



*The* DENVER WESTERNERS  
**ROUNDUP**

September - October 2020



*Courtesy Gary Ziegler*

*Culturally Modified Tree Categorized as a Medicine Tree due to Indian Modifications that Convolutd its Trunk and Created a Basal Scar*

**Native American Prayer Trees of Colorado**

*By John Wesley Anderson*

(presented October 28, 2020)



### Our Author

John Wesley Anderson, MBA, is a published author, storyteller and TEDx speaker. He retired after a twenty-two year career with the Colorado Springs-Police Department and served eight years as the elected Sheriff for El Paso County, Colorado. John retired from Lockheed Martin in 2012 to pursue his love for history, writing and art. John has traveled around the world—including adventures on a catamaran sailing the Caribbean, corporate security assignments into a combat zone on the Horn of Africa and landed on an aircraft carrier at sea—but remains most fascinated by the history and art of the American West.

His books include *Sherlock Holmes in Little London, 1896*, *The Missing Year: ZacBox and the Pearls of Pleiades*; *R.S. Kelly, A Man of the Territory*; *Native American Prayer Trees of Colorado*; *Rankin Scott Kelly, First Sheriff El Paso County, Colorado Territory*; and *Ute Indian Prayer Trees of the Pikes Peak Region*. The first four are available on Amazon.

## Native American Prayer Trees of Colorado

By John Wesley Anderson

Whether they are called Prayer Trees, Spirit Trees or Trail Trees, the fact remains there are thousands of Native American Culturally Modified Trees with bent trunks blended into the green forests of the United States and Canada. According to the Georgia Mountain Stewards January 2020 *Trail Tree Newsletter*, their Trail Tree Project database documents over 2,700 Trail Trees in forty-four U.S. states and Canada, including Colorado.<sup>1</sup> Ethnographical and field research conducted by the author suggests there are easily twice that number still standing today in the forests across the ancestral homeland of the Ute.<sup>2</sup> These trees are living Native American cultural artifacts that deserve to be added to our historical, cultural and archeological records.

A Culturally Modified Tree (CMT) is defined as a tree modified by the indigenous people of a region pursuant to their cultural beliefs or traditions. The most widely recognized CMTs in the world are Bonsai trees shaped by the people of Japan and China for thousands of years. Using similar techniques, American Indians have also shaped trees for hundreds if not thousands of years. While Bonsai trees are shaped primarily for meditation or relaxation, the shaping of trees by the indigenous people of North America was for utilitarian purposes, such as way-finding. Trailmarker Trees informed our indigenous people what lay ahead—similar to today's highway signs—and are the most common type of CMTs found in the U.S. and Canada.

On the cover of this booklet is a photo of a Medicine Tree found near Westcliffe, Colorado. This old Ponderosa pine was discovered northeast of the Great Sand Dunes near dozens of other Native American artifacts (e.g. stone tools and stacked circular rock formations). Other Trailmarker Trees have been discovered along the Cherokee Trail. The Cherokee Trail connected the Santa Fe Trail to the California-Oregon Trail prior to Colorado becoming a territory. This trail was well-researched and documented in the book *The Cherokee Trail. Bent's Old Fort to Fort Bridger*, by Lee Whiteley and published by the Denver Posse of Westerners.<sup>4</sup>

While following Cherokee Trail maps in Whiteley's book, other Trailmarker Trees were discovered in eastern El Paso County that look remarkably *dissimilar* to most "Prayer or Spirit Trees" located elsewhere in the ancestral homeland of the Ute. This, and other recent CMT discoveries, suggests some Trailmarker Trees in Colorado may be attributable to other Indian tribes (e.g., Cherokee, Comanche, Jicarilla Apache).<sup>5</sup> One exquisite Hawken-type projectile point (arrowhead), estimated to be 7000-8500 years old, was discovered within a few hundred yards of Trailmarker Trees lining wagon ruts believed to have been part of the Cherokee Trail.<sup>6</sup> Hawken points attached to a wooden foreshaft were launched using an atlatl—an Indian device used for throwing a spear—to hunt bison. This discovery suggests the Cherokee Trail may have been in use long before these Trail Trees were shaped.

