

The City of Boulder
Ethnographic Education Report



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For
The City of Boulder, Colorado

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The Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes
The Comanche Nation
The Oglala Sioux Tribe
The Pawnee Nation
The Rosebud Sioux Tribe
The Southern Ute Indian Tribe
The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe

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Acronyms

LHA
NAGPRA

NEPA
OSMP
THPO

Living Heritage Anthropology
Native American Grave Protection and
Repatriation Act
National Environmental Policy Act
Open Space and Mountain Parks
Tribal Historic Preservation Officer

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Executive Summary

For thousands of years, the Boulder Valley and the surrounding Front Range have been home to Indigenous peoples who have maintained deep and enduring connections to this landscape. The valleys, creeks, and mountain foothills that define Boulder today are part of a much larger network of homelands. These places provided abundant resources for hunting, fishing, and gathering and served as important travel corridors linking the plains and the mountains. More importantly, they are places of ceremony, teaching, and renewal where stories, songs, and traditions continue to connect people to the land and to one another.

This report was developed in partnership with Tribal Nations to document Indigenous histories, cultural connections, and ongoing relationships to the Boulder Valley. It is part of a continuing collaboration between the City of Boulder and Tribal Nations that began in the 1990s and was renewed through the 2016 Indigenous Peoples' Day Resolution and subsequent consultations. Through these collaborations, Tribal representatives have expressed a desire not only to see Indigenous presence recognized in public interpretation and education, but also to ensure that Indigenous knowledge and values help guide how Boulder cares for its lands today.

The participating Tribal Nations, the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, Comanche Nation, Oglala Sioux Tribe, Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, Rosebud Sioux Tribe, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe, brought together cultural resource staff, elders, and experts to share knowledge and guide the research process¹. Each Nation conducted field visits, reviewed materials, and advised on how information should be represented and protected. This collaborative approach reflects Tribal sovereignty and ensures that the report honors Indigenous voices and cultural protocols.

The project uses ethnography, a way of learning that values time spent with people, listening to stories, and observing how knowledge and culture are lived every day. It also follows a community-based participatory research (CBPR) model, meaning that Tribal representatives shaped every part of the process, from developing research questions to reviewing drafts and determining what information could be shared publicly. This approach centers mutual respect, shared decision-making, and the understanding that research is a relationship, not an extraction of information.

Throughout this report, you will see the legal names of the Tribal Nations who participated in this work. However, these are not the names they call themselves. The list below provides the legal names of each Nation, and what they call themselves in their language.

The Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma: Hinono'eiteen (Arapaho),
Tsétséhéstáhesé (Cheyenne)

The Comanche Nation: Numunuu

The Oglala Sioux Tribe and Rosebud Sioux Tribe: Oc'eti S'akowin

The Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma: Čariks i Čariks

The Ute Mountain Ute Tribe: Núuchiú

¹ The Southern Ute Indian Tribe was unable to join in person due to a last minute emergency, but they were able to join by phone for part of the Ute Mountain Ute Tribe's visit.

The findings of this study show that the Boulder Valley is part of a living cultural landscape. Like the Golden and Clear Creek Valley study (O'Meara, 2022) before it, this report highlights that Indigenous peoples have maintained a continuous presence along the Front Range for millennia and continue to visit, pray, and care for these places today. Sites such as The Peoples' Crossing and other areas within Boulder's Open Space and Mountain Parks are part of broader networks of migration, ceremony, and ecological knowledge that connect to Lookout Mountain, Clear Creek Valley, and beyond (O'Meara, 2022). These connections demonstrate that Indigenous homelands are not defined by modern boundaries; they are continuous, living, and rooted in relationships.

This report aims to support a deeper public understanding of Indigenous histories and ongoing connections to Boulder's landscape while guiding future education, land management, and interpretation in partnership with Tribal Nations. By honoring Tribal sovereignty, following government-to-government consultation, and embracing Indigenous knowledge systems, the City of Boulder can continue to build meaningful relationships that respect the past, acknowledge the present, and strengthen the future of these homelands we share.

To continue and expand this important work, History Colorado awarded the City of Boulder a State Historical Fund grant to support the next phase of the project. Over the next two to three years, additional Tribal Nations will join the collaboration, conducting new field visits and contributing their histories and perspectives. Their participation will result in additional chapters that build upon this report, further deepening the collective understanding of Indigenous connections to the Boulder Valley and surrounding region. The City of Boulder will co-fund this ongoing work in partnership with the Colorado State Historical Fund, ensuring that the research, relationships, and educational efforts established here continue to grow in scope, inclusivity, and impact.



“We were here when they discovered all this gold... that’s when they pushed us out... they made treaties to make what they did was right... they stole all that.”

Mr. Terry Knight, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe

Photo by Living Heritage Anthropology

Introduction

Since time immemorial, the Boulder Valley and the surrounding Colorado Front Range served as a vital homeland and seasonal gathering place for numerous Indigenous peoples. This region, characterized by a striking diversity of ecosystems ranging from prairie grasslands to mountain foothills and riparian corridors, offered abundant resources for hunting, fishing, and plant gathering. Its valleys and waterways provided key travel corridors linking the Great Plains to the Rocky Mountains, facilitating trade, communication, and cultural exchange among Indigenous peoples. Archaeological evidence, oral histories, and ethnographic studies demonstrate that Indigenous communities camped, hunted, traded, and conducted spiritual practices across the Boulder Valley, establishing deep cultural and ecological relationships to the land long before the arrival of European settlers in the mid-19th century (Fisher and Brunswig, 2007; O'Meara, 2022; Young Atekpatzin, 2019). These connections were not only practical but also deeply symbolic, as specific sites were associated with ceremony, storytelling, and seasonal cycles, reflecting a worldview in which humans existed in a reciprocal relationship with their environment.

These longstanding connections continue to be recognized by the City of Boulder today through Tribal consultations, collaborative stewardship initiatives, commemorations, and educational programs. Indigenous presence and influence remain a vital part of Boulder's history and identity, though it has often been marginalized in public narratives and local planning. In recognition of this, the City of Boulder adopted Resolution No. 1190, formally declaring the second Monday in October as Indigenous Peoples Day in August of 2016 (City of Boulder, 2016). This resolution explicitly acknowledges that the Boulder area lies on the ancestral homelands of Indigenous Nations and recognizes the enduring impacts of colonialism, Indian removal policies, and systemic inequities endured by the region's Native people. The resolution affirms that Boulder has directly benefited from historical policies that violated human rights and treaty obligations and emphasizes the importance of confronting these histories to build a stronger, more resilient community. It further articulates a shared responsibility to "forge a path forward to address the past and continuing harm to Indigenous People and the land" (City of Boulder, 2016).

Beyond symbolic recognition, the Indigenous Peoples' Day resolution directs concrete actions by the City of Boulder to address historical erasure and promote Indigenous representation in public spaces, educational curricula, and cultural programming. These efforts include updating signage in Open Space areas, co-developing educational materials, correcting omissions of Native American presence in public interpretation, and revising naming conventions for parks and landmarks. A key outcome of these initiatives is the renaming of Settler's Park to The Peoples' Crossing by the associated Tribal Nations, reflecting both the historical role of the area as a crossroads for Indigenous Nations and the common linguistic trait that many Tribal Nations' name for themselves translates to "the people" (City of Boulder, 2016). The renaming, along with associated interpretive and educational efforts, exemplifies how collaboration between Tribal Nations and municipal staff can produce tangible outcomes that respect Indigenous knowledge, sovereignty, and historical memory.

Historic and Cultural Context

The Boulder Valley exists within a much larger Indigenous cultural landscape that stretches along the Colorado Front Range. Archaeological and ethnographic evidence indicates that these lands were integral parts of a connected network of homelands used by Indigenous Nations for more than 12,000 years (O'Meara, 2022; Fisher & Brunswig, 2007). Seasonal migrations followed water corridors like Clear Creek, Boulder Creek, and the Platte River, which served as vital travel routes between the mountains and plains. The valleys offered shelter, game, and diverse plant resources, while the surrounding foothills provided vantage points, spiritual sites, and materials for tools and ceremony. Fisher and Brunswig (2007) note that similar ecological and topographic features guided prehistoric settlement in the Front Range and Rocky Mountain National Park, suggesting consistent patterns of resource use and movement that extend into the Boulder Valley.

According to the Golden Report (O'Meara, 2022), the Arapaho (Hinono'eiteen), Cheyenne (Tsétséhéstáhese), and Ute (Núuchiu) people each maintain distinct yet overlapping histories within this landscape. Although the study focuses on these three Tribal Nations, they are not the only peoples to have historical connections to the area (Young, 2019). The Ute peoples, whose ancestral territory encompassed much of western and central Colorado, describe the Front Range foothills as part of their "mountain homes," where they hunted elk and deer, gathered medicinal plants, and performed ceremonies tied to mountains (O'Meara, 2022; Fisher & Brunswig, 2007). Ute oral histories place their ancestors in the Golden area long before European contact, identifying the region as part of a continuous route extending from the high Rockies down through the Clear Creek Valley. The Arapaho and Cheyenne, whose homelands extended across the Great Plains, also used these corridors seasonally, establishing encampments along Clear Creek and nearby tributaries while traveling between the plains and the mountains for trade, ceremony, and resource gathering (O'Meara, 2022).

Young (2019) further emphasizes the presence of Apache (Di De'i) groups in the Boulder region, highlighting how historical documents, oral histories, and archaeological patterns converge to reveal a complex network of Indigenous land use that includes both mountain and valley corridors. These findings complement the archaeological framework outlined by Fisher and Brunswig (2007), which integrates material culture, settlement patterns, and ethnobotanical evidence to show the deep connections between people and place in the Front Range. Indigenous connection to land is not symbolic but lived (Young, 2019; O'Meara, 2022).

Key Concept: Indigenous connection to land
● Indigenous Peoples maintain ongoing relationships with Boulder-area lands through ceremony, resource gathering, and travel along ancestral corridors. ● Oral histories, stories, and songs preserve knowledge of land, plants, animals, and seasonal cycles, linking past and present generations. ● Movement across the landscape, like hunting, trading, harvesting, and ceremonial travel, is an active practice that sustains culture and identity.

By understanding the Boulder Valley within this broader network of Indigenous homelands, it becomes clear that Boulder is interconnected with the surrounding area through shared histories of movement, trade, ceremony, and ecological knowledge. The same streams, mountain passes, and plains that guided animal migrations also guided human ones, forming patterns of travel and gathering that persist in memory, practice, and material remains. Recognizing these connections underscores the importance of approaching this work not merely as local history but as part of a larger, ongoing Indigenous presence across the Front Range (Fisher & Brunswig, 2007; Young, 2019).

This deeply rooted knowledge of land and ecology contrasts sharply with how archeologists have historically described Indigenous peoples. “What’s a Paleo-Indian, what’s an Archaic Indian?” asked Mr. Ben Young (Rosebud Sioux Tribe), pushing back against labels that erase identity and continuity. “Those names were given to us by people who do not understand the history of the Indigenous people on this continent.” As Jhon Mr. Goes In Center (Oglala Sioux Tribe) added, “We finally get to say it's not good to call us Indians, we’re Lakotas... There’s a lot of diversity... and there's so much rich diversity amongst us in ecoregions.”

For many, Boulder remains a sacred and restorative place “a universal place where people crossed, prayed, and camped,” in the words of Mr. Chester Whiteman (Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma), who expressed gratitude to the City of Boulder for acknowledging this through the renaming of The Peoples’ Crossing. “It strengthens me to talk about these things,” shared Ms. Ione Quigley (Rosebud Sioux Tribe). “It reaffirms and gives us strength again... it's always a good feeling to have someone really, truly, genuinely interested in what you're saying.” Their voices remind us that this land has always been home. “It wasn’t wilderness. We were comfortable in our home,” as Mr. Frank Medicine Water (Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma) reflected. True respect begins with listening, learning, and understanding that these relationships to place are not relics of the past, but enduring ways of life.



“Whenever you're gonna take something from the earth, you pay it back or it ain't gonna ever work. That's our way of telling Mother Earth, ‘thank you’.”

-Ms. Ruth
Toathy,
Comanche Nation

Photo by Living Heritage
Anthropology

Project Development

Pre-2019 Consultation

The City of Boulder first began consulting with Tribal Nations in the 1990s and early 2000s, well before such practices became common nationally. After these early efforts, however, there was an interval between formal Tribal Consultations. The passage of the 2016 Indigenous Peoples' Day Resolution reignited the City's commitment to reestablish meaningful dialogue with Tribal Nations. By 2018, discussions had resumed in preparation for renewed consultation efforts.

2019 Consultation

In March 2019, the City of Boulder's Open Space and Mountain Parks Department hosted an in-person Tribal Consultation. One of the central topics of discussion was the proposed renaming of Settler's Park, now known as The Peoples' Crossing. During this consultation, Tribal Nation representatives emphasized that renaming alone was not sufficient. They wanted to see educational components incorporated to deepen public understanding of Indigenous histories and connections to the Boulder area.

2021 Consultation and Working Group

Building on those conversations, the City held a virtual Tribal Consultation in April 2021, during which the City of Boulder and Tribal representatives agreed to form a quarterly Working Group. The group's purpose was to develop educational efforts highlighting Indigenous peoples' enduring relationships with Boulder and the surrounding landscape.

During an October 2021 Working Group meeting, Tribal representatives expressed concerns about developing curriculum or other educational materials before having the opportunity to reconnect more deeply with the Boulder landscape. They recommended the completion of an ethnographic Cultural Landscape Report to ground educational initiatives in cultural and historical context.

In the February, May, and August 2022 Working Group meetings, members developed the foundational structure for the ethnographic study. They provided detailed guidance on the process, approved draft informed consent forms and interview questions, and recommended that the final report be made available to the public, all while ensuring that culturally sensitive information would be shared only with the respective Tribal Nations.

Following the signing of the research contract, the City of Boulder and Living Heritage Anthropology provided project updates and additional questions to the Working Group. At that stage, the focus shifted toward Tribally specific meetings and discussions, as approved by the Working Group, since much of the ethnographic report involved information particular to each Tribal Nation. The ethnographic study plan was presented at the September 2022 virtual Tribal Consultation and its progress was reviewed during the March 2023 in-person Consultation in Boulder. In both meetings, the City invited representatives to continue participating in the Working Group for ongoing conversations about the Ethnographic Project.

Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)

Between the 2019 Consultation and its signing in 2024, the City of Boulder and the Tribal Nations collaboratively developed a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU). This agreement formalized their shared commitment to educational collaboration, stating:

“The City and the Tribes agree to work together to provide accurate educational information about the history of each respective Tribe and other Indigenous Peoples in Boulder and Jefferson Counties. This continuous, ongoing work will include accurate, truthful Indigenous Peoples stories, both past and present, through educational and interpretative materials, such as signage and education curriculum.”

The MOU marked an important milestone, codifying years of partnership, dialogue, and mutual respect into a lasting framework for collaboration.



