

Life in the Early Times

Life was very hard for the Ute people; they did not grow corn and squash in large fields like the ancient cliff dwellers. Their food came mostly from the wild animals that they hunted and from plants and berries that they gathered. The Utes spent much of the year moving from place to place looking for food. When the high mountain passes became covered with drifts of snow, the Utes left the mountains to look for food in the valleys and hills, and sometime even traveled east to hunt on the plains.

Before Utes had horses, moving from camp to camp during the winter was hard work. The only way to carry their possessions was on their backs. When the new camp was set up, the men hunted while the women looked for plants and berries. They did not always find enough food to eat. The Ute bands were often hungry during the long winters of the Colorado high desert plateau.

During these hard times, the families often traveled alone. Each family had its own favorite trails down through the mountains with its own hidden berry patches and hunting grounds. Ute families were larger than most families of today; besides the father, mother, and children, there would be at least one pair of the children's grandparents and maybe an aunt and uncle along with their children and some adopted cousins. A family of this size was very useful. The grandparents could take care of the children while the fathers hunted the mothers looked for berries, onions, and other types of food. It was important to have the grandparents living with the family. The Utes believed that the grandparents were the wisest of the elders and could teach their children the ways of the Ute people.

At mealtime, the oldest person of the family was the first to be served. To take a drink before an older person did so or speak before he did was considered to be bad manners. When it was time to move camp, it was the grandfather who would say, "We must go on the next place. There is no more food here."

Camp life was good for the children. Their grandparents spent all day watching them play and often spoiled them. Ute parents did not believe in spanking their children when they were bad. They thought it was enough to warn them that an evil spirit would come to get them if they misbehaved. After all, in that hard life, they would not be children long. Everyone knew that the young children would soon begin to help the family.

From the time a Ute girl was very young, her grandmother would teach her how to search for food and help her mother. Some of the chores for the little girls were to dig roots, find berries, and gather wood for the fire. The boys would learn, usually from an uncle or grandfather, how to hunt deer and antelope or clear a new campground for the teepees. By the time the children were fourteen or fifteen, they could do most of the work a grown-up could do.

The Mountains, the Land, and the Animals

The Utes had many trails through the steep mountain passes that they used when the seasons changed. They traveled to the land where the weather would provide food and game for their large families. In the spring and summer, the Utes traveled by foot to the mountain valleys where they could grow corn, harvest wild onions, and pick good berries.

During the warmer seasons, they would fish the swift clear streams, and hunt the

game to feed their families through the long winters. The Utes dried the meat of the wild game that made it easy to carry from camp to camp and to use it later in the year.

On the narrow ledges, steep cliffs, and mountain peaks high above timberline lived the bighorn sheep. On the sides of the beautiful pine covered mountains, the elk, deer, and mountain lion lived. Antelope, deer, rabbits, and beavers lived below in the valleys and parks. After the Utes acquired the horse from the Spanish explorers, they hunted the plains to the east for buffalo.