Dozens more Trailmarker Trees have been discovered along well-traveled mountain passes—from Glorietta Pass in northern New Mexico to Rabbit Ears Pass in northern Colorado—including La Veta Pass, Ute Pass, Vail Pass and Kenosha Pass (Kenosha is an Indian word for water jug.)<sup>7</sup> The majority of these Trailmarker Trees have one bend to the trunk, bent at about a thirty degree angle, which is also the approximate angle of inclination for tipi lodgepoles. In addition to pointing toward a trail or mountain pass Trailmarker Trees are also known to point to a resource, such as where chert (rock used for stone tools) or spring water could be found.<sup>8</sup>



Author Collection

*Native American Trailmarker Tree Located in  
Fox Run Regional Park, El Paso County, Colorado*

In the article *Trail Trees Along the Old Spanish Trail*, written by Southern Ute tribal elder James Jefferson and published in *The Southern Ute Drum*, he explains,

*The Ute are a people who lived in the mountains of Colorado, Utah and New Mexico. The traditional hunting grounds extended far beyond that territory.... Important to the Ute Indians were the trail trees and rock art that guided them on their travels. While many of these trees can live to be 300 to 600 years old, some are near the end of their lives.... The Utes call them Spirit Trees as they were known to hold the prayers and then they go to Creator.<sup>9</sup>*

In reference to another publication, Jefferson stated: "I can confirm the existence of Prayer Trees that were used by my ancestors for navigational, medicinal, burial, educational and spiritual purposes."<sup>10</sup>

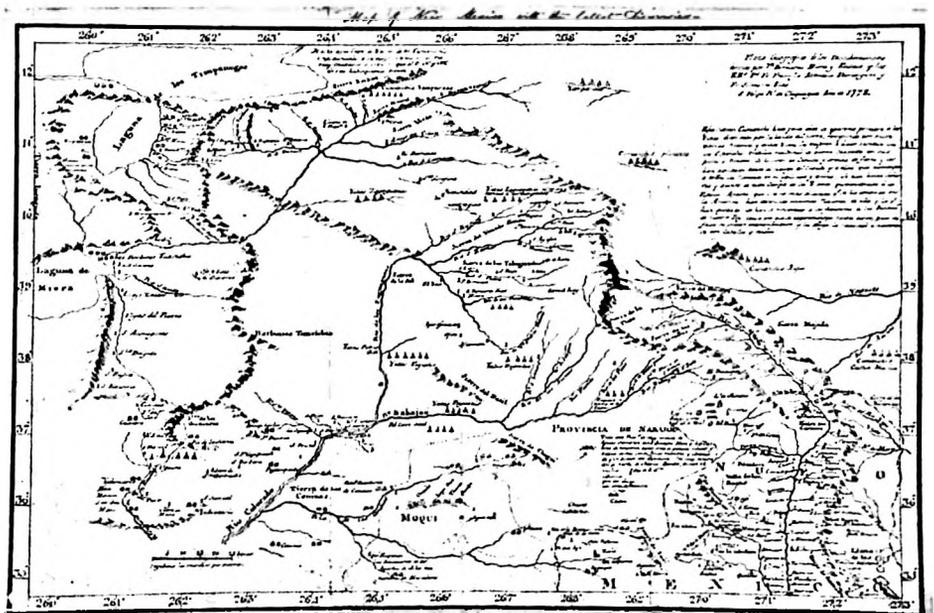
In the book, *Comanche Marker Trees of Texas*, the authors stated:

*...uses of trees are more individual to the tribes they represent, such as the Ute Indian Prayer Trees in Colorado or the Comanche Storytelling Place*

*Tree in Dallas, Texas. The consistency of use among tribes is noted by Arterberry: Prior to entering into Texas, the Comanche had migrated out of the Great Basin area, then southerly into the Ute territories and became allied with their linguistic relatives. They spent many years living amongst the Ute before entering into the Southern Plains of Texas. The Comanche brought with them a technique of tree usage that served a host of purposes. Not only were these trees used to mark trails, springs, meeting locations, plant and geologic resources, they identified boundaries, events and other activities that were important to Comanche cultural history.<sup>11</sup>*

The Spanish made first contact with the indigenous people of present-day Colorado during the mid-16th Century. Spanish Conquistadors traced the Colorado and Rio Grande Rivers to their headwaters, high in the Rocky Mountains, the ancestral homeland of the Ute. The Ute Creation Story teaches them Creator brought them to the “Shining Mountains” at the beginning of time. They are one of the few Indian tribes without a migration story. The Ute and Comanche languages are Shoshonean, a dialect of the ancient Uto-Aztec language. According to the Southern Ute website, “The Ute people lived in harmony with their environment. They traveled throughout Ute territory on familiar trails that crisscrossed the mountain ranges of Colorado.”<sup>12</sup>

A Spanish map by Bernardo Miera y Pacheco, dated 1778, documents where encampments for the Yutas (Utes) and Cumanchis (Comanches) were found. In 1779