“We’re still here, we’re carrying on our traditions even though we were told, ‘nope, you can’t speak it, you can’t do this.’ We kept that inside us and now we’re teaching it to our kids and carrying on what we can for the next generations.”
Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Elder

Photo by Living Heritage Anthropology

Project Approach

The primary purpose of this report is to document the cultural, historical, and ecological connections of Tribal Nations to the Boulder Valley. By foregrounding Tribal perspectives, the report aims to provide guidance for education, land stewardship, public interpretation, and community engagement. This project centers Indigenous knowledge within the contemporary management of Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP) lands, acknowledging the ongoing responsibilities of both municipal authorities and Tribal Nations to protect and interpret these spaces in ways that honor historical and contemporary relationships. The report also seeks to strengthen collaborative partnerships, serve as a model for Tribal Nation-requested research, and advance efforts to integrate Indigenous knowledge systems into environmental management, education, and policy.

A critical component of this research is recognizing Tribal sovereignty, which refers to the inherent authority of Indigenous Nations to govern themselves, manage their lands, and make decisions regarding their people, cultures, and resources. A critical component of this research is recognizing Tribal sovereignty, which refers to the inherent authority of Indigenous Nations to govern themselves, manage their lands, and make decisions regarding their people, cultures, and resources. Tribal sovereignty is not something granted by the United States as it predates the country's founding and arises from the status of Tribal Nations as distinct political and cultural entities that have existed since time immemorial. Over time, this sovereignty has been reaffirmed through treaties, Supreme Court decisions, and federal policies that acknowledge the government-to-government relationship between Tribal Nations and the United States. Treaties, in particular, represent formal agreements between sovereigns, outlining mutual responsibilities and rights that continue to hold legal and moral weight today. Recognizing this sovereignty is essential to honoring Tribal self-determination and ensuring that Indigenous Nations are not treated as stakeholders but as equal partners in governance and decision-making (U.S. Executive Office of the President, 2000).

Key Concept: Tribal Sovereignty
• Tribal Nations within U.S. borders are recognized as distinct political entities with the inherent right to govern themselves. • Tribal Nations manage natural resources, conduct education and health programs, and preserve cultural heritage as an exercise of their sovereignty. • Respecting Tribal sovereignty is essential for supporting Indigenous governance, legal rights, and cultural continuity.

Government-to-Government Consultation refers to the formal process by which federal, state, or local governments engage directly with federally recognized Tribal governments when policies, projects, or decisions may affect their lands, resources, or cultural heritage. This principle is reinforced by *Executive Order 13175* (U.S. Executive Office of the President, 2000), which mandates that federal agencies consult with Tribes in a manner that respects their sovereignty and right to self-governance. Government-to-government consultation is both a legal obligation for federal work and an ethical practice as it ensures that Tribes have a meaningful voice in decisions that impact them and helps prevent the repetition of past injustices where Tribal concerns were ignored. In the context of Boulder, adherence to this framework ensures that Indigenous perspectives are respected in decision-making processes, particularly regarding land management, cultural resource protection, and public interpretation. Doing so fosters equitable collaboration, builds trust, and serves as a foundation for responsible and inclusive research and stewardship.

The research described in this report uses ethnography, which is a way of studying people and cultures by spending time with them, listening to their stories, and observing how they live (Madden, 2017; Atkinson, 2015). Instead of just reading books or collecting numbers, ethnographers learn by being present with the community. For example, a researcher might participate in a ceremony, share a meal with, or walk with community members to learn about important places on the land. Through these experiences, researchers can see how traditions, relationships, and stories connect to everyday life. This kind of work helps them understand what the land, history, and culture truly mean to the people who live there (Bernard, 2011; Madison, 2012; Pelto, 2016). In this project, ethnography helps document Indigenous connections to the Boulder Valley by including oral histories, ceremonial knowledge, ecological observations, and lived experiences. By working directly with Tribal representatives, researchers can make sure the final report reflects Indigenous perspectives, rather than relying only on outside sources or historical documents.

Ethnographer Jessica Yaquinto
takes ethnographic notes
Photo by Phil Yates



Community-Based Research Approach

This project followed the principles of community-based participatory research (CBPR), which means that Tribal Nations were partners in every stage of the work. Tribal representatives helped decide what questions to ask, how to collect information, how to understand the results, and how to present the final report. Instead of researchers simply taking information, this approach focused on giving back to the community and working together as equals. It helped build trust, supported learning and capacity within the community, and made sure the research reflected Tribal priorities and values.

That project demonstrated the effectiveness of sustained, Government-to-Government Consultation grounded in trust, reciprocity, and Tribal-led review. Similarly, this Boulder ethnographic study was developed through ongoing dialogue with Tribal representatives who guided every stage of the process, from defining the scope of inquiry to approving the interpretation of findings. Both efforts reflect a shared understanding that Tribal Consultation must go beyond compliance to become an ongoing relationship. By aligning with these established models of Indigenous-led ethnography in the Front Range, the Boulder project situates itself within a growing regional movement toward collaborative research, public education, and cultural revitalization led by Tribal Nations.



City of Boulder staff talks with a Tribal Representative
Photo by Living Heritage Anthropology

Boulder Open Space and Mountain Parks (OSMP)

The research for this report focused on the OSMP lands managed by the City of Boulder. This work was supported by the City Manager's Office and the Office of Equity and Belonging (OEB). The OEB's mission is to work toward the elimination of systematic and institutionalized racism from the City's policies, programs, and practices. OEB staff participated in this work which was conducted entirely on OSMP lands. OSMP oversees more than 45,000 acres of permanently protected lands and approximately 155 miles of maintained trails, balancing the dual priorities of ecological preservation and public recreation (City of Boulder, n.d.). These lands include a variety of ecosystems—prairie grasslands, riparian corridors, forests in the foothills, and mountainous terrain—that have historically been utilized and valued by Indigenous Nations. In preserving such a diverse landscape, OSMP undertakes not only land protection and trail maintenance but also stewardship of working lands (agricultural use), habitat restoration, and public access programs (City of Boulder, n.d.).

For example, OSMP leases about 16,000 acres of working agricultural land to farmers and ranchers, which supports the continuation of historic agricultural practices and also provides habitat for native species. Meanwhile, OSMP also invests in ecological resilience: its land-management staff work on wildfire risk reduction by thinning forests, prescribed burns, invasive species removal, restoring wetlands and riparian zones, and improving fencing so wildlife movement is less hindered. On the recreation side, OSMP manages trails for multiple user groups (hikers, cyclists, horseback riders, dog walkers) and tracks visitation, receiving millions of visits annually (City of Boulder, n.d.)

From the perspective of our study, OSMP's work matters in a few key ways. Firstly, the fact that these lands are permanently protected means that Indigenous Nations' historic and ongoing connections to place are less likely to be disrupted by new development, making the land somewhat more stable for cultural and ecological work. Secondly, the mix of land uses (restoration, agriculture, recreation) means a more complex set of contributors and management priorities, so incorporating Indigenous perspectives in land management and public interpretation is especially important. Thirdly, because OSMP explicitly identifies "community connection, education and inclusion" as a strategic priority, including "continuing to support city-wide efforts to sustain, strengthen and honor relationships with American Indian Tribal Nations" (City of Boulder, n.d.). This aligns well with our approach of including Indigenous voices and respecting sovereignty.

In short, by working with and within the context of OSMP's framework of land protection, ecological stewardship, recreation, and community engagement, this research aims to situate Indigenous knowledge and perspectives in a space where land, culture, ecology and public use meet, as opposed to treating these concepts in isolation.

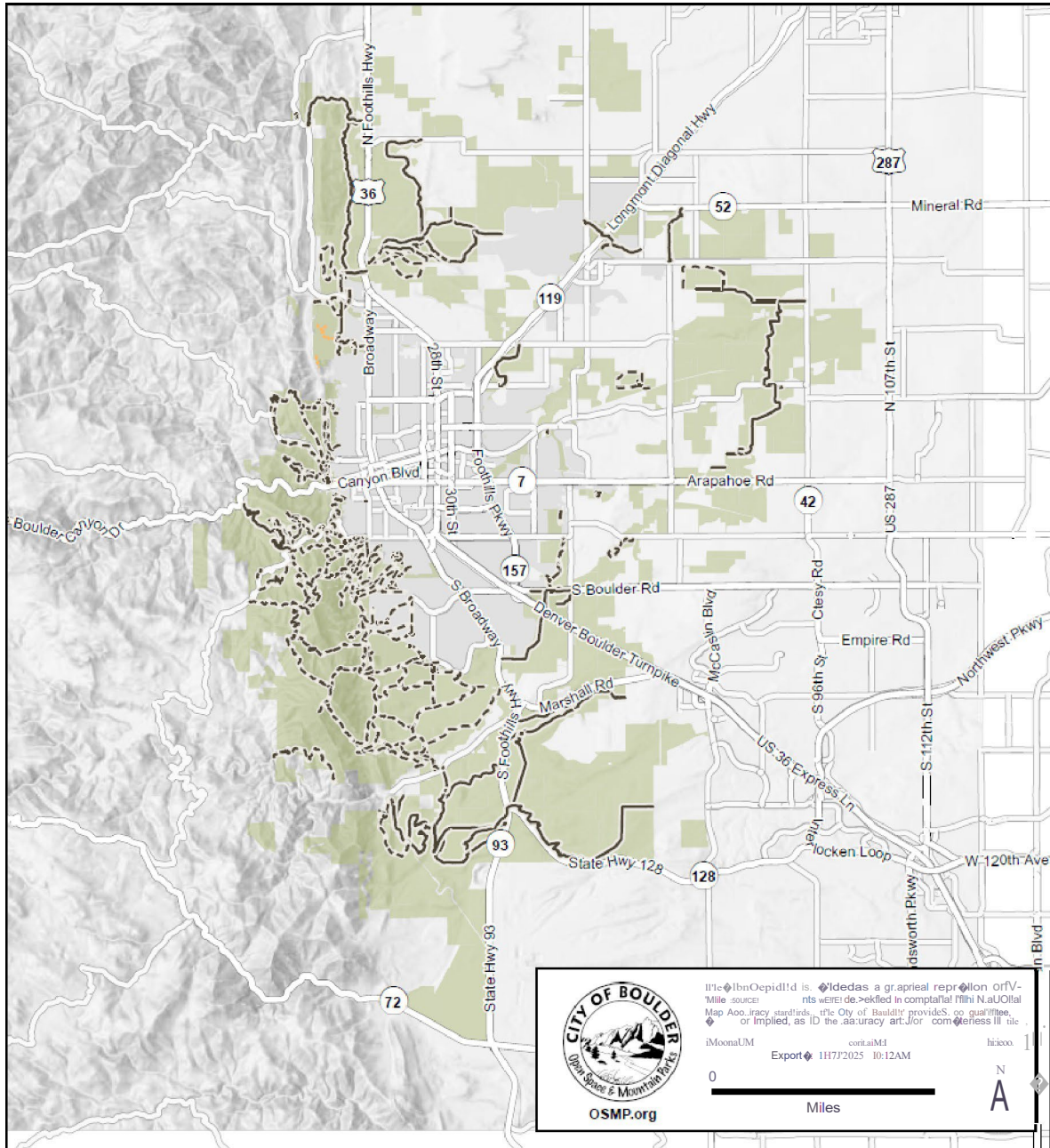
Key Concept: Collaborative Stewardship

- Indigenous voices inform OSMP land management decisions, balancing cultural, ecological, and recreational priorities.
- Collaboration supports ecological restoration, habitat protection, and cultural site preservation while providing public access.
- Engaging Tribal Nations fosters education, inclusion, and stronger community connections across Boulder's open spaces.



Photo by Living Heritage Anthropology

City of Boulder Open Space and Mountain Park's Land Interests



Methods

Overview of Research Design

An ethnographic report was requested by the Tribal Nation partners during an October 2021 Working Group Meeting with the City, as detailed in the above Project Approach section. The methods employed in this research were designed to document both the historical and contemporary cultural, ecological, and spiritual significance of these landscapes to culturally associated Tribal Nations.

This project infuses ethnographic fieldwork with CBPR principles, ensuring that Tribal Nations were active partners throughout all phases of the research like project planning, fieldwork site selection, data interpretation, report review, and ethical oversight. The study focused on documenting Indigenous knowledge, practices, and histories, including ceremonial and linguistic traditions, ethnobotanical knowledge, seasonal land use, and spiritual connections to landscapes. Ethical considerations, informed consent, and culturally appropriate research practices were embedded in all aspects of the project. Tribal representatives advised the research team on how to handle sensitive materials such as ceremonial knowledge, traditional stories, and restricted cultural information. They determined what could be made public and what should remain within the community, reinforcing cultural protocols and protecting sacred knowledge.

Tribal Nation Partners

Participating Tribal Nations included the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes of Oklahoma, Comanche Nation, Oglala Sioux Tribe, Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma, Rosebud Sioux Tribe, Ute Mountain Ute Tribe. A larger Working Group of Tribal representatives participated in quarterly Working Group meetings. This work will continue with the help of a State Historic Fund grant and more Tribal Nations will participate, expanding this report. Each Tribe selected representatives based on expertise, including cultural resource specialists, historic preservation staff, NAGPRA² personnel, elders, and designated cultural experts. Representatives served as active collaborators in the research process, guiding methods, reviewing materials, and contributing to the writing of this report. Their leadership in every stage of the project reflects the exercise of Tribal sovereignty, the inherent right of each Nation to speak for itself, determine how its cultural knowledge is represented, and shape decisions about its ancestral lands. Each Tribe's leadership appointed official representatives to participate in the project, and in some cases, those representatives either selected additional designated participants or took part directly themselves, ensuring that the process remained grounded in Tribal authority and self-determination.

² NAGPRA: Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act

Key Concept: Active Partnership
• Tribal Nations actively co-designed and directed all phases of the research, from planning and site selection to data interpretation and report review. • This approach integrates Community-Based Participatory Research (CBPR) principles, ensuring Indigenous knowledge and perspectives shape outcomes. • Collaborative research practices support Tribal Nations to guide how their cultural heritage, histories, and connections to land are documented and shared.

Each Tribal Nation conducted a separate field visit to Boulder, with the exception of the Rosebud and Oglala Sioux Tribes, who chose to visit together. Prior to the visits, Tribal staff worked with researchers to review and refine the bibliography, informed consent forms, interview guides, and field logistics. Tribal representatives provided guidance on cultural context, appropriate conduct, and social norms, including blessing practices, gift-giving protocols, and proper titles, ensuring that field visits were conducted respectfully and ethically.

Data Collection

Ethnographic data were collected through multiple complementary methods:

1. Participant Observation – Researchers joined Tribal Representatives, and City staff on site visits across OSMP lands. Observations focused on land use patterns, ceremonial and cultural markers, ecological knowledge, and ongoing stewardship practices. Researchers recorded detailed field notes, made recordings, and captured photographs, ensuring documentation aligned with culturally appropriate protocols.
2. Interviews and Conversations – Semi-structured interviews and informal conversations were conducted with Tribal representatives to document narratives about historical and contemporary use of the land, spiritual and ceremonial practices, and ecological knowledge. Interviews were designed collaboratively with Tribal staff to ensure relevance and cultural sensitivity.
3. Review of Oral Histories and Archival Materials – Researchers incorporated oral histories, linguistic data, archival records, and prior ethnographic studies to contextualize field observations and interviews. Tribal representatives contributed insights to interpret these materials accurately.
4. Ethnobotanical and Ecological Observations – Specific attention was paid to plants, landscapes, and natural resources with cultural significance, documenting species, uses, and traditional knowledge shared by Tribal representatives.



“The main thing that I think about this Arapaho life; as you go through it, you gain more knowledge, but this knowledge is just to turn around and take care of your people.”

