \$1.25 an acre for any new disposition of the land under the Public Land Laws. When the original Monument establishment was being considered in the early 1930's,⁷ and when later boundary changes were contemplated, the specter of this and their provision was to keep the memory of the Utes' former "happy

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- 2 - Personal communication from Dr. Robert Lister, Department of Anthropology, University of Colorado, April 19, 1965.
- 2a- Two Folsom points and "various rock inscriptions" were found on the North Rim near the Monument's west boundary in September of 1939. - Monthly Report.
- 3 - Later incorporated into the Middle or Ccchetopa Agency.
- 4 - According to Escalante, "...by the Yutas called Ancapagari (which according to the interpreter, means Laguna Colorado) because near its source there is a spring of red water, hot and bad tasting." - Bolton, Herbert E., 1950. Pageant in the wilderness. Utah Hist. Quar. 18: 150.
- 5 - National Park Service Report, November, 1937. MCR-RB, National Archives.
- 5a- A wickup site was found at the west end of the North Rim in September of 1939, and tent poles were found in August of 1940 in the same general area. Also, just under the rimrock overlooking the west end of Bostwick Park a possible burial site was discovered in September, 1963. - Monthly Reports.
- 6 - This treaty guaranteed the Utes their land "as long as the rivers might run and grasses might grow."
- 7 - See Chapter V, "The Monument Establishment."

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CHAPTER II
THE EARLY REGIONAL EXPLORERS
Rivera, Escalante, Gunnison and Fremont

If history could be rewritten, it would be much more exciting for Black Canyon's to have had the first white explorers of the region reach the chasm rim rather than merely skirt the uplift. But from Rivera's entry into the Uncompahgre Valley in 1765, over a century was to pass before history could truthfully record such an event.

Juan María de Rivera's expedition of 1765 was probably the first in the vicinity of Black Canyon.¹ On orders from Tomás Vélez Cachupín, Governor of New Mexico, the party had left Santa Fe searching for mineral riches, prospected the western San Juans, and eventually came down the north slope of the Uncompahgre Plateau into the river valley near today's Montrose.

Following the Uncompahgre River northwest, the expedition skirted the western end of the Black Canyon uplift to the junction of the Gunnison and Uncompahgre Rivers near the present-day town of Delta, where on the south bank an encampment was made in a meadow. Here, reportedly, Rivera cut a cross on a "second-growth" cottonwood together with his initials and the year of the trip. After sending two men across the river (mistakened for the Colorado) to look for Yuta (=Ute) Indians, Rivera turned his group around and proceeded back the way he had come.

In late summer of 1776 Franciscans Fray Francisco Atanasio Domínguez and Fray Silvestre Vélez de Escalante and their small party, with a Yuta guide named "Atanasio" in honor of the leader Domínguez, came northeast off the Uncompahgre Plateau and struck the Uncompahgre River (=Río de San Francisco) about five miles south of present-day Montrose.² This was not entirely strange

country, inasmuch as the expedition was familiar with Rivera's journal and included one man who had already been in the area. Escalante prophotically noted that where the expedition first saw the river "...there is a meadow about three leagues long with excellent land for crops, opportunities for irrigation and everything needed for the establishment of a good settlement."³

The next day, August 27, the party moved downstream along the west bank of the Uncompahgre River, with the Black Canyon uplift in view to the right, crossed the river several miles below today's Montrose, and camped for the night in a cottonwood-edged meadow about three miles north of Olathe. On the 28th the expedition left the river and cut cross-country around the end of the uplift, striking the Gunnison River (=Rio de San Francisco Javier=Rio del Tomichi) several miles west of its junction with the North Fork, near the site of Austin. The group camped that night in a bend of the river where there was some pasturage, naming the spot "Santa Monica;" then on the afternoon of August 30 crossed the Gunnison River "in which the water reached above the shoulder blades of the horses" and proceeded northeast to the North Fork of the Gunnison (=Rio de Santa Rosa de Lima), at about the location of Hotchkiss. From here the expedition crossed northeast over Grand Mesa, leaving the Black Canyon area.

Thus Escalante and his men circled much of the Black Canyon from south by west to north, fording water which had emanated from the gorge; but never realized what rugged scenery they had circumscribed.