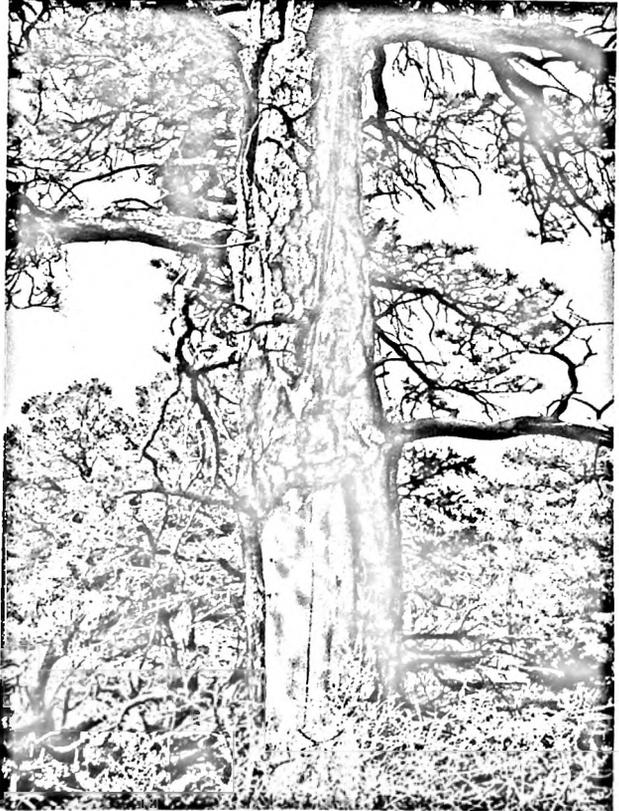


Courtesy Library of Congress

Miera's "Map of New Mexico with the Latest Discoveries (1778)," Including Parts of Present-Day Colorado, Utah and Arizona. Note Comanche Tents near Present-Day Denver

Juan Bautista de Anza, Governor of the Spanish Northern Frontier, led a punitive campaign from Santa Fe (NM) against the Comanche Warchief Cuerno Verde (Green Horn) who had been raiding other tribes and Spanish settlements disrupting the balance of trade. A translation from Anza's journal reads, "Friday August 20, 1779, From Santa Fe to Rio de Los Conejos (Conejos River), 41 Leagues...two hundred men of the Ute and Apache Nation also joined me with one of their principal captains...on a campaign against the Comanches."<sup>13</sup> According to Jefferson, the Utes made good guides for the 1776 Dominguez-Escalante Expedition—establishing the Old Spanish Trail—and the 1779 Anza Comanche Campaign because the Ute could read rock art and Trail Trees.<sup>14</sup>

Obviously, not every bent tree in the forest is a Prayer Tree. There are many natural causes for a tree to be disfigured. To help distinguish between natural and man-made features, author John Anderson collaborated with Lois Adams to develop a Culturally Modified Tree Verification Chart.<sup>15</sup> (See pages 10-11.) The CMT V-Chart guides people down the left-side of the V to help rule out many natural causes for trees disfigurement and up the right-leg of the V to search for human-caused features. Examples of natural causes might include; animal involvement (e.g., porcupines), weather (i.e., heavy snowfall, lightning) or disease (Dwarf Mistletoe, Western Gall Rust, etc.). Human-caused indicators might include peeled bark or tie-down marks in the bark.



*Author's Collection*

*This Tree was Modified by Humans Below a Lightning Strike as Shown by the Oval Basal Scar.*

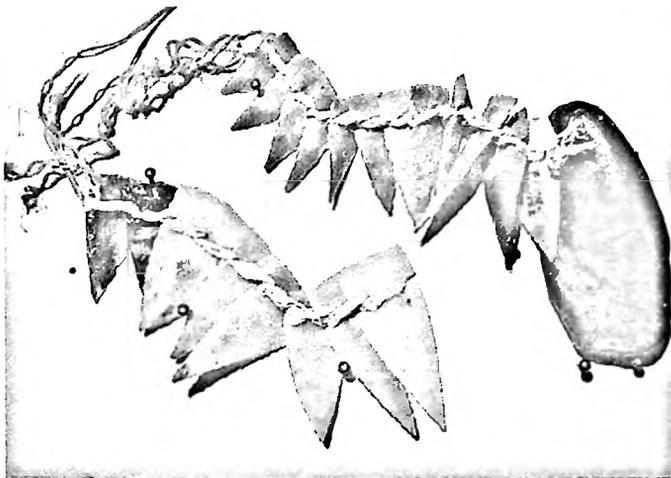
Many Native American tribes in the Southwest, including the Ute, braided yucca fibers to make a lightweight rope or cordage. This durable cordage was used for eagle snares, bridles for horses or to bend the trunk of a young tree by tying the sapling to a wooden stake driven into the ground. Similar to baling wire or barbed wire being wrapped around

the trunk of a young tree, after a few years of growth, when the wire or cordage is removed, it will often leave a visible indentation in the outer bark. The book *Comanche Marker Trees of Texas* refers to these tie-down or ligature marks across the bark of a CMT as “cross-grain scars.”<sup>16</sup>

The second most common type of CMT found in Colorado is the Burial Tree. These trees have two ninety-degree bends to the trunk. The two bends were made when the tree was young and the trunk pliable enough to be bent at a ninety-degree angle close to the ground. The Cherokee used a branch from another tree, called a “thong,” shaped like a capital Y and driven into the ground. They bent the trunk of a young tree over the thong, creating the first horizontal bend in the trunk, and then at the desired length, drove a second wooden stake into the ground to tie the tree to the ground. Often a cut can be seen in the bark going down the trunk over the first bend, called the “hip.” Occasionally a parallel cut can also be observed severing the outer fibers of the heartwood on the hip which helped keep the tree from resuming its natural shape.