Mr. Fred Mosqueda,
Cheyenne and Arapaho
Tribes of Oklahoma

*Photo by Living Heritage
Anthropology*

Data Management, Analysis, and Collaboration

All the materials collected during the research, such as notes, recordings, and photographs, were carefully organized to make sure nothing was lost and everything could be reviewed clearly. Drafts of each report chapter were written together with Tribal representatives, who gave feedback several times throughout the process to make sure the information was accurate, respectful, and reflected Indigenous ways of understanding. Staff from the City of Boulder also reviewed these drafts, and any major changes were sent back to the Tribal representatives for approval. This teamwork made sure the final report was both factually correct and culturally respectful.

Ethical Considerations

Respect and honesty were at the heart of this project. Everyone who took part in the research gave their permission beforehand, and all research steps were discussed and approved together with Tribal representatives. Information that was private or sacred—such as details about ceremonies or protected cultural knowledge—was treated with care and handled only in ways approved by Tribal leaders. The research team also took time to reflect on their own backgrounds and the long history of how Indigenous communities have been treated in research. Their goal was to make sure the final work honored Tribal sovereignty and represented Tribal voices accurately and respectfully.

Community-Based Research Approach

To make the research more respectful and fair, the project also uses something called community-based participatory research (CBPR). This approach means that researchers and community members work together as partners throughout the entire process (Atalay, 2012;

Tuhiwai Smith, 2012; Wilson, 2008; Gone, 2019). Instead of the researcher deciding everything alone, the community helps choose what questions to ask, how to collect information, and how to share the results. For example, Tribal members might suggest including stories from elders, reviewing the research findings before they are published, or holding meetings where everyone can discuss what the results mean. This helps make sure the research is culturally respectful, useful, and accurate. For Tribal Nations, CBPR also supports the use of Indigenous knowledge systems, or ways of knowing that come from generations of experience and spiritual connection to the land. By combining ethnography, CBPR, and government-to-government consultation, the project shows how research can honor Tribal sovereignty, build trust, and create knowledge that benefits both the community and the broader public.

Limitations and Challenges

While this project worked to include as many Tribal representatives as possible, not everyone was able to participate due to distance, scheduling, and other logistical challenges. These limits shaped the process and remind us that this report captures only part of an ongoing story. Equally important, some cultural and ceremonial knowledge shared by Tribal representatives could not be included in this public document. This is not an omission of detail, but an act of respect and cultural protection.

Certain ceremonies, stories, songs, and teachings are held privately within Tribal communities because they are deeply tied to spiritual beliefs, family responsibilities, and ancestral rights. Sharing this information outside of the community without permission can cause harm, it can separate the knowledge from its cultural context, misrepresent sacred practices, and repeat patterns of extraction and appropriation that Indigenous peoples have experienced for generations. To put this more bluntly, outsiders have attempted to take Indigenous peoples' land, language, culture, economies, and many other things, for themselves. After this misappropriation, academics and those seeking spiritual guidance have pursued what they see as the most sacred and in need of protection from the outside. In this sense, withholding sensitive knowledge is an expression of Tribal sovereignty and cultural care, not secrecy. Safety is also a concern, as some knowledge must be understood within a full cultural context to be used safely. The research team honors these boundaries and encourages readers to understand that true respect for Indigenous knowledge means recognizing that not all knowledge is meant to be shared publicly, or even beyond specific members of a Tribal Nation. This report, therefore, should be read as a collaborative snapshot and respectful representation of the insights and perspectives Tribes chose to share rather than a complete record of all historical, cultural, or spiritual information connected to the Boulder Valley.

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The Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes

Contributors

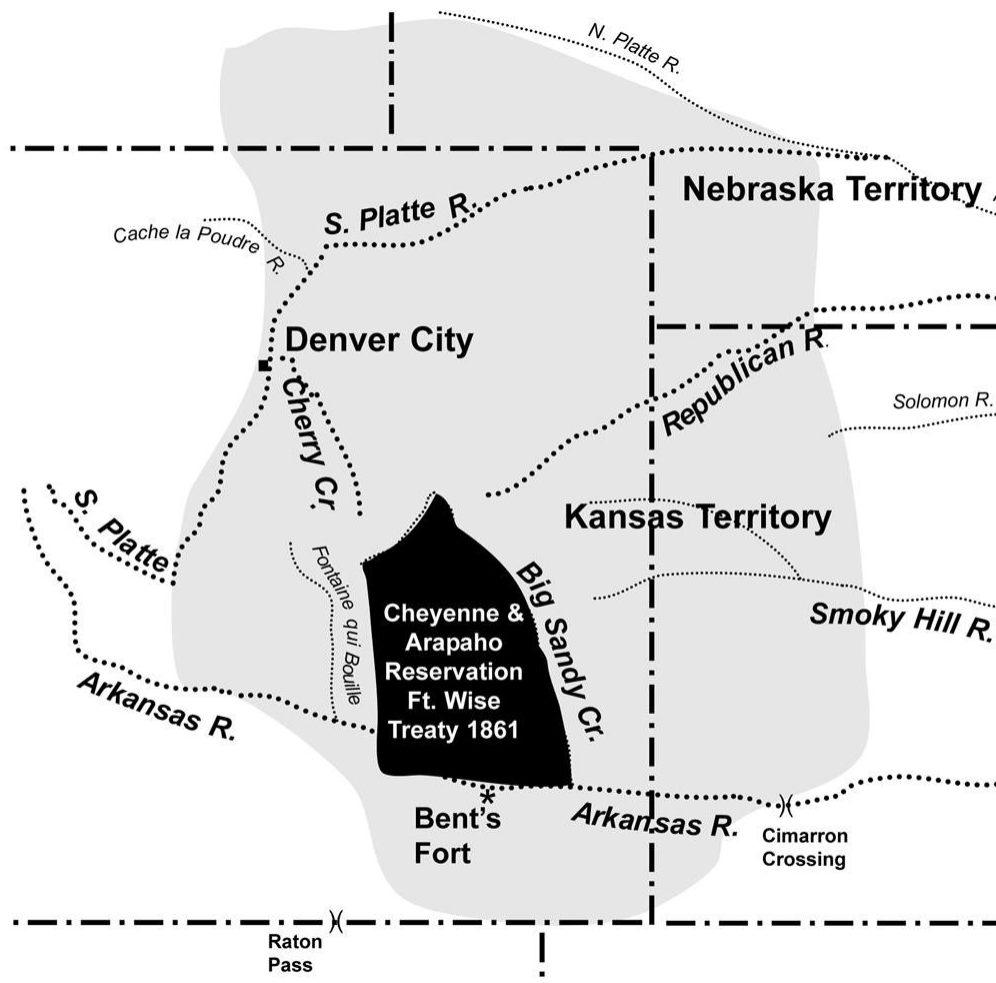
Frank Medicine Water, Arapaho
Pauline Medicine Water, Arapaho
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Mary Mosqueda, Arapaho

Clarinda Fletcher, Arapaho
Chester Whiteman, Cheyenne
Roy Dean Bullcoming, Cheyenne

Cheyenne and Arapaho History

Archaeological evidence of human occupation of the Boulder area goes back more than 13,000 years. Arapaho oral traditions reflect a long period of occupation, as evidenced in the following history told by Mr. Fred Mosqueda.

We have stories from long, long, long, long time ago. We crossed this huge, vast area of ice. When the Arapahos were crossing it, there was a white out. So the old people, they got lost. They didn't know which way to go because of the white out and it was just a vast expansion of ice they were crossing. So seven old men and seven old women sat down and they started praying and then they heard a sound. They looked up, and above them were Sandhill cranes in a circle, making that sound. So [the old men] said "They will know where land is." So they got up and followed the Sandhill cranes. They're the ones that brought us into this country. They migrate from Alaska all the way to the Gulf of Mexico. So, in one of our ceremonies we holler like that, too. We circle like they do. Some Arapaho men will use the bones out of their wings for whistles.



The gray shaded area indicates the land area reserved for the Cheyenne and Arapaho under the 1851 Treaty of Fort Laramie and managed by the Upper Arkansas Indian Agency. The black shaded area indicates the reduced land area reserved for the Cheyenne and Arapaho ten years later under the Treaty of Fort Wise, supervised by Samuel G. Colley. (History Colorado, image by Kevin Cahill)

The Arapaho and Cheyenne traversed land throughout Colorado historically, but as non-native immigrants encroached, the United States government pushed them out. Mr. Frank Medicine Water describes the South Platte Trail, going from Denver to Colorado Springs, as an old Arapaho trail. This trail alone is nearly 100 miles long, showcasing a small section of the huge swaths of land the Cheyenne and Arapaho occupied. Once the Front Range became more populated by non-native people, the Cheyenne and Arapaho groups that were in the north Front Range were forced to draw rations from Fort Laramie, Wyoming. The government agents pushed the rest of the Cheyenne and Arapaho south, to draw rations at Bent's Fort. This artificially separated the groups into Northern and Southern bands of Cheyenne and Arapaho. Today there is the Northern Cheyenne Tribe and the Northern Arapaho Tribes (the groups who drew rations from Fort Laramie); and the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes (who drew rations from Bent's Fort). This southern group consisting of both Cheyenne and Arapaho signed the 1851 Fort Laramie

Treaty (Horse Creek Treaty) together, establishing them as one group in the eyes of the United States government. Due to their closeness of the Tribes, the Southern bands were settled together in Oklahoma. Fred Mosqueda, an Arapaho member of the Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes explains:

“The Cheyenne are our allies. We are two different people, two different languages; but due to treaties and the closeness of our Tribes, we got out together. We have more similarities than differences now. We didn't camp together until the 1930s.”

- Mr. Fred Mosqueda



Mr. Fred Mosqueda talks with ethnographer Jessica Yaquinto

The Fort Laramie Treaty took place in Fort Laramie, Wyoming, but this location is just one place in the expanse of lands the Cheyenne and Arapaho historically traversed, with the help of the horse.

“We covered all the way from Colorado Springs up to north of Fort Collins in the wintertime. In the summertime all the bands would be moving out. You have to think about, well, how come they couldn't all stay together all the time? Well, we went to Fort Laramie in 1851 when they signed the treaty, they had to move the treaty signing because they didn't have enough grass at Fort Laramie for all the horses. I think they figured that the tribe when they showed up; had in excess of 50,000 horses themselves. So that is a bunch of grass that is needed to keep those horses.”

-Mr. Frank Medicine Water



Mr. Frank Medicine Water and Mrs. Pauline Medicine Water in Boulder

Gold was discovered in Denver in 1858, just ten years after the Fort Laramie Treaty. Soon after, in 1861, the Cheyenne and Arapaho were moved to a reservation along the Arkansas River in eastern Colorado with the signing of the Fort Wise Treaty. This treaty drastically reduced the Nations' land base and the document itself had been altered between the time it was signed and when it arrived in Chicago to be entered into the official record. Despite clear evidence that the treaty had been tampered with, the Cheyenne and Arapaho had no legal recourse to challenge it.

“Once it got to Chicago, the wording and some of the conditions were changed. That made that treaty void, because when you go into a contract-the way we know it-if you change anything after signatures, then it voids out the whole contract.”

-Mr. Chester Whiteman

By the early 1860s, relations between the Tribal Nations and government agents had deteriorated rapidly. An executive order was issued declaring that any “unfriendly” were to be killed, and the possessions of those killed could be kept as payment by their attackers. This order sanctioned open violence against Indigenous people. Governor John Evans, a railroad entrepreneur whose interests aligned with bankers, industrialists, and railroad developers, knew exactly where the Cheyenne and Arapaho camped at Sand Creek. That camp was not a hostile encampment, it was more like a retirement village, home to elders, women, and children, along with a few horses. It was a peaceful place. Evans took advantage of that peace, as many of the Cheyenne warriors were north and east of Sand Creek, in the Smoky Hill region near the Big Timbers area, along the river. On October 10, 1864, Company D of the Colorado Militia attacked a small Cheyenne camp at Buffalo Springs near Sterling, Colorado and this was the first blood drawn by the militia. There were at most four warriors present; the rest were women and children. The militia killed the women as they bathed their babies, killing the mothers and infants alike. This foreshadowed the horror to come.

Just weeks later, on November 29, 1864, the Colorado Cavalry launched a brutal attack at Sand Creek, murdering approximately 230 peaceful Cheyenne and Arapaho people. Evans and others stood to profit from the removal of the Cheyenne and Arapaho, as they were “in the way” of westward expansion and industrial projects tied to railroads and land speculation. The Sand Creek Massacre was not a battle, it was a slaughter carried out against a peaceful people. The warriors returned and saw what had happened. Soon after, the Cheyenne passed the war pipe to the Lakota, and then carried it to Cherry Creek, where it was smoked with the Arapaho, signifying the renewal of alliance and collective resistance.

“We want that blood that was spilled to be recognized, for our kids, our grandkids, our great grandkids to know their history and where they came from. We weren't the aggressors. Our people are compassionate people.”

-Mr. Fred Mosqueda

Following Sand Creek, the surviving Cheyenne and Arapaho faced yet another forced removal. In 1867, just three years later, the Medicine Lodge Treaty was signed, moving the southern communities of the Cheyenne and Arapaho to Indian Territory, in present-day Oklahoma. Although the Kiowa, Comanche, and Apache signed separate treaties at Medicine Lodge, the southern Cheyenne and Arapaho were the direct victims of Sand Creek and the signatories to their own treaty. Some have mistakenly assumed that these treaties came with reparations, but there were none. The southern Cheyenne and Arapaho, who signed the Medicine Lodge Treaty, paid the price for Sand Creek, and carried the memory of those lost into their new homelands.

“When they moved us down into Oklahoma, we wanted to stay at Fort Supply because it's a straight shot west to the Panhandle. And that was the last place to hunt buffalo”

-Mr. Frank Medicine Water

It is impossible to overstate the importance of the buffalo to the Cheyenne and Arapaho people. *“They [the buffalo] did everything for the Cheyenne. They supplied shelter, food... Everything in the buffalo was used by the Cheyennes in everything they did. They didn't waste nothing. I don't know how they [the Cheyenne] really survived by handout after the soldiers came in and the soldiers and took over killing the buffalo. They disappeared quick. But the Cheyenne used to honor, respect the animal, but that was lost way back. I don't know what year that would be but, that put the Cheyennes in a real bad situation, when the buffalo started disappearing. And they [the soldiers] did it just for sport, not for survival. And that was the lifeline for the Cheyenne.”*

-Mr. Chester Whiteman

Calling the buffalo the ‘grocery store’ of the Cheyenne people, Mr. Chester Whiteman explained that, besides eating buffalo meat, the Cheyenne people used the hoofs to make glue, the marrow for food, the bladder for water, and the hide could be used to make drums.



Mr. Chester Whiteman speaks with City of Boulder staff

The Cheyenne and Arapaho in the Boulder Area

As previously stated, the Cheyenne and Arapaho people moved through the Boulder Valley at various times. The Arapaho word for the Boulder area would be Boulder: Heet3iixoobee' (Where it gets steep) or Heet3iiookuu (Where it goes up). Mr. Whiteman explained that the Cheyenne people had a main winter camp just north of Sand Creek, and they would pass through the Boulder Valley on their way to and from there. The Cheyenne and Arapaho presence in the Boulder area has given rise to some legendary figures. Niowat (pronounced Nawath), whose English name was Chief Lefthand, lends his namesake to many areas in the Boulder Valley. His English name comes from the fact that he was left-handed. This is uncommon for Arapaho people. Some Arapaho elders may even tie a child's left hand to his side if the child is shown to be favoring it. (Fred Mosqueda, interview, 2023)

"You always drink with your right hand because that's the future. If you drink with your left hand, that means you're going to relive the past and you don't want to do that. So you always want to go forward. I think the sign for the past is to the left."