Around 1837 Fort Uncompahgre was constructed just below

the junction of the Gunnison and Uncompahgre by Antoine Robidoux, French trader from St. Louis; and for the short time before it was burned by Utes, the fort served as a congregating point.⁴ But if anyone from here penetrated to the Black Canyon Gorge, the event was unpublicized.

In 1853 John Williams Gunnison and his party, like those before, skirted the Black Canyon uplift but failed to reach the gorge. However, inasmuch as Gunnison's name is closely associated with the present Monument, it is worth delineating in greater detail this man and his expedition.⁵

John Williams Gunnison was born on November 11, 1812, in Goshen, New Hampshire, a small village in the Sunapee Mountains. In the spring of 1833 he was appointed as a cadet at West Point, commencing his studies on July 1, 1833. When he graduated in June of 1837 as Cadet No. 892, he ranked second in his class of fifty.

Feeling that "the interests of individuals should yield to the interest of their Country," Gunnison accepted a commission as second lieutenant on July 1, 1837. He was shortly ordered, as an ordnance officer, to Florida where at the time there was trouble with the Seminole Indians. During the course of this tour of duty he explored many of the unknown lakes and rivers in this semi-tropical wilderness. The next year he was transferred to the Corps of Topographical Engineers for whom he carried out surveys both in Florida and Georgia.

On April 15, 1841, he married Martha A. Delony whom he had met in Georgia. Shortly he was sent to Green Bay, Wisconsin, to carry out a survey of the Wisconsin-Michigan boundary. He was

engaged in a survey of Lake Michigan in 1842 and continued surveys of the Great Lakes into 1848.

In April of 1849 he received surprise orders to proceed to St. Louis and there join an expedition bound for Utah Territory. His job was to commence a survey along a new and unknown route from Fort Hall on the Oregon Trail to the Mormon settlement at Great Salt Lake, obtaining all information possible about the Salt Lake Valley and making charts of the country.

This expedition was under the command of Captain Howard Stansbury. When the company left St. Louis, Gunnison was sick and had to be transported on a bed in the large spring wagon used for carrying instruments. He reached Salt Lake on August 23, 1849, and, having recovered from his illness, went up to Fort Hall and later superintended the party which explored Utah Lake and its vicinity over a three-month period.

During the winter of 1849-50, which Gunnison spent at Salt Lake City, he made a thorough study of the Mormon religion and began preparations for his book "The Mormons or Letter-Day Saints in the Valley of the Great Salt Lake." On occasion he also assisted the Mormons in their encounters against the Indians.

With the arrival of spring, Gunnison commenced a survey of the eastern shore of Great Salt Lake. By the end of August, 1850, the survey was completed and the expedition headed east for home. During the course of this return trip, Gunnison was thrown from his horse and severely bruised, after his horse had been accidentally shot. Otherwise the journey was without incident.

By January of 1851 Gunnison was back in Washington, engaged

in making maps of the expedition's travels. Subsequently, he and Stansbury compiled the official report for the Great Salt Lake expedition.

At the close of the 31st Congress in 1852, an appropriation was made for a survey of a railroad route from the Mississippi River to the Pacific Ocean. On March 3, 1853, Jefferson Davis, then Secretary of War, ordered such an expedition to be made through the Rockies after a plan by Senator Benton. The senator had advocated a transcontinental railroad between the 38th and 39th parallels.

Benton tried to engineer John Charles Fremont, his son-in-law, into command of the expedition, but Secretary of War Davis appointed Gunnison, who now held the rank of captain. He was ordered, by telegram from J. J. Abert of the Army Office of Chief Engineers, to make a survey through the Rocky Mountains by way of the Huerfano River, over Cochetopa Pass "or other accessible passes," into the region of the present-day Gunnison River, the Green River, west to the Sevier River, returning north to Lake Utah, through the Wasatch Range to South Pass and Fort Laramie, then east to Washington.⁶

This expedition outfitted just below the mouth of the Kansas River, about five miles from Westport. Gunnison's staff consisted of Lt. E. G. Beckwith, second in command; R. H. Kern, topographer and artist; J. A. Snyder, assistant topographer; Sheppard Homans, astronomer; F. Creutzfeldt, botanist; Dr. James Schiel, surgeon and geologist; and Charles Taplin, wagon-master. In addition, there was a military escort of thirty non-commissioned officers and men under Brevet Captain R. H. Morris.