Horticulturalists explain when the main trunk of a plant or tree is staked down it will grow a secondary trunk, called a leader, which resumes the natural sun-seeking growth of the tree. The primary trunk continues to grow outward for years and may wither and die on its own. However, if a dead primary trunk is examined closely, cut marks can occasionally be found all the way around the primary trunk cutting through the bark and exposing the heartwood. This technique was done to intentionally kill off the primary trunk to redirect the natural sun-seeking growth of the tree. Foresters refer to this bark removal process as “girdling” and some suggest this characteristic may be the most compelling evidence the tree was modified by human hands.

Some people claim these Ponderosa pine trees with bent trunks are not old enough or big enough to have been shaped by the Native Americans. Yet, dendrochronology—the science of determining the age of a tree by counting annual tree rings—proves most of these CMTs are at least 200-300 years old. Foresters are taught to measure and core a tree at diameter breast height (DBH) to determine its age. However, a challenge arises when using an incremental bore core tool to determine the age of a CMT as the “pith

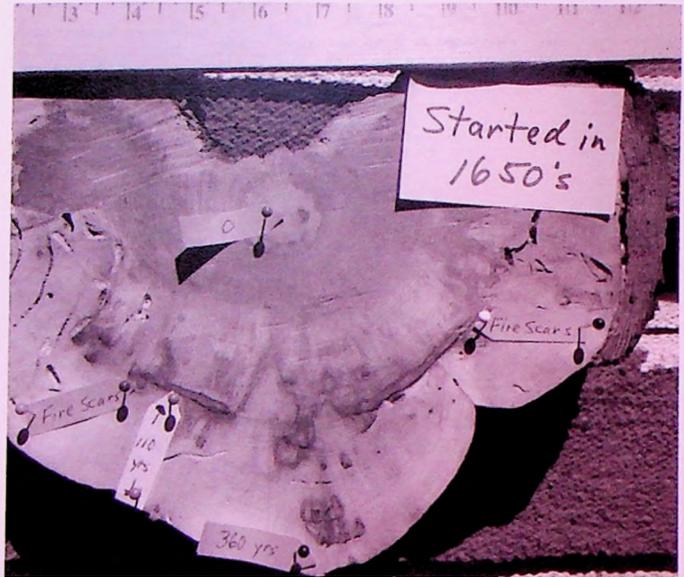


*Courtesy Bruce Clark*

*Yucca Cordage here used to Lace Together Projectile Points that may have been used as an Eagle Snare or for Picketing a Horse*

ring” (the center ring or year one) is off-set and is no longer located at the exact center of the trunk. To support the weight of the tree above the bend, annual tree rings grow thicker at the bottom causing the trunk to assume an oval shape.<sup>17</sup>

For a tree to be old enough to have been modified by American Indians it must be well over 100 years old; but CMTs don't have to be huge. Dendrochronology analysis supports the hypothesis that the height and diameter of a tree is determined more by sunlight, access to water, soil conditions and altitude, rather than by the tree's age. Dendrochronology results for a CMT with a 12-inch diameter, discovered in El Paso County, was determined to be 360



Courtesy Dean Williams

Partial Cross-section (or Cookie) of a CMT Showing 360 Tree Rings that Started Growing in the 1650s. Found North of Fox Run Regional Park, El Paso County, Colorado

years old when it died several years ago. Another Ponderosa pine with a 9-inch diameter trunk was confirmed to be 309 years old.<sup>18</sup> After years of research, Anderson has concluded that deciding if a tree is a Native American CMT is an easier task than determining its attribution (*who?*) or interpretation (*why?*).