-Mr. Fred Mosqueda

Perhaps the most well known story of Niowat tells how he allowed some white settlers to stay in present-day Boulder for a season, and they never left. This has inspired folklore of a 'Lefthand Curse', which the Arapaho representatives think is unlikely to ever have occurred.

"I've heard people say that Niowat said 'People, seeing the beauty of the valley, will want to stay. But their staying will be the undoing of the beauty'. This was told to me that this was the curse Chief Niowat said about the Boulder Valley.

I don't think that he would say that. In so many terms, [Lefthand would've said] 'you can't stay here' because he would understand the 1851 treaty because he could understand English. [...] So he would have said 'you are on our land that's been given' and he would have understood that the treaty said that they can pass through, but they can't stay. So that's what he said. 'You can't stay here, you have to leave'. [...] I think that's just romanticizing the fact that he's here. Tourism is very strong and you always want to add a little more to make the story just a little bit more, you know, keener so that people will come. That's what you're doing."

-Mr. Fred Mosqueda

Another figure often associated with Niowat is Little Raven, an Arapaho leader who rode with him (Fred Mosqueda, interview, 2023). Mr. Mosqueda explained that Little Raven and Niowat were riding together right before the Sand Creek Massacre, but Little Raven did not stay at Sand Creek as Niowat did. Other notable people who narrowly avoided Sand Creek were Spotted Wolf and his brothers, Yellow Bear and Mountain. Mountain was said to have a wheel and therefore be a spiritual and ceremonial leader.

“Left hand’s band was the only one that moved to Sand Creek. I remember Little Raven took the rest of the Arapaho and moved them east along the Arkansas River at that time, he didn't stay there. Little Raven was you know, of course, he's one of them old men. So they had special abilities. You know, I always say, I listened to my mother and grandma, they could tell the future, you know, they could tell what was gonna come to pass. So that's probably why he moved.”

-Mr. Fred Mosqueda

“There's a story also, Spotted Wolf was here, and his brother, Yellow Bear and his other brother Mountain. They came through Sand Creek that night before, but there was nothing to eat. So they went and they camped on, they were going towards where Little Raven was. So they camped down there and they heard the battle going on in the morning and so they got up there and looked down. And then told Little Raven what happened. So that's how the Arapahos found out about Sand Creek.”

-Mr. Fred Mosqueda



Spring foliage in Boulder

There are a few details concerning Niwot that the representatives dispelled, the first being the images of Niwot that are often cited, are not actually of Niwot. Niwot was sick and never made it to Oklahoma.

“There are two Lefthands. The older one (Niwot), and one that was born in the Oklahoma panhandle and took over as principal chief after Little Raven died. He is buried in Oklahoma with Jesse Chisholm. He was a young man when Sand Creek took place. It is said that he rode with the older Lefthand before Sand Creek up to Fort Lyons. The Lefthand that was in Colorado; there aren't any photos of him. Only the younger one in Oklahoma.”

-Mr. Fred Mosqueda

Additionally, Mr. Frank Medicine Water explained that Niwot is often mis-characterized as violent but was actually an advocate for peace. He explains there are many stories of him seeking a peaceful resolution to the conflicts with non-native settlers. Even when he was ill and could not travel, he was sending his brothers and nephews to meetings to broker peace (Frank Medicine Water, interview, 2023). Another peaceful figure in Arapaho history is Niwot's sister, Snake Woman. She married a French man named John Poisel, and she was sometimes called Ma-Hom, which may have been a pet name given to her by her husband. Their oldest daughter was called Margaret Poisel and she married Thomas Fitzpatrick. Fitzpatrick was the first Indian agent for Cheyenne and Arapaho Tribes. He was called ‘broken-hand’ because his hand had been mangled in an accident.

“Snake woman was, to me, she was very important and her children continued on but she was almost invisible. That's the way a lot of Arapaho women are. They're invisible, but they're the strength behind the men because we can't make decisions without them. But she was married to a white man and this white man taught her and her brothers how to speak English. So when the settlers started to come into this area, he (Niwot) was able to talk to them, so he was an interpreter for Little Raven. Little Raven trusted Left Hand and used him until his death. After he passed away, they used Snake Woman's daughters [...] Snake Woman had a daughter named Margaret Fitzpatrick and she was the interpreter at Fort Laramie. She was married to a Fitzpatrick, but he moved her and her children up to St Louis. So then her sister Mary was the interpreter at Medicine Lodge.”



Mr. Chester Whiteman and Mr. Roy Dean Bullcoming talk with LHA ethnographer Joanie Finch

Family played a central role in the lives and leadership of the Cheyenne and Arapaho people, grounding their communities through times of peace and hardship alike. For figures such as Niwot and his sister Snake Woman, family was not only a bond of kinship but also a means of cultural survival and continuity. The oral histories shared by Representatives reveal that decisions of diplomacy, migration, and even conflict were rarely made by individuals alone, but through the counsel and support of family members. Snake Woman's work as an interpreter, and later that of her daughters, demonstrates how familial lines carried forward both language and responsibility across generations. These ties ensured that even as external pressures came in, the strength of family preserved the values, knowledge, and unity of the Arapaho and Cheyenne peoples.

Animals in the Boulder Area

While visiting the Boulder area, Cheyenne and Arapaho Representatives saw many animals. For examples, eagles were spotted nesting in a park west of the City. "Its a refuge for eagles and a place they [the public] can watch them, but don't interfere with them" advised Mr. Fred Mosqueda.

Visiting another city park, Tribal Representatives saw a large group of crows that landed in the surrounding trees and started cawing.

*“Crows, **houu** [ho] in Arapaho, can travel from heaven and back to here. He [the crow] is the one that used to bring messages from heaven. He is a symbol of the ghost dance. Also the magpie. ”*
-Mr. Fred Mosqueda

The conversation then turned to another type of bird, the meadowlark. It is said that meadowlarks speak Arapaho. If one noticed a child having a hard time speaking, they would be fed a meadowlark, and then the child would learn to speak Arapaho. Fred Mosqueda is one of the last speakers of his dialect of Arapaho, as the children who attend language school learn Northern Arapaho. Mr. Frank Medicine Water shared that men and women traditionally speak slightly different forms of the Arapaho language. Mr. Fred Mosqueda shared more about how he learned Arapaho:

“We [the Arapaho] came down to Cantonment, and that's where the Mennonites had started a church there and they started the school. The government would say, [to the missionaries] “Well, if you're gonna be there, then you take care of the schools, too.” So they opened up schools and they went to the sixth grade there or something like that. And when my grandmother went to school there for sixth grade, she could sign her name, she could read a little bit, she still spoke real broken English. She didn't use proper pronunciation. She could in Arapaho but not in English. So, but that's where I grew up.”

“There were always songs, they were always singing every morning, you'd hear my uncle sing songs and then my grandmother would sing, my mother would sing. And so as we just grew up with songs from the ceremony songs, Sun Dance song, Ghost Dance song, all these songs she would sing. And then when we started growing up, well, then we started to sing. So my grandmother passed away and then my mother started, you know, teaching us all these songs and how to sing them”

-Mr. Fred Mosqueda

Seeing a spider, Fred Mosqueda shared the Arapaho name for spider as **nih'oo3oo [nehahthaw]**, who is a trickster figure in Arapaho mythology. A nod to Arapaho history, this is also the word for white man. Caterpillar is **neyooxet [neeyak-hcach]** and is also related to Arapaho history.

“It's neyooxet [neeyak-hcach] the same thing we call Whirlwind Woman or Tornado. She's a very powerful figure in our what you guys would call mythology, in our creation story. When the world was created, it was small. Then Whirlwind Woman began to blow and she began to move and she blew and she traveled clear around the earth. And by the time she got back, it was the size that it is today. So she's the one that created the size of the earth.”

-Mr. Fred Mosqueda

With the streams running through the Boulder Valley, modern people may assume fish would have been a staple food, but the Cheyenne and Arapaho representatives want to correct that misconception.

“No, no, no. We didn't eat fish.”

-Mr. Fred Mosqueda

Meat was dried for the winter as well, and people followed game trails up into the mountains in the past to hunt for elk and deer. The Boulder area would have provided so much for people, with its abundant plant life, water sources, and game.

Elevation

The high elevation of Boulder and its surrounding mountains provided unique resources and opportunities for people before colonization. Mountain peaks may have been used for gathering specific medicines, following game trails, eagle catching, ceremony, and scouting other Tribes out on the landscape. Representatives agreed that the elevation was high enough that people would have only come up here for specific reasons.

“If they came this high, there was a purpose. There was a reason why to come this high. They had to be tough. [...] Even a horse coming up here would be tough.”

-Mr. Frank Medicine Water

“When they were up here, it wouldn't be a Tribe as a whole moving along. It was probably individual camps to come up, maybe gather medicines and plants and different things like that up in this higher elevation.”

-Mr. Chester Whiteman



Mr. Frank Medicine Water and Mrs. Pauline Medicine Water observe views of the Boulder Valley with LHA ethnographer Reshawn Edison

There are some plants that only grow in higher elevations, so a person would need to travel up to harvest them. The representatives explained that Cheyenne and Arapaho people only took what they needed, and taught others about medicinal plants through practice.

"I gather a little bit. As time goes along, I'll have enough to make that. I have all the ingredients to make that medicine. And that's when I call folks together. If you want to learn how to make this: come over."

-Mr. Chester Whiteman

Along with large game, eagles were valuable animals that could be interacted with at high elevations. Offerings need to be made before, during, and after during an eagle hunt for the spirit of the eagles. Elder men and their younger helpers would construct a blind that looked like a shelf on the side of the mountain, and then use willows and other tree branches for cover so the eagle couldn't see the people. Sometimes, it would take days to catch an eagle. The elder men used specific medicines to try to catch them. Once caught, they had several uses, but they were first and foremost a sacred animal.

“You would use the head and the claws, the tail feathers, the plumes. When they got done with using all that, they always buried the remains. The bones, [...] whistles are made out of the bone.”

“They were the messengers from our father. They're the ones that, you see the Arapahos using eagles all the time because, you know, them four old men¹? They could come to you in the form of an eagle. They come and take care of you, watch you.”

-Mr. Fred Mosqueda

Along with eagle traps, elder men may have used the seclusion of higher elevations to perform fasting rituals. The old men built a little fasting shelter for the person who was fasting. Fasting is an important part of the spiritual life of Arapaho men. There would be many reasons for fasting but it was typically to ‘find out what you need to know’.

“Everything the Arapahos do, everything we have, comes from someone going out and fasting and praying for it.”

-Mr. Fred Mosqueda

The views from the high vantage points around Boulder reminded Mr. Fred Mosqueda of an Arapaho story. The story describes a great flood (not unlike the great flood of other world religions). The Arapaho people went up onto a mountain and used their moccasins to push the water back down and escape the flood. Arapaho people would have traditionally went into the mountains to gain access to water sources if needed.

High elevation viewpoints would have also been good observation points for both spiritual and strategic purposes. Lookouts facing east make good vantage points to see the morning star.

“The Arapaho’s day starts with the morning star, which is a messenger for the Arapaho, letting them know that they are being watched over.”

-Mr. Fred Mosqueda

¹ When Our Father created the first Arapaho, he put four Old Men or Grandpas (could be understood as similar to angels) in the four directions, not the cardinal directions but the Southeast, Southwest, Northwest and Northeast. They are like our guardian angels. Their sign to us is the Morning Star.



Mr. Fred Mosqueda, Mrs. Mary Mosqueda, and Ms. Clarinda Fletcher enjoy the vistas of Boulder, Colorado

Plants

There were several useful plants observed in Boulder. Mr. Fred Mosqueda shared that Douglas Fir is aromatic when it releases its pollen, and adding it to medicine makes the medicine sweet. Ponderosa Pines have pine gum, which also smells very sweet. Bear root (osha) is often called black medicine, and can be prepared and chewed. It numbs the mouth and can be made into a tea to treat respiratory symptoms. Mr. Chester Whiteman shared that male sage, also called prairie sage (*artemesia ludoviciana*), was also observed, along with food plants like wild currants. Representatives shared that foods like wild turnips, chokecherries, and buffalo berries were likely found in the area in the past, and can be dried for the winter.

More examples include sage, peppermint, bear root, and cottonwood trees. In line with traditional ecological knowledge, Cheyenne and Arapaho people only took what plants they needed, just for themselves, always mindful not to take too much.

Landscape

The notable rock formations in the Boulder area would have been used for navigation purposes, and held spiritual importance. “The mountains had unlimited power and it's still here” says Mr. Fred Mosqueda. “I can trace my bloodline to here [...] I know that people who were related to me walked here and walked this ground and now I’m walking on it again”. When discussing the overall management of the Open Space and Mountain Parks lands around Boulder, the Representatives prioritize the natural state of things:

“I think people should be allowed to walk and enjoy the outdoors. You can live in a city and it becomes, I don't know, kind of like a rat race. But, when you come to a place like this, it's quiet and you can hear nature and then you can recharge in a place like this. You're probably doing therapy to a lot of people just by allowing them to come through here and, and to be in different areas.”

“This probably was a happy place at one time because it provided so much and they stayed here. But they weren't allowed to stay. But now, we come back and we can walk this ground and look at it and see it and be welcomed here. You know that's a little different than the way they were. After gold was found, they were no longer welcome here. This place took care of them. If you tell the story from before, it was a happy place, a good place.”

-Mr. Fred Mosqueda

The wooded areas on the outskirts of the City would have been good for gathering teepee poles, which the horses would’ve helped to transport and maneuver. When discussing how Buckingham Park fits into the larger Cheyenne and Arapaho landscape, the Representatives explained that all of the places in the area are related through Chief Lefthand. To keep everyone fed and not deplete resources, the Arapaho needed to break up into bands. Spotted Wolf, Yellow Bear, Niwot (Lefthand), and Little Raven, would have camped at different locations.

“We were so completely removed from this place- we can’t say they are important because of the removal. But there are places here that are important to our people or important things happened here” Mr. Frank MedicineWater explained. “I don’t think there is any place that we can walk that they didn’t walk before us” shared Mr. Fred Mosqueda.

Speaking more about the camp structure, representatives shared that huge camps and ceremonies could have happened at places in Boulder that are now developed, so it's impossible to tell what could have been there. The structure and layout of a typical Arapaho camp would have depended on its purpose. Smaller camps would have held family bands, and others could be upwards of 70 lodges. At 3-5 people per lodge, the larger camps could have held about 350 people. The council of seven old men and seven old ladies, whose duty was to advise and bless the people, would have been located in the back of a large camp.

The representatives stated that the water makes it a great place to camp, not only because the people and horses could drink water, but the water also draws in larger game.

“We only traveled between water sources, and that’s how we traveled. A horse can go 15 miles on one tank of water. We would camp along the water, according to water” explained Mr. Frank Medicine Water.

Mr. Fred Mosqueda added,

“Water is where it starts. There is a spirit that takes care of that water source, before you use or cross that water you should give an offering/prayer to the water. Nothing can live without water, [...] Water is life, its life giving”.