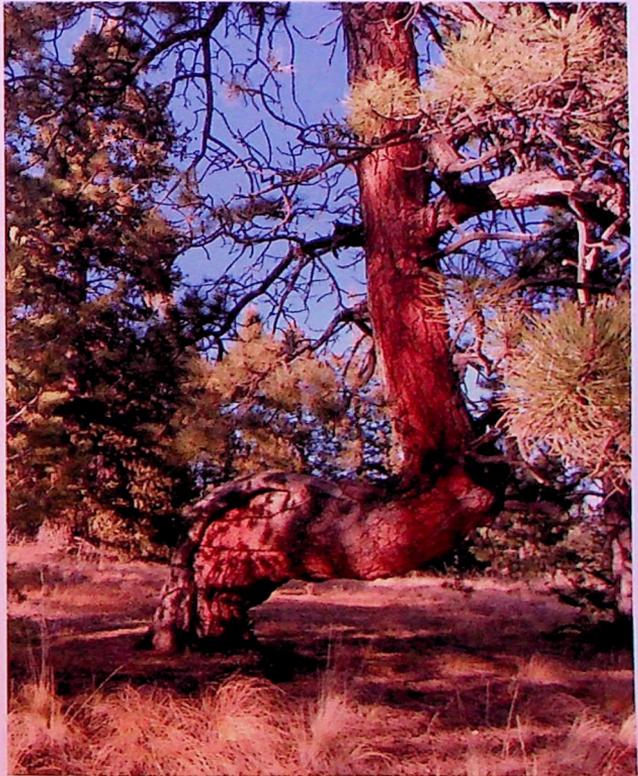
The presence of the Ute was well-documented by Colorado's early explorers and frontiersmen, including John C. Fremont and Kit Carson, who used the Ute as guides. General William Tecumseh Sherman wrote, "Kit Carson first came into public notice by Fremont's *Reports of the Exploration of the Great West* about 1842-3." Continuing in the same letter he commented, "Reaching Fort Garland, New Mexico, in September or October 1866, I found it garrisoned by some companies of New Mexico Volunteers, of which Carson was Colonel or commanding officer. I stayed with him some days, during which we had a sort of council with the Ute Indians, of which the Chief Ouray was the principle feature."<sup>19</sup>

Some people might question how so many Prayer or Spirit Trees could still be standing in the homeland of the Ute? There are a couple possible explanations; first, is the longevity of Ponderosa pine tree, with an average lifespan of 600-800 years, which outlives most species of trees growing at lower elevations. Secondly, the Indians that once

occupied the ancestral homeland of the Ute modified trees extensively. The last possibility is that all other American Indian tribes were displaced from their homelands before the removal of the Ute. The Ute were the last American Indians forced onto a reservation following the September 29, 1879 Battle of Milk Creek, fought between the Ute and U.S. Cavalry, and the simultaneously occurring Meeker Massacre. The result was the 1880 Ute Agreement forcing the Ute to relocate to reservations in Colorado and Utah.<sup>20</sup>

The early presence of the Ute in southern Colorado, from the Four Corners to the Spanish Peaks, is well documented and many CMTs and stone features (projectile points, tipi rings, firepits, rock art, etc.) have been attributed to the Ute. However, the Jicarilla Apache were also known to have traveled across present-day southern Colorado and were known to have modified trees. Place names with Native American references might help determine which tribes once occupied or traveled through a region. For example, travelers today heading west on Highway 160 approaching La Veta Pass, may notice a road sign sharing the Native American name for the Spanish Peaks, "Wahatoya." However, this place name is neither Ute nor Apache, but Comanche.<sup>21</sup>

Trailmarker Trees are often found in alignment with other Trailmarker Trees. Hikers following Trail Trees may come across CMTs of different configurations clustered together. A grouping of CMTs might suggest the area was a destination location for gatherings, ceremonies or hunting camps used while harvesting food. While exploring a group of CMTs on the Black Hawk Ranch, located on the eastern slope of the Spanish Peaks, a cluster of CMTs was found in association with bedrock mortar holes. These stone features may have been used long ago by Native Americans to crush pinon nuts and meat mixed with melted fat, mountain sage and other ingredients to create a protein-rich food source called pemmican.<sup>22</sup>



Author's Collection

*Ute Prayer Tree at Mueller State Park*

While the Ute are generally accepted as the indigenous people of Colorado, many other federally recognized tribes also claim a presence including the Apache, Arapahoe, Cherokee, Cheyenne, Comanche, Hopi, Navajo, Pueblo, Shoshone, Sioux, Wichita and Zuni. With the notable exception of the Cherokee, these tribes were not known to have a written language. Their culture and history have been passed down from one generation to the next in the form of stories, ceremonies or songs. Without a clear understanding of which tribes and tribal bands were where, and when, and without knowing the approximate age of a CMT or stone feature, the attribution or interpretation of an artifact remains challenging.

Visitors to the Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Park, in the four corners of Colorado, south of Cortez, can take a Ute-guided tour into the park where broken pottery shards still lay on the ground below ancient ruins and petroglyphs.<sup>23</sup> Ute guides and tribal elders claim many of these petroglyphs are hundreds of years old and a few have solstice alignments. By definition, petroglyphs are images pecked into the rock surface rather than painted as are pictographs. Arborglyphs are images carved into the trunks of trees (Utes primarily used Ponderosa pine or aspen trees). Petroglyphs, stone enclosures and CMTs with bent trunks have been discovered with sunrise or sunset solstice alignments across the Ute ancestral homeland.