Mr. Roy Dean Bullcoming observing a Boulder Valley stream

Final Thoughts

Reflecting on the trip to Boulder as a whole, the representative shared these comments:

“We were here as a people, we survived in Boulder, and all along the front range. We were strong people who are not as we are portrayed in the history. We lived here through circumstances that we couldn't help, we were moved from this area. There are no Indians living east of the Rockies of Colorado. We survived. We got pushed all the way to Oklahoma which was a dumping ground for Indians. We are still there. We live there. We are offered this chance to come here back home and I think it's important that we come talk to y'all and get to be here on this ground again. We still live with the same traditions and customs that we had here and we still use them and live by them.”
-Mr. Frank Medicine Water

“We're out of balance. When this earth is out of balance, we're out of balance. So it's not one tribe or anybody. It's everybody. Everybody has to get back on the right page. And then folks are gonna have to give up this money, this greed. That's a big problem and they're going to have to learn how to pray and respect one another.”

-Mr. Chester Whiteman



Mr. Fred Mosqueda viewing mountains with
City staff member David Ford

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Comanche Nation

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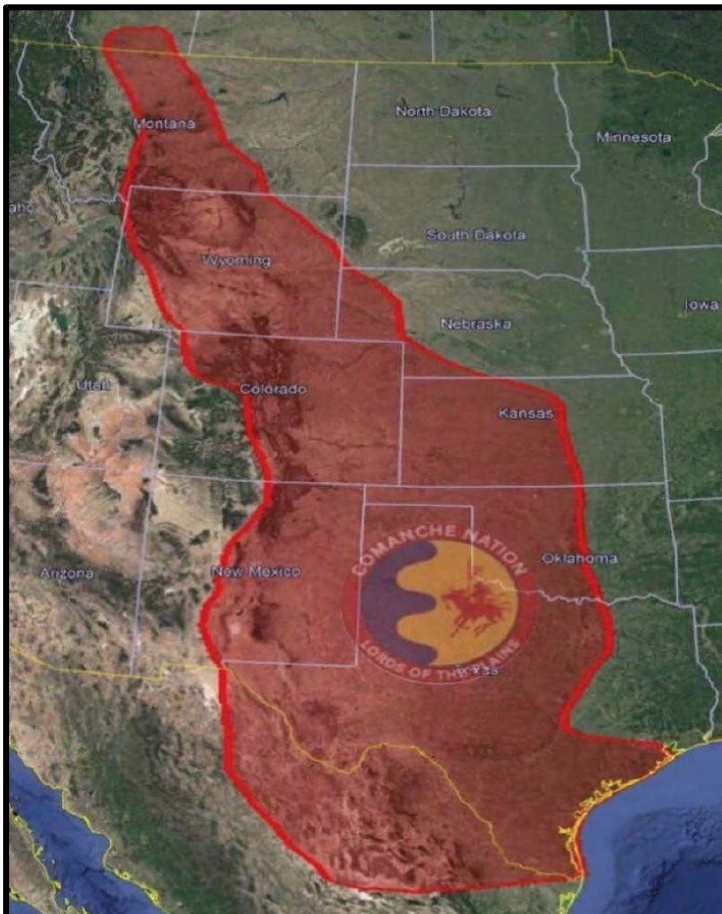
Ms. Rosemary Chibity, Comanche Nation Elder

Mr. Leonard Chibity, Comanche Nation Elder ,

Ms. Martina Minthorn, Tribal Historic Preservation Officer for the Comanche Nation

The Comanche People

The Comanche people are renowned for their masterful horsemanship and expansive influence across the Southern Plains. They maintained a dynamic relationship with the broader Central and Southern Rocky Mountain region, including the Boulder Valley. Although the core of Comanche homelands lay further south, their mobility, trade networks, and seasonal migrations brought them into contact with regions along Colorado's Front Range. Scholars such as Gelo (2010) and Hämäläinen (2009) detail how Comanche landscapes extended across many environments, with their presence marked by hunting, trading, and intertribal relations. Previous ethnographic and ethnohistoric studies, including those by Blythe (2008b) and Campbell (2007), establish that lands in present-day Colorado were recognized by Comanche as part of a larger network of traditional use areas. Montgomery and Fowles (2020) write about a broader Indigenous presence that included Comanche people navigating the Boulder Valley landscapes over time. Comanche traditional homelands are vast, and today, the Comanche Nation is located in Lawton, Oklahoma.



Comanche Nation traditional territories (original map created by Jimmy W. Arterberry and reproduced in TxDOT, 2021)

Precolonial Comanche Life

Traditional Comanche life was rooted in mobility, spiritual practice, and social structure. Ms. Ruth Toathy emphasizes that Comanche women were taught from a young age to be self-reliant and capable, stating, “A Comanche woman is strong physically and mentally... anything a man can do, they could do it”.

“Comanche men, how they are with their families, they put their wives above.”

-Ms. Ruth Toathy

“...we even had women fight with the men.”

-Mr. Leonard Chibity

The importance of ceremonial life is also deeply ingrained, particularly in the context of the Native American Church and peyote meetings. Ms. Ruth Toathy provides a detailed account of the peyote ceremony, comparing it to a church gathering and explaining how each role—fire man, water carrier, singer—serves an important function. These gatherings reinforce respect for elders, gendered responsibilities, and healing through prayer. As Ms. Martina Minthorn points out, the annual pilgrimage to collect peyote remains vital today, underscoring how the Comanche helped “blossom” this ceremonial tradition across Tribal Communities nationwide.

Precolonial Comanche society also revolved around warfare, equestrian skill, and trade, which were fundamental to their cultural identity and survival. Ms. Martina Minthorn describes how the acquisition of horses revolutionized their lifestyle, allowing them to hunt more effectively and conduct raids across vast regions, including against the Puebloan peoples. These raids weren't about conquest; they shaped intertribal relationships, even influencing architectural defenses in Pueblo communities. Wealth was held in horses, and raiding was an integral piece of trading. The Comanche brought horses to many other Tribes through trade, and everyone they traded with needed to learn Comanche sign language in order to trade with them. Comanche people needed to feed their families, just like us, and raiding was one way they could do that. Ms. Rosemary Chibity reinforces Comanche prowess on horseback, recalling how “they’re the only ones that could use the bow and arrow, wrap them legs around that horse and yet get under that neck and shoot”. Leadership was earned through accomplishment, symbolized in regalia such as the moons on a leader’s necklace—each moon representing a milestone or achievement. Each band had different leaders for different roles, power was not consolidated to a single person. Despite their reputation as fierce warriors, Comanche people held strong values of community, reciprocity, and respect for other Tribes’ sacred practices, as seen in their willingness to avoid intrusion during others’ spiritual ceremonies. This balance of strength, spirituality, and adaptability defined traditional Comanche life.

Plant Use

Comanche people have and continue to interact with the Boulder Valley landscape in many ways, including collecting traditional plants. This plant use reflects a deep ecological knowledge grounded in both practicality and respect for the land. As Ms. Ruth Toathy describes, plants like cedar, pine, bitterroot, and hawthorn were central to everyday life and healing practices. Cedar in particular was deeply versatile and used for smoke in ceremonies, its sap for spiritual protection and treating nightmares in infants, and its branches in food preparation such as pounding jerky. Ms. Ruth Toathy also emphasized bitterroot's medicinal and protective properties, describing how it was powdered and applied to the body to ward off snakes and insects, as well as chewed by singers to soothe the throat during drumming. She also explained that pine cones were used as fire starters, and that each tree was recognized.

“There is a name for just about every tree there is (in Comanche)”

-Ms. Ruth Toathy

These practices speak to an enduring relationship with high-elevation landscapes, where such plants were carefully gathered and remembered by name in the Comanche language. The Boulder Valley is an important region due to its high elevation areas and their proximity to the plains. It is an ideal access point to gather high elevation plants and quickly return to more well-traveled areas. This ethnobotanical heritage aligns with broader studies that note Comanche use of mountain and plains ecologies for food, medicine, and ceremonial materials (Brett 2003; Campbell 2007).

Similarly, Ms. Rosemary Chibity's reflections illuminate the religious ethics that accompany Comanche plant use. Ms. Ruth Toathy explains the cultural expectation to give something back to the plant when harvesting, a ritual that includes offering and expressing gratitude to the earth, reinforcing the reciprocal relationship between people and nature.

Plants were used according to their healing properties. For example, cedar tea was drunk warm to break up chest congestion and was even used postpartum in some communities to clear the womb. Mr. Leonard Chibity, too, highlighted the diversity of Comanche botanical knowledge, referencing yucca for hair washing, possum grapes for jelly, and pine sap smoked to calm restless children.



Ms. Toathy and Ms. Chibity talk with City of Boulder staff

Language

The Comanche language holds a central place in the cultural identity and memory of the Comanche people, and it has faced significant challenges due to colonization, assimilation, and language loss. Ms. Ruth Toathy vividly recounts growing up speaking only Comanche at home, saying, “I had to. I’d starve or die of thirst”, emphasizing that it was once the only means of communication with her mother and community. However, as English became essential for survival in schools and broader society, English became more commonplace. Ms. Ruth Toathy describes the tension she felt when her sister prepared her for school, teaching her English by an oil lamp and warning her not to speak Comanche, or else she’d be teased by other children. Similarly, Ms. Rosemary Chibity recalls how her mother, though fluent, deliberately withheld the language, fearing they would develop an accent and be disadvantaged.

“I don’t want you speaking with an accent’ she said, ‘you’re gonna learn English’. So she took us to the Mennonite school.”

-Ms. Rosemary Chibity

These personal stories reflect broader patterns of linguistic suppression and loss described by scholars like Foster (1992) and Kavanagh (2008), who document how federal education policies and assimilationist pressures eroded Indigenous language transmission.

Despite this history, efforts to preserve and revitalize the Comanche language continue, though not without difficulty. As Ms. Ruth Toathy notes, “We’re losing it... But they’re trying,” referring to the Tribal-led language revitalization programs and certified instructors working to reclaim fluency. Mr. Leonard Chibity’s observations point to the presence of Comanche in place-naming traditions, “We got names for our trails, our creeks” highlighting how language encodes geographic and familial knowledge. Additionally, Mr. Chibity describes traditional Tornado songs, which have been passed down orally and are tied to specific bands and ceremonial practices. This is just one example of the role of language in ceremony and social relationships.

Comanche in the Boulder Valley

Despite the limited habitation of high elevations, mountains held important functional and symbolic roles. Ms. Rosemary Chibity emphasized that elevated points were used as lookouts, enabling Comanche sentinels to detect threats or locate resources such as water and other camps. These lookouts were crucial for community safety, giving women and children time to escape in the event of raids, and also helped guide movement through the landscape. Some of the most important Comanche spiritual activities took place at high elevations, like burials and vision quests, imbuing these areas with additional importance.

Ms. Martina Minthorn, the Tribal Historic Preservation Officer of the Comanche Nation, connected this knowledge of terrain with the Comanche's adaptive use of horses, which allowed them to travel swiftly across vast areas and conduct raids, especially during the "Comanche moon" a full moon that enabled rapid movement and safe navigation at night. Mountains thus became part of a broader mobility network and central hubs for trade and intertribal contact (Fowles et al. 2017; Hämäläinen 2009). While the peaks themselves may have remained distant, the surrounding slopes, valleys, and ridgelines were vital to Comanche life for hunting, defense, seasonal movement, and regional connectivity.

“They could cover lots of land, lots of miles; like they call it that Comanche moon. So, in New Mexico that's when we would raid, on a full moon because they could go and come back. If you're riding a horse, you don't want to fall in a prairie dog hole or something like that. That moon would be significant.”

-Ms. Martina Minthorn, THPO

The Comanche people had a dynamic but practical relationship with mountainous landscapes. Ms. Ruth Toathy explains high elevations like those around Boulder were largely inaccessible to many, especially elders and pregnant women who traveled on foot or travois (a horse-drawn wooden sled). Mountains were used in signaling, to alert other Comanche to the presence of other Tribes. A fire was lit as a signal and then put out before going back down to lower elevations.

While the Comanche passed through the Boulder Valley, their camps would typically be in lower elevations where they could find shelter from the wind and cold, especially in winter. The base of the mountains and the valley floors provided essential wintering grounds during snowstorms or while on longer seasonal migrations. Ms. Ruth Toathy's recollection reinforces what scholars like Gunnerson and Gunnerson (1988) and Brett (2003) have observed: while the Comanche ranged widely across the Plains and into foothill zones, their direct use of high alpine terrain was limited, largely due to the environmental and logistical constraints of winter weather and moving people up and down a mountain.



Comanche travois, courtesy of the Comanche Nation Tribal Historic Preservation Office

However, the Comanche made strategic use of the landscape's natural features for survival, mobility, and protection. Ms. Ruth Toathy recalls a vast cave system near Tucumcari used historically by Comanche bands as a winter refuge or as a hiding place during times of conflict, complete with flowing spring water and traces of habitation. These stories align with ethnohistoric records documenting Comanche use of natural shelters and valleys during harsh weather or intertribal tensions (Foster 1992; Campbell 2007). The Boulder Valley, situated along north-south travel corridors, functioned as part of a broader network of pathways linking Comanche bands with key trade hubs such as Taos, where seasonal trading with other Tribes occurred. Low-lying mountain zones offered refuge from the weather and served as resting places when migration was stalled by snow or fatigue. Similarly, Mr. Leonard Chibity noted that while mountain regions provided game, Comanche did not use the high peaks regularly, choosing valley trails instead for ease of travel. These patterns are consistent with archaeological and ethnographic research suggesting that while Comanche territories included foothill and mountain margins, high-altitude zones were less frequently used, except for specific ceremonial purposes. (Brett 2003; Gunnerson & Gunnerson 1988).



Mr. Chibity discussing elevation

Food

Traditional Comanche foods were deeply rooted in the natural resources of the Plains and closely connected to spiritual practices and survival strategies. Buffalo was the cornerstone of Comanche sustenance and culture, providing not only meat but also materials for tools and religious items. As Ms. Ruth Toathy explains, hunting buffalo was a sacred act that required fasting and sacrifice: “To hunt the buffalo, you stay on that hill. You do not eat and drink. You have to sacrifice... Then they'll tell you how you're gonna use it”. This reverence extended beyond the hunt itself; even buffalo beards were used by Comanche women to make pincushions with the beards kept as practical and symbolic household items. The intimate relationship between Comanche people and the buffalo reflects a broader worldview that valued balance, respect for animals, and the importance of spiritual reciprocity in obtaining food.



Buffalo with beard

Preservation and preparation of food were essential to the Comanche's nomadic lifestyle, and traditional methods emphasized practicality and sustainability. Mr. Leonard Chibity recalls that drying meat and salting pork were common practices in his childhood home used to store food for long periods, especially before refrigeration: “They do a lot of drying food... and they had a refrigerator and had a lot of salt, too, to keep some of their meat”. Ms. Ruth Toathy also mentions using specific animal fats, like kidney fat, in drying meat, which added flavor and preserved it longer. These foodways not only sustained Comanche communities through harsh conditions but also passed down generational knowledge about how to live in harmony with the land and its offerings.