Jefferson tells how the Ute planted trees, transplanted trees, grafted parts of one tree onto another and used trees as a clock, a calendar and a compass. Standing in the forest, Jefferson points to the shadow of a tree as it tracks slowly across the ground. He explains this is how his people knew the time, which way is north and how tracking the sun informed them of the season. Native American CMTs, with sunrise or sunset alignments for the summer and winter solstice, have been located. A few trees appear to incorporate the sun setting behind a distant mountain peak. CMT trees with bent trunks have alignments to the four cardinal directions, thus proving the direction of the bend is not random.

### Rule out Natural Causes

Animals? (i.e., deer, elk, porcupines).

Weather? (i.e., heavy snowfall, strong winds).

Lightning?

Disease? (Mistletoe, etc.).

Recent, man-caused damage (lumbering, road work, etc.).

All negatives?  
Move on to confirm!

#### Key:

- > A positive to any of the causes will likely rule out the tree being a Native American CMT.
- > The more indicators that are confirmed, the higher the likelihood the tree is a Native American CMT.



Jefferson tells stories how his ancestors studied the stars in the night sky and used the North Star to help guide them along their annual migration routes. He tells stories of how his people sang songs when they traveled at night. He says he remembers his elders telling stories about how their ancestors sang four different songs, one for each direction. They also had four names for the wind, depending upon which direction the wind was blowing. Many Native American people believe the wind is sacred. Some accept its touch upon their face as the breath from their Creator. Sadly, the four names for the wind and words to the four Ute songs appear to have been lost from their culture over the years, along with their family traditions of shaping trees.<sup>24</sup>

Jefferson explains this cultural loss began when his ancestors were forced onto the Ute Reservations. They didn't need Trailmarker Trees—they weren't going anywhere. He tells how the "process of cultural assimilation" implemented by the U.S. Government was intended to take "the Indian out of the child." He says Native American children, including himself, were forced to leave their families on the Reservations to attend the white man's boarding schools. There they were punished if they spoke their Ute language, used their Indian names or practiced their tribal ceremonies and traditions.<sup>25</sup> Jefferson remembers he had an Indian name, and it was just one word; but sadly, he has forgotten his Ute name.

Jefferson is one of the last surviving members of his tribe who as children were taught Ute as a primary language, a language that had been spoken for at least 14,000 years. It wasn't until he was five years old that Jefferson was taught English and by then he had already learned Spanish. He also learned to speak Diné (Navajo), the Native American language of his wife of fifty-three years. Professor of Ojibwe, Anton Treuer, estimates in his book that, "there may have been as many as five hundred distinct tribal languages in North America prior to sustained contact with Europeans. There are now around 180, but the number is shrinking quickly."<sup>26</sup>



**Confirm Man-caused Indicators**

✓ Peeled bark pattern and/or hurls not caused by nature.

✓ Tie-down marks where tree was shaped, grafted or possibly planted.

✓ Other CMTs found in area and/or indications of Native American activity (i.e., bedrock mortar holes, stone enclosures, etc.).

✓ Location: near a trail or water source and/or oriented to point to important land mark(s).

✓ Appears to be over 100 years old.

Ponderosa Pines start to turn orange about 80-100 years of age and will turn full orange as they mature.



Lois Adams 3/6/2017

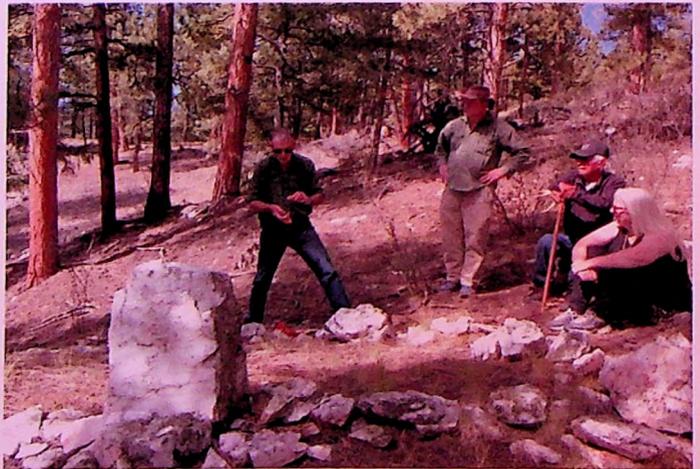
Author Collection,

Wade Davis, a Colombian-Canadian anthropologist, ethnobotanist and author, shares in his digital TED Talks (TED meaning technology, entertainment and design), "When each of you...were born, there were 6,000 languages being spoken on the planet. Today ...fully half are no longer being whispered into the ears of children. They are no longer being taught to babies, which means, effectively, unless something changes, they're already dead." Davis teaches, "A language is not just a body of vocabulary or a set of grammatical rules. A language is a flash of the human spirit. It's a vehicle through which the soul of each particular culture comes into the material world." Dr. Davis explains, "Perhaps the greatest cultural loss is language loss" and, explains Davis, "we must be the agents of cultural survival."<sup>27</sup>

People ask, "Why are not more people aware of these trees?" Jimmy Arterberry explains it this way,

*Many years ago, American Indians became reluctant to share details regarding their customs with outsiders. They had lost the basic necessities for their way of life. The Comanche's painted trees and carved trees, as well as other trees obviously related to the American Indian way of life, were often removed by early settlers. Bent and less-obvious Indian marker trees often survived because only the American Indians knew of their significance, and tribe members were instructed not to talk about them. As a result, it is difficult to uncover the tree's secrets from a past that was buried long ago. Add to that the fact that Traditional Cultural Properties and Indian marker trees are often in the way of future development or redevelopment. As a result, society often greatly underestimates or ignores the true value of these cultural resources.<sup>28</sup>*

Many Native Americans believe these modified trees are sacred and may lead to sacred places. The U.S. Highway 285 corridor west of Denver, between Morrison and Kenosha Pass, is lined with CMTs. Many of these CMTs were found in association with stone features including arrowheads, stone tools, Moqui (or Moki) steps carved into the surface of



Author's Collection

*Native American Medicine Wheel found in Jefferson County. Left to right: Gary Ziegler, Tom McGuire, James Jefferson and Janet Shown.*

a rock formation and one extraordinary Medicine Wheel.<sup>29</sup> This Medicine Wheel was constructed entirely of milk white quartz crystal, one of the three sacred stones of the ancient Ute people. Two distant Trailmarker Trees were discovered pointing to where this Medicine Wheel was found.

While visiting this Medicine Wheel site with botanists from the Denver Botanic Gardens in 2018, evidence of “lichen bridging” was observed with lichen growing from one rock onto the next, confirming the site to be an older archeological site.<sup>30</sup> Jefferson “feels” this site is attributable to the ancient Ute and offered a prayer in his native language before performing a smudging ceremony to bless the site located on private land. An earlier visit by Jefferson and archaeologist Gary Ziegler confirmed compass readings taken of the two intersecting lines of rocks extending outward from the center stone are aligned to the four cardinal directions.

During another late summer field trip to this site in the mountains west of Denver, dozens of Painted Lady butterflies were observed flying across the Medicine Wheel, from north to south.

Birds and insects, including butterflies and bees, use the Earth’s magnetic field for navigation during their annual migrations. This poses an intriguing question; since the Ute also traveled along annual migration routes, is it possible they too somehow used the Earth’s magnetic field for navigation?.

When visiting ancient cultural sites and sacred trees, people must be taught from a young age to protect the archaeological integrity and respect the spiritual sanctity of these Native American sites by “taking only pictures and leaving only footprints.”

The only grove of trees listed on the National Register of Historic Places is in southern Colorado on the Great Sand Dunes National Monument. Over 200 Ponderosa pine trees with large peeled bark patterns are protected as “living artifacts” around the Great Sand Dunes.<sup>31</sup> Over seventy of these CMTs are clustered in the Indian Grove area. Our field research located over forty more directly south of the Sand Dunes, including the CMT shown on page six. While other Indian tribes visited the dune for centuries, these large peeled trees are believed to be attributable to the Ute who used the inner layer of bark, called the cambium layer, for medicinal or nutritional purposes.

While exploring these large peeled CMTs with Jefferson, he shared, “What this tells me is this was done during a time of great sickness and starvation among my people.”<sup>32</sup> While some people on and off the Ute Reservations dismiss any tree with a bent trunk as being a CMT, large peeled bark trees and arborglyphs are widely accepted. However, hundreds of Burial and Trailmarker Trees have been discovered with peeled bark patterns. In the San Juan National Forest stand several large peeled bark trees, Trailmarker Trees, Burial Trees and arborglyphs, including one Ponderosa pine that had the trunk of another tree grafted onto its trunk and bent around the trunk to fuse with the trunk of a third tree.