The Comanche presence in the Boulder Valley of Colorado reflects a complex and dynamic relationship with the land, shaped by movement, survival, reciprocity, and adaptation. While the high elevations of the surrounding mountains were not often traversed by families, the valley floor served as an essential corridor for travel, trade, hunting, and seasonal shelter. The Comanche used the terrain strategically, for lookouts, winter camps, and access to water and game. Comanche traditions like food preparation, healing ceremonies and raiding practices demonstrate a resilient and sophisticated way of life that continues to evolve while remaining rooted in culture. Through oral histories and lived knowledge shared by Comanche elders today, we see that the Boulder Valley was not only a landscape they passed through, but evidence of a powerful and enduring presence that still resonates in the region.



Top Left: Mr. and Mrs. Chibity observe plant life
Above: A group photo of the research team

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Lakota
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Respecting the Land: A Lakota Perspective

Respecting the land and all its inhabitants is a core principle in Lakota tradition. It is important to recognize the interconnectedness of all living beings and act with care toward the environment. As Jhon Goes In Center shared, “It’s a whole different idea of loving this land... and that’s a feature that we don’t talk enough about.” This love is expressed not through ownership or domination, but through relationship, humility, and gratitude. For the Lakota, land is not a commodity—it is a living entity, a relative that sustains life and deserves to be treated with care.

This ethic of respect extends to all aspects of the natural world, from the smallest plant to the largest animal. “We always make a prayer and ask permission of the animals that we’re going to hunt... and then we give them gratitude,” said Ione Quigley. She emphasized that hunting is not a sport but a sacred exchange. “We only hunt what we’re going to eat, what we’re going to need. And same thing with the plants. We only take what we need, no more.” This tradition of intentional, mindful use stands in stark contrast to modern extractive practices, where, as Benjamin Young put it, “from a Native perspective, we’ll look at a tree and it has life and it has a heart and has branches. And from a non-Native perspective, they’ll look at it and see how many toothpicks can I get out of this.”

In today’s world, where environmental degradation is rampant, the Lakota perspective serves as a guide for more ethical and sustainable living. “All of a sudden you’re finding out there’s more traffic and more traffic,” Mr. Goes In Center noted, referring to the increasing human impact on natural places. “Just have a conscious mind in designing places, you know.” Noise, air pollution, and unchecked development all disrupt the delicate balance that Indigenous communities have long worked to protect. “The pollination would be changed with the air from the helicopters and of course, the noise,” Ms. Quigley added, emphasizing how even subtle disruptions can have cascading effects on plant life and ecosystems. Underlying all of this is a spiritual and philosophical grounding in balance and reciprocity. Mr. Goes In Center reflected, “I think about my ancestors – how great it is that they lived in equilibrium... A society that attained equilibrium with their environment.” Unlike dominant cultures that have often sought to exploit land and resources, Lakota tradition prioritizes harmony and long-term thinking. “They never built cities. They never – they followed it, you know... it gives me a sense of pride today and speaking to the next generation about our ancestors.”



Mr. Jhon Goes In Center

This legacy of balance is rooted not only in practical tradition but in a moral and ethical view of the world. The Lakota do not compartmentalize nature into lifeless resources. Instead, as Ms. Quigley said, “We don’t do that. We connect and communicate with our flora and fauna so much differently than the world of science.” This worldview challenges the dominant Western narrative of control, competition, and consumption, which has led to both environmental destruction and social disconnection. Today, Lakota voices challenge us to confront uncomfortable truths about modern society’s relationship to the land. “It bothers me when I look at the worldview,” Ms. Quigley said. “Greed; all about resources. The colonists had used up all resources on their lands. The lands were so contaminated that they could no longer produce food.” The consequences of historical exploitation are no longer distant echoes; they are present realities in the form of climate change, resource depletion, and ecological collapse.

Yet even in the face of these challenges, Lakota teachings offer a path forward—not through guilt, but through transformation. “America needs that,” Mr. Goes In Center stated. “Their maturation as a society is to connect to the land.” This is not just a call to environmentalism, but to a deeper relational understanding—of history, of place, and of responsibility. “Everybody should know the history of where their family comes from and what happened when they got here,” he said. “So, we can kind of have a better understanding... and honor each other in that way.”

Ultimately, the Lakota perspective is not a criticism of today’s world, but an invitation to reconnect—with nature, with community, and with the values that sustain life. “Asking people to be respectful of the area. Especially a lot of people with their dogs and all that,” Mr. Goes In Center noted, pointing out that even everyday actions like picking up after one’s dog and using a leash reflect deeper attitudes. Respect is not abstract; it is practiced in how we walk through the world, how we gather, how we build, and how we give thanks. In listening to these voices, we’re

reminded that the path to ecological restoration and social harmony lies not in dominance, but in humility. It lies in remembering that “this earth is going to shake and destroy us” if we continue down a path of arrogance. But it also lies in hope—in the idea that we can still choose balance, still choose respect, and still learn to love the land as the Lakota have done for generations.

Roots and Relationships

Lakota lifeways are deeply rooted in a relational understanding of the world, where humans are seen as part of a larger, interconnected system that includes plants, animals, water, air, and the land itself. The big horn sheep that once roamed the Boulder area were (and still are) associated with Chiefs, and the Boulder Valley would have been a place Lakota people traveled to get sheep's wool to make shirts for Chiefs. Unlike the compartmentalized and hierarchical structures common in Western science, the Lakota worldview does not separate nature into distinct categories. As Ms. Quigley explained, “We live with the flora, with the fauna... the air, the water, everything around us, the rocks. We're part of it, we're not compartmentalized.” This view shapes not only how the Lakota interact with the land but also how they speak, think, and live. “Indigenous language is relational,” they continued. “It’s not so much noun-driven,” unlike English, which tends to “look at the land in the sense of linear lines.”



Big horn sheep, public domain

One of the most misunderstood aspects of Indigenous history is the concept of nomadism. The term "nomadic" is often applied to Lakota people inaccurately, implying rootlessness or aimlessness. But, as multiple Lakota Representatives clarified, “We weren’t just wandering... we moved season by season,” following medicinal plants and resources essential to their way of life. “We knew where we were going. We knew what we were doing and the purpose behind where

we go.” The Lakota seasonal movements were precise and deeply informed by generations of ecological knowledge. Calling them “nomadic,” one speaker noted, suggests “somebody is lost and wandering around”—but in fact, they followed a careful, intentional pattern that honored the earth’s natural rhythms.

This deeply rooted knowledge of land and ecology stands in contrast to how outsiders have historically tried to categorize Indigenous peoples. “What’s a Paleo-Indian, what’s an Archaic Indian?” Mr. Young asked rhetorically, pushing back against arbitrary academic labels. These terms often fail to reflect Indigenous self-understanding. “Those names were given to us by people who do not understand the history of the Indigenous people on this continent.” Instead of reducing people to categories or eras, Lakota lifeways emphasize continuity—living traditions passed down through “older ancestors” and grounded in place.

Harmony and balance were also key values in social relationships. Contrary to popular depictions, the Lakota were not perpetually at war. “There’s always some misconception out there that Tribes were constantly fighting,” Ms. Quigley explained. “But it wasn’t that way. There might have been a battle here and there... but it was never territorial.” Conflicts, when they arose, were about resources—hunting grounds, not conquest. The arrival of the horse did introduce new forms of rivalry, such as stealing horses for prestige. “The advent of the horse... caused us to compete and steal horses from one another. It became part of our status symbols.” Yet even then, the competition was often more symbolic than destructive. “We never conquered each other. We proved ourselves against each other.”



Mr. Goes in Center and Ms. Ione Quigley

Underlying all of these traditions is a worldview grounded not in domination but in relationship—with the land, with other people, and with the spirits of all things. This relationality is the foundation of Lakota life, ethics, and language. It resists the mindset of separation and superiority that has characterized settler colonialism. “I struggle with the word nomadic,” said Mr. Young. “Because we were not lost.” They call instead for a deeper historical truth, one that recognizes not only the injustices of colonization but also the sophistication and intentionality of Indigenous societies.

As the Lakota continue to reflect on the impact of colonization and resist reductionist narratives, they also look toward education as a way to bridge understandings. “There’s a book that everybody should read. It’s called *The Indigenous Continent*,” recommends Mr. Goes In Center. “It gives you a perspective... of what really happened to us.” The competing interests of France, England, and Spain—and later the expansionist agenda of the United States—deeply altered Indigenous lifeways (Hämäläinen, 2022). And yet, through resilience and adaptation, Lakota communities maintain a deep connection to the land and their cultural foundations. At the heart of the Lakota way is a simple yet profound truth: everything is related. This isn’t a metaphor; it is a lived reality. The land is not a resource to be measured and divided—it is a relation, a part of the family. And the Lakota, far from being wandering tribes, were and are knowledgeable stewards of their environment, living in a rhythm with nature that holds critical lessons for a world struggling with disconnection, ecological crisis, and cultural loss.

Boulder Valley: A Lakota Perspective on Living Land, Sacred Place, and Changing Systems

From a Lakota perspective, the Boulder Valley in Colorado is not merely a scenic landscape—it is a living, breathing place, deeply imbued with spirit, memory, and ancestral significance. Though it may lie outside the core of their traditional homelands, the Lakota people traveled throughout the area for hunting and resource gathering (Brett, 2003). Many Lakota people have formed powerful, ceremonial, and emotional ties to this land through presence, listening, and reverence. “It’s a whole different world,” Mr. Goes in Center recalled. “It connects you to something that’s really part of reality—more than anything else that’s contrived down there.” The winds, mountains, creeks, and rocks are not just features of the terrain; they are relatives, and the valley itself is understood not as a finished product, but as an ongoing creation. “The first Rocky Mountains disintegrated over time and created all the prairie sculpted by the wind... this planet is still being created.” The Lakota people have names for places in Colorado, explained below, the naming of places is just one of the many ways the Lakota connection to the area is reinforced.

Lakota Name	Rough Translation	Common Name	Explanation
Ĥenúŋpa	Two Mountains Longs Peak	Longs Peak	This peak name is adapted from the Arapaho name Neníisótoyóú'u, meaning "There are Two Mountains.
íŋyaŋ Šá	Red Stone Red Rocks	Red Rocks	According to Walt Pourier (Oglala Lakota), the Lakota came here to pray at this sacred site, alongside many other First Nations.
Ĥé Wahíŋ	Flint Mountain	Mount Arkansas	The source of the Arkansas River.
Wičháŋčala T̥hathípi Maŋpíya	Grandfather's Cloud Lodge	Pike's Peak	Black Elk experienced a vision in which he was taken atop this summit which he called "Grandfather's Cloud Tipi." The Sixth Grandfather, Raymond J. DeMallie, 1984, p. 98.
Kxaŋxí Wakpá	Crow River	Crow Creek	A tributary of the South Platte River. The stream name is from the Cheyenne who call it "Ohetani Ohe," (Crow River). George Bird Grinnell, "Cheyenne Stream Names," American Anthropologist, New Series, Vol. 8, No. 1, 1906, page 21.

Spiritual understanding arises through direct, felt experience with the land—through silence, vision, and participation. In Boulder, the ancient forces of water, wind, and time are still at work, shaping a landscape that teaches those willing to listen. “You could see it all... these are things that gave us repose and connection again,” Mr. Goes in Center shared, remembering his time as a student in Boulder. “Even though we come from far away, we look for places like this.” The valley, like other sacred geographies, becomes a point of grounding—physically, emotionally, and spiritually. This way of relating to the world reflects an understanding of ecosystems that existed long before modern science. “You have to understand,” Mr. Goes in Center continued, “this is a giant recharge system for hydrology... Boulder Creek, Saint Vrain, Little Thompson, Big Thompson—they’re all a result of a system of geology that accommodates the percolation of water.” This understanding emerges not from abstraction but from a lived relationship with place—an Indigenous science that watches, listens, and learns through relationship, not reduction.

Naming is one way of affirming these connections. The City of Boulder and The Tribal Working Group worked in partnership to rename a park in Boulder from *Settler’s Park* to *The People’s Crossing* in 2023. “We renamed the park down below [The] People’s Crossing. It felt good. It felt right. There were so many Indigenous people up here getting together” (Quigley, 2023). Names matter because they reflect memory, purpose, and care. They recognize a deeper history and continued presence, countering the myth of absence in places like Boulder Valley. In the Lakota worldview, land is not passive—it is active. Places like Boulder hold spiritual potential—if people are willing to be quiet, pay attention, and show respect. “It strengthens me to talk about these things,” Ms. Quigley shared. “It reaffirms and gives us strength again... it’s always a good feeling to have someone really, truly, genuinely interested in what you’re saying.”



A chokecherry bush growing in the City of Boulder

The Boulder Valley is also a place of sustenance—not only in its obvious resources like water, but culturally and spiritually. Indigenous knowledge recognizes a wealth of resources in the region’s flora: chokecherries, kata (plum, kanda)¹, uzizitka (rosehip, uedzdzdka), peji hota (sage, padzi hohda), wipazutka (juneberries, wipa zwendka), and mullein—each harvested with care, ceremony, and purpose. Mullein, often dismissed by modern landscaping as an “invasive,” is valued in Lakota medicine for treating asthma. Ms. Quigley shared that prairie sage (*artemesia ludoviciana*) in the Fall curls up its leaves to rest before it goes to seed, as it will need to put its energy into seeding. It is best not to take the tallest prairie sage that sits in the middle of the plant, as he is ‘the grandfather protecting the others’ and needs to protect his relatives. Humans can protect the plant as well by cutting off the needed amount instead of pulling it up from the root. These relationships are built on generations of observation and care, where plants are not objects but relatives—beings to be asked, thanked, and respected. However, climate change is now disrupting these seasonal and spiritual rhythms. “Juneberries used to be ripe in June. That’s why they’re called Juneberries. Everything’s changing”, she continued. Even sacred plants like sage are showing signs of distress. “They were a little shorter in July than they usually are. And this was the second year in a row.” These observations are not anecdotal—they are ecological indicators, rooted in centuries of local, Indigenous science. “We need to actually take a good look at the plants that we really need and make sure they are rejuvenating.”

¹ plants are transcribed as: Lakota name (common English name, Lakota name in the International phonetic alphabet)



Mr. Ben Young

High places in the Boulder Valley—its ridgelines and peaks—hold special meaning for Lakota people. They are places of ceremony, vision, and connection to the universe. “I was inspired by this ability to see in the universe and cardinal directions. So high places are very important to Lakota people. Even today, when we go driving to our reservations, all our cemeteries are on the rises in the prairies” (Goes in Center, 2023). These places allow people to orient spiritually and physically—to connect with the cosmos, the directions, the ancestors. As the climate continues to change and landscapes like Boulder Valley face development pressures, Lakota voices call for a deeper shift—not just in environmental management, but in worldview. “We’re not any different,” Ms. Quigley said. “At the end of the day, we all want to survive. But the world of Indigenous people actually consists of one more sense—and that is intuition. That spiritual connection.” In this light, Boulder is more than a backdrop for recreation or a site of natural beauty. It is a sacred place that invites relationships, demands care, and offers teachings. “What better way to do self-reflection,” she asked, “than to be actually alone when you have no one else to help?” For the Lakota, Boulder Valley remains a teacher, a healer, and a place of grounding—a place not just to visit, but to honor.