Many Native American elders who have “walked on” left behind their words of wisdom. Shortly before her passing, Northern Ute tribal elder Loya Arrum was interviewed for the film documentary, *Mystery of the Trees*. She shared, “I talk to the spirit of the Prayer Tree; the Prayer Tree is holding the prayers.... They are not just Trailmarkers, they are places where you could have an offering...speak to the ancestors. What they would

do is bend the tree...the prayer is to Creator.”<sup>33</sup> A Lummi Nation elder, Jewell Prayer Wolf James, cautions, “If we can’t protect the Earth, can’t protect the sky, if we can’t protect our sacred sites, then we’ve failed the world.”<sup>34</sup>

Despite the teachings of some Ute tribal elders, there are archeologists, historians and Ute representatives who claim trees with bent trunks are simply causalities of nature (heavy snowfall, lightning, disease, porcupines, wind, etc.) and profess, “There are no oral histories of cultural practices that provide any evidence for ‘prayer trees’ in the Ute tradition. In fact, recent studies have indicated that some of these identified trees are only a handful of decades old.”<sup>35</sup> Other naysayers claim the Ute didn’t need Trailmarker Trees because they knew their ancestral homelands. However, Jefferson teaches, “My ancestors who modified trees didn’t do it for themselves, they knew where they were, they did it for the next generation to follow.”

A statement denouncing the existence of “Bent Trees” as being part of any “Traditional Practices of the Ute Nation” claims, “while other Tribes may have conducted these types of practices, the practice of bending trees is not part of the customary cultural traditions of Ute people, past or present, who comprised the Southern Ute and Ute Mountain Ute Indian Tribes.” In this statement, Southern Ute elder, Alden Naranjo, goes on to state, “I want to stress that individual Ute families may have their own traditions associated with physically bending and or making prayers to trees.”<sup>36</sup>

In 2018 Southern Ute elder, James Jefferson, gathered a small group, including author John Anderson, to found the nonprofit Association for Native American Sacred Trees and Places ([www.NASTaP.org](http://www.NASTaP.org)). Its mission is to inspire discovery, appreciation and conservation of CMTs and places held sacred to Native Americans. Every year NASTaP conducts CMT field trips and holds an annual conference to share research findings to help the children of the next generation learn from this legacy gift left behind by our Native American people.<sup>37</sup> The author and other presenters at past NASTaP events



*Author's Collection*

*A Ponderosa Pine Trailmarker Tree in Teller County  
with Peel used for Food and Medicine*

agree, the study of these CMTs offers an entirely different world-view of the indigenous people of North America, a people far more advanced culturally and spiritually than the image of nomadic “hunter-gatherers” often taught in public schools.

Whether Native American Culturally Modified Trees with bent trunks are attributed to a specific Ute band or family, or to the Comanche, Cherokee or the Apache tribal nations, should not matter. The study of CMTs found in situ with stone features will advance both the field of anthropology and archaeology. These historic trees are living *Native American* cultural artifacts that deserve to be added to our historical, cultural and archaeological records and preserved for The Seventh Generation. We must be the “agents of cultural survival” while we still have access to these sacred trees and the tribal elders who are willing to share their stories.

## Endnotes

1. Don Wells, *Trail Tree Newsletter*, Trail Tree Project, Mountain Stewards, GA: January 2020, p. 1.
2. John Wesley Anderson, *Native American Prayer Trees of Colorado*, Colorado Springs, CO: Old Colorado City Historical Society, 2018.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 70.
4. Lee Whiteley, *The Cherokee Trail, Bent's Old Fort to Fort Bridger*. The 1999 Merrill Mattes Brand Book, Volume XXXIII, Denver Posse of Westerners, Inc., Boulder, CO: Johnson Printing, 1999.
5. Anderson, *Native American Prayer Trees of Colorado*, p. 65-70.
6. *Ibid.*, p. 68.
7. Ethnographical interview of James Jefferson by Anderson, near Kenosha Pass (Jefferson holds a Ph.D. in Linguistics, worked at the Smithsonian and speaks five languages).
8. Anderson, *Native American Prayer Trees of Colorado*, p. 98-102.
9. James Jefferson, *Trail Trees along the Old Spanish Trail*, The Southern Ute Drum, Ignacio, CO, July 21, 2016, p. 1-4.
10. Anderson, *Native American Prayer Trees of Colorado*, foreword.
11. Steve Houser, Linda Pelon, Jimmy W. Arterberry, *Comanche Marker Trees of Texas*, College Station, TX: Texas A&M University Press, 2016, p. 5.
12. Southern Ute Tribe homepage ([www.southernute-nsn.gov](http://www.southernute-nsn.gov)), history section.
13. Wilfred O. Martinez, *Anza and Cuerno Verde Decisive Battle*, Second Edition. Colorado Springs, CO: Mother's House Publishing, Journal Translation for August 20, 1779.
14. Panel discussion with Dr. James Jefferson at the 2018 Anza Society Conference in Taos, NM. (Dr. Jefferson is a Southern Ute Tribal Elder serving as the tribal representative on the Board of Directors for the Old Spanish Trail Association).
15. Anderson, *Native American Prayer Trees of Colorado*, p. 11.
16. Houser, Pelon and Arterberry. *Comanche Marker Trees of Texas*, p. 88.
17. Anderson, *Native American Prayer Trees of Colorado*, p. 54-63.

18. Ibid., p. 57.
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