Native Science: Intuition, Relationship, and Generations of Knowing

Lakota Native science is not confined to laboratories or peer-reviewed journals—it is a body of knowledge forged through generations of lived experience, observation, and deep relationality with the natural world. Rooted in land, spirit, and story, this way of knowing emphasizes balance, humility, and trust in both the tangible and intangible. At its core, Lakota science uses the five senses—seeing, touching, tasting, hearing, and smelling—to understand the world, but it also embraces a sixth: intuition. This often-overlooked dimension is not an abstract belief or superstition; it is a legitimate and vital form of perception. As Ms. Quigley explained, “We have had thousands of years to actually see, hear, touch, taste... and to do it. So, we know that that plant will work for certain illnesses. But the world of science wants to take that plant apart and see what it’s comprised of. We learn to live with those plants and we learn to accept what they are.”

In this worldview, plants are not objects to be dissected or chemically analyzed—they are relatives. Their healing powers are not “discovered,” but remembered, received, and affirmed through respectful engagement and ancestral continuity. A plant that eases a cold or delivers nourishment is valued because it works, not because it has been validated by a microscope. “Our ancestors didn’t know about vitamin C,” Ms. Quigley explained, “but they knew this plant helped with flu. So they used it, and it worked.” This approach reflects a fundamental difference in how knowledge is valued and acquired. Western science tends to treat knowledge as valid only when it is empirically proven, repeatable, and objectively verifiable. As Ms. Quigley noted, “When we look at the worldview of science, people are not accepting until they prove it. Until they can see evidence... But we’ve lived here for many, many years. We **know** that plant.”

The Lakota way values experiential and intuitive knowledge passed through generations, often through dreams, oral tradition, and direct experience. “If we’re shown a plant in our dream,” Ms. Quigley shared, “we wake up and ask about that plant. We look for that plant because it is something somebody in our family needs.” Dreams, in this context, are not mere subconscious impressions—they are part of a spiritual communication system that guides care, medicine, and decision-making. This form of insight is not about guesswork; it is about trust in relationship and receptivity to guidance from forces beyond the physical. In contrast, Western scientific culture often resists accepting intuition as a valid source of knowledge. “Nobody wants to accept that. Everybody wants to see hardcore evidence,” Ms. Quigley remarked. “They forget that we’ve known these plants for thousands of years.” The spiritual dimension of Lakota science cannot be separated from its ecological knowledge. It is precisely this spirituality—this intuitive, relational way of being—that forms the foundation of connection to flora, fauna, water, and land. “Our spirituality does keep us connected with everything,” Mr. Goes In Center explained. “But scientists refuse to acknowledge the intangible... that difference surely needs to be looked at more.”

This doesn't mean the Lakota view science with contempt. Rather, there is a call for mutual understanding—an invitation to recognize that different knowledge systems can coexist. “I’m not asking anyone to accept their intuition,” Ms. Quigley said, “but that does exist with Native Americans. And that way of being—of knowing—deserves respect.” Lakota science is not anti-empirical. It is empirical in its own right—grounded in centuries of observation, trial, and adaptive learning. It is just rooted in a different philosophy: one of humility rather than control, of coexistence rather than conquest. Plants are not specimens; they are helpers. Knowledge is not something to be extracted; it is something to be honored. In this way, Lakota Native science challenges dominant narratives about what counts as “real” knowledge. It asks us to consider: What if the spiritual, the intuitive, the relational, and the ancestral were not dismissed as unscientific—but embraced as a necessary part of knowing the world?



A group photo of the research team

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The Pawnee Nation

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Pawnee in the Boulder Area

The Pawnee Nation of Oklahoma is headquartered in the town of Pawnee in north central Oklahoma. The Pawnee were removed from their homelands along the North Platte River in 1875, when the federal government moved them to Oklahoma (Pawnee Nation, 2020). This new environment presented incredible challenges to the Pawnee, as they were forced to adapt to an entirely new way of life and negotiate their existence with the federal government (Royce Blaine, 1990; 1997). Even before their removal, the Pawnee people faced hardships in Nebraska due to the presence of missionaries. Their traditional way of life and cultural practices were disrupted as missionaries attempted to convert the Pawnee to Christianity. Many Pawnee were introduced to European-style agriculture and settlement practices, which conflicted with their traditional nomadic or semi-nomadic lifestyle. Additionally, the arrival of settlers and traders, driven by westward expansion, led to the disruption of the Pawnee's land and resources (Dunbar, 2010; Irving 2001). Prior to colonization, a rich Pawnee culture of sophisticated economic practices, hunting techniques, and communal activities (like the Chawi Winter Hunt) existed in the Great Plains region (Roper, 1991).



The North Platte River (Encyclopædia Britannica)

We live by water, and I think that's why we traveled over here because we always followed water. And that's part of our history. I mean, even when we lived in Nebraska, it was always by the Platte River, you know. We've always lived by the water. I think that's just because it's a resource.

-Martha Only A Chief

The North Platte's headwaters are in Coalmont, Colorado; just 100 miles northwest of Boulder. The Front Range's abundant resources made it an attractive area for Pawnee people in the pre-colonial and early historical periods. The Pawnee created trails to the area primarily to hunt buffalo, who were being slaughtered for their hides by non-native settlers.

The Pawnee oral history stretches back hundreds, even thousands, of years, serving as a vital source of continuity for the community. It preserves not only the memory of significant sites but also ways of life and intricate cosmology, which blends spirituality, astronomy, and their cultural practices (Chamberlin, 1982). Like their cosmology, Pawnee social organization is intricate and thousands of years old. The Pawnee people consist of four bands, Pitahawirata, Kitkehahki, Chawi, and Ckiri. The Ckiri band has their own dialect of Pawnee, and the three other bands all speak a version of Pawnee called the South Band dialect (Only A Chief, 2025). Within these bands, Pawnee individuals held distinct roles, and one unique way they identify themselves among other Native peoples is through their distinct pottery styles.

They would come and they would camp. And then they – the men – would go out and hunt while the women would start setting up the tipi and preparing for when they come back. And then when they come back, then they would get the meat and skin it and all that. [...] It wouldn't be everybody. It'd be just the ones that normally went hunted. And they'd probably bring the younger ones to, you know, show them what they need to do. [...] So, they would stay in one place. They wouldn't move around and go hunt and go to different places. That's why you find scrapers, and there's been pottery found. Different Tribes have different ways of identifying themselves and ours is cord marking. I guess the best way to say is, like a popsicle stick, and then get a cord and just wrap it around. When they make that pottery, they take that thing [stick] and just go all the way around. That's why they call it 'cord marking' on our pottery. Ours would have handles on them sometimes. But the other Tribes are different.

-Martha Only A Chief

Pawnee Perspectives on Animals

It wasn't just the Boulder Valley that held significance for the Pawnee, there are important spiritual and cultural sites in various parts of the state. Garden of the Gods in Colorado Springs was (and still is) a destination for the Pawnee and this impacted the expanse of their cultural landscape. In Pawnee history, the Garden of the Gods is the place buffalo would go to give birth, ensuring the continuity of this important subsistence animal. The importance of the buffalo is reflected in the petroglyphs of the Pawnee homelands, where bison are a common motif (Loendorf, 2008). The presence of buffalo historically drew Pawnee people to the Boulder area and beyond. But as non-native people moved in and started hunting buffalo for sport and trophy hunting, the Indigenous people who respected them as a valuable resource were left with a dwindling population of the animal that once provided so much.

That's why we came over this way from Nebraska, just due to food resources. Because ours were getting eliminated by whomever shooting just for fun and not for use. We used everything from the bison, the buffalo. They [Pawnee people] used the hide. I mean they used the horn, made spoons out of the horns. I think we used as much as we could. [...] all parts of the body. We didn't throw anything away. We had dogs because they were like horses at times, you know. So, that's probably what they fed them, whatever was left over [from the buffalo]. And our utensils, they made spoons out of the bison horns and bags out of their guts or their insides. That's what it provided to us.

-Martha Only A Chief

Dogs were another important animal, serving a different role than the buffalo. The Pawnee people have a long history with these animals, often using them alongside or in place of horses. Ms. Only A Chief explained that dogs were considered "like gold" because of their ability to carry and drag materials over long distances. While both dogs and buffalo had practical purposes, they also held spiritual significance. Many animals were culturally and spiritually meaningful to the Pawnee, such as the eagle, which Ms. Only A Chief described as "a blessing."



Ms. Only A Chief

Pawnee Perspectives on Water

Water is a resource with multi-faceted meaning for the Pawnee people. As expressed, “Water is, water is life. You can't live without it” (Only A Chief, 2024). The waters of the North Platte River served many vital purposes when the Pawnee people lived in their homelands. As Ms. Only A Chief explains,

You live by water because you have that access to water your crops, feed your family and you don't have that far to carry water. Because you have to have water to survive. So that's why we've always lived by water.

-Martha Only A Chief

In addition to its practical value for crops, people, and animals, water holds deep spiritual significance that has been passed down through generations. Water can help a person who needs healing, or to calm the soul and soothe the mind.

What I was told: if I'm having a hard time or things aren't going right; go to the water and watch the water because it'll calm your soul. It'll calm your mind. So sometimes I'll go to this lake and then I'll just go out there and sit there and then I'll just start talking [...] And then after that, I just feel better.

-Martha Only A Chief

Given its many essential roles, water remains a cornerstone of Pawnee life. The loss of access to clean river water when the Pawnee were relocated to Oklahoma underscores its importance. The water flowing through the Boulder Valley should be treasured as the gift it truly is. The value of water is ever increasing as the climate changes, building projects progress, and the population increases. This is a pattern the Pawnee witnessed historically and are observing today.

Pawnee, where I live, we've been having rain almost constantly for two weeks and that's unusual. It is crazy how this climate changes. [...] You got running water coming from there [a creek in the distance]. I guess the only thing is just the building. How much more do you need to build? How much more are you gonna take away, you know? [...] Where I live, we don't have running water like that. We just have a lake. And as I keep saying, you're blessed to have something like this. Because we're all fighting for water where we live. It's not really drinkable. We always have a 'boiling water order' throughout the city. The people that use the water. So, you're lucky and it's awesome to see that.

-Martha Only A Chief



Ms. Only A Chief observing a river

Pawnee Perspectives on Plants

Being in the Boulder area serves as a reminder of Pawnee people that once existed on the land, and can inspire a sense of connection and continuity for the Pawnee today. Speaking about the area, Ms. Only A Chief reflected on a deep sense of connection to the land, ancestors, and spiritual practices. She spoke about the significance of knowing where their ancestors traveled, how they honored the land, and the rituals they performed, such as praying and offering tobacco before taking anything from nature. She shares the special bond that certain places hold, like the Garden of the Gods, where the act of gathering cedar was intertwined with prayer and gratitude. It's a reflection on the peacefulness and reverence of tradition, highlighting the importance of emotional and spiritual connections to both people and places across generations.

To us, anything traditional is anything that you can use from the earth for any reason – whether it's medicine, whatever. Sage or flat cedar, that's what we pray with or just cedar but, that's culture to us. Because we use that for specific reasons. It's not just to tear things down or to take everything and not leave something.

-Martha Only A Chief

The following is a list of plants that are found in the Boulder area and their names in Pawnee.

Pawnee Name	Scientific Name	English Name
<i>usâku</i>	Negundo aceroides ssp. interius	boxelder
<i>cakîra</i> (south band) <i>cakirâkahcu'</i> (Ckiri)	Yucca glauca	yucca/ Spanish bayonet
<i>lup'-it</i> or <i>lup'-it-kur-i-wi</i>	Rhus aromatica ssp. trilobata	three-leaved sumac/ skunkbrush
<i>lup'-it</i> or <i>lup'-it-kur-i-wi</i>	Rhus glabra	smooth sumac
<i>kahcahîtu'</i>	Ligusticum porteri	osha / lovage
<i>kit-au'-i-u</i>	Achillea lanulosa	yarrow
<i>kit-au'-i-u</i>	Ambrosia psilostachya var. coronopifolia	western ragweed
<i>kit-au'-i-u</i>	Ambrosia trifida	giant ragweed
<i>kêwuhki</i>	Artemisia frigida	fringed sage/ silver sage
<i>ka-wau'-it</i>	Artemisia ludoviciana	prairie sage/ Louisiana sagewort
<i>kirikitahkatâru'</i>	Helianthus annuus	common sunflower
<i>kirikitahkatâru'</i>	Helianthus pumilis	Nuttall's sunflower
<i>ksapitâhaku</i> (Ckiri) <i>ksapitâhâku</i> (south bands)	Ratibida columnifera	prairie coneflower
<i>pîrahatus</i> or <i>pirahatuskatus</i>	Opuntia macrorhiza	twistspine prickly-pear cactus
<i>kipahki</i> (Ckiri) <i>čahriksikskîsu'</i> (south bands)	Chenopodium album	goosefoot
<i>tawačâku</i>	Juniperus communis ssp. alpina	common/ spreading juniper
<i>tawačâku</i>	Sabina scopulorum	Rocky Mountain juniper
<i>sistâtu'</i> or <i>sistat</i>	Scirpus pallidus	cloaked bulrush
<i>rakasis</i>	Arctostaphylos uva-ursi	kinnikinnick / bearberry
<i>ke-ha-pir-i-us</i>	Dalea purpurea	purple prairie clover
may have been seen as any other rush <i>sistâtu'</i> , <i>sistat</i> ;	Juncus arcticus ssp. ater	arctic/ baltic rush
may have been seen as any other rush <i>sistâtu'</i> , <i>sistat</i> ;	Juncus interior	interior rush
<i>cusâhtu'</i>	Monarda fistulosa var.	wild bergamot/ bee balm

	menthifolia	
<i>kai-it-u</i>	Oxalis stricta	yellow oxalis/ woodsorrel
<i>pîcuc</i>	Hesperostipa comata	needle-and-thread
<i>pakuckucu'</i> (Ckiri) <i>Pakuckucu'</i> (south bands)	Schizachyrium scoparium	little bluestem
<i>kacpîrakari'</i>	Rumex crispus	curly dock
<i>riwaharikasis</i> (Ckiri-dwarf plum with small fruit) <i>Riwaharit</i> (south bands-plum fruit) <i>riwahariktâtu'</i> (south bands-plum bush) <i>riwaharikiripirus</i> (south band-small plum variant)	Prunus americana	wild plum
<i>pahâtu</i>	Rosa sayi (acicularis)	prickly rose
<i>aparûpahat</i> or <i>aparu</i>	Rubus idaeus subsp. melanolasius	red raspberry
may have been seen as just a cottonwood; <i>pasakîtu'</i>	Populus angustifolia	narrow-leaved cottonwood
<i>Ruk-a-ra-kus-pit-u;</i> <i>Pus-ukr;</i> <i>Us-a-hak-ta-kar-u;</i> <i>Pus-uk-uts</i>	Populus deltoides ssp. monilifera	plains cottonwood
could have been seen as another type of cottonwood	Populus tremuloides	aspen
<i>Kitapatu</i> ; Depending on when introduced, could have been seen as another type of willow	Salix alba var. vitellina	golden osier
<i>Kit-up-a-la-rus</i>	Salix amygdaloides	peach-leaf willow
<i>Kit-up-a-la-rus</i>	Salix bebbiana	Bebb willow
<i>Kit-up-a-la-rus</i>	Salix exigua	sandbar willow
<i>Kiriktacarus</i>	Typha angustifolia	narrow-leaved cattail

Pawnee Perspectives on Traditions

Appreciating what one has is an important lesson from the Pawnee, who have nearly lost and revitalized several of their cultural traditions. The 1883 Code of Indian Offences outlawed Indigenous spiritual and religious practices like dances, gift-giving, and medicine men (Price, 1883). This law was in place for 95 years until 1978, when the American Indian Religious Freedom Act was signed by President Carter (American Indian Religious Freedom, 1978). Any Native person over the age of 50 can remember a time when they weren't allowed to engage in their cultural and religious practices, and knows that their parents, grandparents, and even great-grandparents couldn't do so either. The resilience of traditional practices demonstrates the resilience Native people everywhere. These dances and traditions are more meaningful than many non-native people assume; for example, the Ghostdance, a form of traditional game involving hidden objects and teams, was used as a medium for expressing cultural values, social bonds, and religious beliefs tied to the Ghost Dance (Lesser, 1978). Ms. Only A Chief talked about how the Nation has started holding spring and fall dances, where they feed their people and perform traditional dances. She expressed her love for dancing, as it connects her to the heartbeat of the drum. While acknowledging that their efforts to revive their culture might not have exactly replicated what their ancestors did, she emphasized the importance of preserving it. She highlighted that it was their responsibility to keep the culture alive.

There's a difference between ceremony and spiritual things. To us, ceremony- the only ceremony that we had that's been brought down from Nebraska is when we put our people away [i.e. funeral]. That's the only ceremony that's carried on and still carried on. Same way, same thing. [...] We mourn for four days. We feed the people, feed the family. And then we give away whatever people bring us. [...] The thing about Pawnee people is we take care of each other. [...] We've lost most of our dances due to being told we couldn't do our dances when we went to Oklahoma. So, the people that used to do dances, they didn't continue, just to keep the family from getting in trouble. So, we've lost ceremonial dances.

-Martha Only A Chief



Ms. Only A Chief observes a Boulder viewscape

Pawnee Perspectives on Protection

Protecting the natural spaces in the Boulder area is crucial for preserving the region's rich biodiversity, maintaining ecological balance, and supporting the health and well-being of its residents and associated peoples. The area's unique landscapes offer vital habitats for diverse wildlife, while also serving as essential areas for connection to nature. These natural spaces help regulate the local climate, improve air and water quality, and provide flood protection.

Additionally, they play a significant role in the cultural and spiritual lives of many, offering opportunities for reflection, healing, and outdoor activities that foster a sense of community. By safeguarding these precious landscapes, Boulder ensures that future generations will continue to experience the beauty and benefits of its natural environment, while also contributing to global efforts to preserve natural ecosystems and mitigate climate change. Caring for the environment is a universal concept that we can all connect to. It is vital to engage staff, volunteers, and the public in this goal so everyone can work together to preserve the natural spaces that mean so much to us all.

One has to have love for the land to protect that land. They have to have that compassion and appreciate Mother Earth.

-Martha Only A Chief



Ms. Only A Chief on a Boulder OSMP trail

Not only can the natural places around Boulder be protected for residents and visitors, but also for future generations of Native children who need a connection to their culture and homelands. Ms. Only A Chief reflected on how many of her people, especially the youth, don't have the opportunity to experience important places or learn about their history. She hopes that by exposing younger generations to these locations, it will inspire them to pursue education and connect with their heritage. Ms. Only A Chief emphasizes the importance of preserving these experiences so that future generations can witness and feel a connection to their ancestors.

[The] big thing right there, is to keep it going so later our people can come over here, our youth, and witness what I've witnessed. And it's different seeing it and hearing about it, but actually being here, it opens your mind, your heart to know that your relatives have been here.

-Martha Only A Chief

An often-overlooked element of protecting a place is protecting the stories and knowledge that comes with it. These narratives should only be provided by those who they concern. "Now more than ever, we want our stories to be told" (Only A Chief, 2024). Throughout history, the stories of Indigenous people in the United States have been told by non-native people. This third-party knowledge has perpetuated incorrect information and created false sources. As the Pawnee Nation continues its partnership with the City of Boulder, the rich history, culture, and stories from the Boulder area will continue to be uncovered and enjoyed.



Ms. Only A Chief observing the City of Boulder from a lookout area

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Ute Mountain Ute Tribe

Contributors

Terry Knight, Ute Mountain Ute THPO
A Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Elder

Presence and Movement

The Ute people's connection to the Boulder Valley is rooted in centuries of seasonal movement and cultural presence, long before European or American settlement (see Appendix 1 and 2 for maps of traditional Ute territories). The front range particularly was one of the migration areas for the Moache band. Mr. Knight emphasized the importance of historical recognition, stating, “the Ute people have been here for at least a minimum of 13,000, maybe 18, 20,000 years... So, we say, we were here forever.” As part of a broader seasonal round, Ute families moved through the region to hunt game, gather medicinal and edible plants, and engage in ceremonies tied to specific landscapes. Plants such as chokecherries and wild onion were staples, and oral histories continue to recount how families would camp together and pass down knowledge to younger generations. These were not only acts of sustenance but expressions of cultural continuity and reverence for the land. Brandi Denison (2017) describes this as “Ute land religion”—a relational worldview where land is sacred, reciprocal, and central to identity.

“ (The Utes would be) coming back from the lowlands where there were foothills, getting ready, coming off the mountain, coming down into the lower elevation for the winter, and coming from lower elevation going into the mountains in the summertime... We were always mobile, going here and there. Nobody could say we can’t go. It wasn’t written; it was understood.”

-Mr. Terry Knight

Mr. Knight discussing the landscape



Though Ute presence in the Boulder Valley was disrupted by settler colonialism, removal, and land dispossession, the area remains part of a broader homeland that includes present-day Colorado and surrounding states. Historians like Robert Emmitt (1954) and Virginia McConnell Simmons (2000) document the extensive use of the Front Range by Ute bands before forced removals.

“When they migrated along the front range, so basically the Mouache band and Capote and the Grand River Utes, some of them had all intermingled. My great grandfather and him and his, used to come across over to hunt buffalo or whatever; they would go up to Laramie to hunt. They didn't stay along the river, they moved around like anybody else did. And they'd get into skirmishes with the Arapahoe and sometimes the Cheyenne and when the Lakotas would come across... and they would get in to with them because they were coming onto Ute hunting grounds. But they didn't say “that's my land”, they'd say “that's my hunting area”. That's what all the other Tribes are looking for: hunting grounds, and that's what they were fighting. Not because of the land, because of the ground, hunting grounds that they were encroaching on.”

A Tribal Elder talking with Jessica Yaquinto, LHA ethnographer



Despite historical rupture, contemporary Ute voices assert an ongoing connection to Boulder through memory, cultural practice, and educational outreach. As a Ute Mountain Ute Tribe Tribal Elder remarked, “we’re not here for the money, we’re here for the land... that’s our riches”—a sentiment echoed by David Rich Lewis (1994), who notes that Indigenous worldviews frame land not as property but as kin, a source of life and identity.

"We were here when they discovered all this gold... that’s when they pushed us out... they made treaties to make what they did was right... they stole all that....the chiefs... could not read English... I think that’s against some law, isn’t it?... These people did not understand English... so how can you say that’s a legal document?" "

-Mr. Terry Knight

Recounting how he grew up living with his grandparents in a stone structure. Mr. Knight shared “We used what was available. To have shelter, to have food, whatever. If it's from the animals or if it's from berries, fruit or roots in the ground, we know where to get them and then she [my grandmother] knew how to process it. But my grandmother had been in this front range a long time. And then the pictures down at the Garden of the Gods? She's in a lot of those pictures, her and her mom, and my mother when she was 4 years old.”

The Ute people have experienced profound cultural and physical displacement through settler colonialism, which not only removed them from ancestral lands but also systematically erased their histories from public memory. A participating Tribal Elder expresses frustration that significant events like the ‘Posey War’ remain largely untaught, reflecting a broader absence of Native perspectives in education and public narratives—a silence that reinforces cultural marginalization. As Virginia McConnell Simmons (2000) and Robert Emmitt (1954) describe, the forced removal of Utes from Colorado and the renaming of sacred places severed vital connections to land, identity, and history. A Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Elder highlights how exclusion from traditional territories—due to development, allotments, or off-road vehicle damage—prevents cultural practices such as gathering tea or making offerings, further deepening the rupture. This disconnection is not merely material but spiritual, as land is understood not as property but as kin. Calls to restore Indigenous stewardship and visibility, including accurate signage and education, reflect ongoing efforts to reclaim historical truth and revitalize Ute cultural presence in their homelands (Denison 2017; Lewis 1994).

The History of how Non-Natives came to Boulder

As told by Mr. Terry Knight, as it was told to him by the late Mr. Neil Cloud, Southern Ute Indian Tribe Native American Graves Protection and Repatriation Act (NAGPRA) Coordinator. As was told to Mr. Neil Cloud by his grandfather, who was present for the events described.

Neil Cloud's grandfather [a Ute leader] gave his permission for these poor, ragged people that were coming from the east, they came here, and the Chief at that time, he went to talk to them, and he saw them, and they were just poor, poor people.

And whoever it was that they were following (their leader) said, "we come across the plains and we're here, we're tired, we're hungry, we got no food, we got, we got nothing."

and Chief said, "yeah, I see that."

They said "we're gonna camp here for a while"

"well go ahead. You know, there's food here, there's game, there's fish and there's water. Go ahead, stay here as long as you have to. And I'm giving you permission to stay here."

And they said "thank you".

And so (Chief) went back to the people and told them. "These people are poor, you know, they need to find some place to stay for a while and until they get all right."

Then (the Chief) saw the Ute people, and told the Ute people, "What do you think?"

They said, "Yeah, I guess so."

And one woman said, "Yeah, poor people, you know, what harm can they do?"

And they left went back over the mountain. And I don't know how long it took for them [the Ute] to make that migration route and come back around. By the time they came back here, those people were still here!

So, when Chief remembered that were Ute people said "Ah, let them stay here. What, what harm can they do? They need a place to live, and we got all this mountain here, we got all this land and everything, and the Utes we're just a handful. And these people needed a place to live."

The Utes told them to "Go ahead, you know, you can stay here, no problemo".

So, I must say, "Oh, I see you're still here."

Reciprocity and Respect

The Ute worldview sees nature not as a resource to be owned or exploited but as a living relative deserving of respect, listening, and offerings. As A Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Elder put it, “we don’t say that these mountains were ours... nothing is ours... we just use what there is,” reflecting a philosophy of shared use and humility. Denison (2017) frames this perspective as a land religion—one where prayer, offerings, and presence maintain balance and honor sacred geographies. Ritual acts, like setting aside food before meals or preserving sacred plants in the home, serve as spiritual maintenance, ensuring harmony and abundance for all beings.

“Before I eat, I put a little aside — that’s my offering.”

-Tribal Elder

The belief that land holds memory and energy—“the energy is still here in the mountains”—reflects what Robert McPherson (2011) documents among the White Mesa Utes: landscapes imbued with spirit and ancestral presence. Sites such as lookout points, springs, and ceremonial spaces are approached with offerings and care. These places are not only spiritually potent but ecologically significant, and their misuse or development disrupts both physical and cultural ecosystems. Lewis (1994) observes that Indigenous ideas about land favor kinship, care, and spiritual reciprocity. Even when displacement or land destruction occurs, Ute spiritual connection survives through memory, storytelling, and ceremony.



“...you do not make money off what was given to us by the creator... He gave us everything... if we sell it... he’s gonna gradually take that away...”

-Ute Mountain Ute Tribal Elder

Traditional Use and Ecological Knowledge

Ute land use was historically defined by mobility, seasonal migration, and deep familiarity with local ecosystems. Rather than build permanent settlements, Ute families moved through high country, valleys, and plains, setting up small camps near water and food sources. As Terry Knight explains, a 16-foot teepee was often sufficient, especially in places selected for access to resources or spiritual significance. Lookout points, such as those used to monitor game or approaching camps, held both practical and ceremonial value. The late Mr. Clifford Duncan (2003) and Mr. Fred Conetah (1982), of the Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray Reservation, emphasized the sophistication of this mobility, guided by tradition and an intimate knowledge of terrain. Mr. Knight explained that campsites had to be in level areas within walking distance to water, but not too close to the water. High areas were used at lookouts to ‘see who’s coming’.

Mountains themselves hold deep cultural, spiritual, and practical importance to the Ute people. They are seen not only as homelands but also as sacred places where stories, traditions, and ceremonies are rooted. Many Ute oral histories describe the mountains as living beings with power and A Tribal Elder explained that they are cleansing places with energy you can feel through your bare feet. Mountains also provide essential resources such as water, plants, and game, which sustained Ute communities for generations. Beyond their material importance, mountains embody the Ute worldview of balance and interrelatedness with nature, reminding the people of their responsibility to respect, care for, and maintain harmony with the land. For the Utes, mountains are more than landscapes; they are relatives, teachers, and sources of identity.

Traditional subsistence practices were taught from generation to generation. Mr. Knight and A Tribal Elder describe purifying spring water, eating rabbits and berries, and using wild plants for flavor or nutrition. These practices align with Fowler and Fowler’s (1971) research on Numic-speaking peoples, who lived sustainably off the land through observation and adaptation. Cooperation was key: youth helped elders meals were shared, and every outing was a lesson. As Lewis (1994) writes, “these habits were not just for survival but formed the basis of a land-based cultural ethic, in which people moved not aimlessly, but with purpose, tradition, and respect.”

“They don’t say ‘I’m teaching you.’ I guess they expect you to observe and learn.”

-Mr. Terry Knight

Seasonal Gathering and Foodways

In the Boulder Valley, Ute families gathered a variety of native plants, including pinyon nuts, chokecherries, wild onions, strawberries, yucca, and prickly pear. These seasonal camps were intergenerational, with adults teaching children how to harvest, prepare, and respect the plants. Yucca was roasted over fire like squash or processed into natural soap. The stalks were sometimes used for weaving, especially sandals. Prickly pear and barrel cactus fruit, once scorched to remove spines, was described as tasting like apricots. Wild rose hips and strawberries added sweetness, though Mr. Knight humorously recalled breaking out in a rash after eating wild strawberries that hadn't been properly cleaned.

"We've forgotten to give thanks to what we plant. This year, I didn't offer anything — my corn came out too early, too small. It didn't grow right."

-Mr. Terry Knight



On an OSMP trail

These traditional foodways reflect more than subsistence—they represent cultural continuity, environmental stewardship, and ecological intelligence. Both Mr. Knight and A Tribal Elder expressed concern about modern disruptions, such as off-road vehicles damaging gathering sites or land use policies that restrict access. Denison (2017) and Jones (2019) both highlight how such interruptions erode not just food sources, but the cultural and spiritual relationships tied to place. In this context, the Boulder Valley is a living archive of Ute heritage, where each plant, trail, and lookout holds layered meaning—nourishing body, memory, and spirit.

"...just to give thanks to the creator for all this... ceremonies... sacred site... offering... whenever they go somewhere... they always give offering... they understood who Creator was..."

-Mr. Terry Knight



Reviewing maps with Boulder OSMP staff

Final Thoughts

Ute Mountain Ute Representatives advocated for keeping open spaces “natural” rather than developing them “till it looks like Main Street in Boulder,” emphasizing that true connection to the land requires preservation and spiritual attentiveness. Nature, they argue, is not simply a recreational backdrop for weekend visitors, but a living teacher, holding ancestral memory and offering space for reflection, prayer, and healing. As a Tribal Elder reflected, “being out here helps me reflect on what my aunts and uncles taught me” a reminder that cultural transmission and healing can only continue if the land remains respected and intact.



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