

# RIFLE'S BLAST FROM THE PAST

## RIFLE HERITAGE CENTER

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The museum is looking forward to once again being open for the 2018 season. Considerable work has been done to better our displays and a new display will open for the first time this year. This display will feature Heritage Firearms and memorabilia. Information about the Battle of Milk Creek, the battle that changed the course of our local history, is also on display.

We will again have Heritage Days in June and new this year will be a 1920s murder mystery dinner fund raiser called Mystery at the Juice Joint. The play and dinner along with additional activities will be at the Ute Theater. Check out the event at [utetheater.com](http://utetheater.com) or on facebook at [NewUteEventsCenter](https://www.facebook.com/NewUteEventsCenter).

Special thanks goes out to the High School Classes of the 1950's for their donation to the museum.

This quarter's newsletter is on the Battle of Milk Creek. Hope you enjoy.

*George Pearson, Editor*

### The Battle of Milk Creek

The Utes were a nomadic, native people occupying a territory from southern Wyoming in the north to Santa Fe, New Mexico in the south and from the front range of the Rockies in Colorado in the east to most of Utah in the west. They had been a horse culture from the mid to late 1500's and had traded with the Spanish, the Navajos, the Apache, and many other tribes.

By the time Abraham Lincoln became president settlers had moved into Colorado and Utah and were requesting that the Utes be placed on reservations. In 1861 Lincoln established the Ute Reservation in the NE corner of Utah along the Colorado border. By 1869 the majority of Utes in Utah were moved to this reservation.

In Colorado on October 7, 1863 a treaty between the remaining Utes in Colorado was established giving the Utes a reservation basically from the Continental Divide to the east, the Utah border to the west, the Wyoming border to the north and the New Mexico border to the south which is most all of western Colorado and most certainly all of the Colorado River Valley, where we now reside. This treaty was signed by the Utes and ratified by Congress. However, Congress did not fund the treaty. Miners and others were trespassing on the Ute lands in Colorado and the government was put in a position where they wanted to honor the treaty but they did not want to drive off the miners so in 1873 a new treaty was established. This treaty, known as the Brunot Treaty, took away the land that the miners wanted to occupy and the mineral rights to the land and provided the Utes with an increased payment from 25,000 a year to 65,000 per year but again the treaty was never ratified or funded by Congress. By 1879 no payments had been made and the Utes were very upset with the government and the Ute leaders.

In NW Colorado the White River Indian Agency had been established in 1874. In the spring of 1878

the original agent, Reverend E. H. Banforth, was replaced by Nathan Meeker. Meeker had come west as a representative of Horace Greeley to establish a utopian society called the Union Colony in Greeley, Colorado. This did not work out well, and so using his political influence he got appointed to the White River Agency. He knew nothing about the Ute culture and was determined to keep the Utes on the reservation and make them farmers. Meeker decided in order to accomplish this he would have to get take the Utes' horses from them. His first action of hostility towards the Utes was to plow up a portion of their race track. In anger the Ute leader, Canalla, got into a shoving match with Meeker and Meeker was pushed to the ground. Meeker then went thru the channels of the Department of Interior in Washington but that department having no power of enforcement contacted the War Department and General William Tecumseh Sherman. Sherman thought Meeker was concerned about a possible uprising of the Utes so he contacted General Phillip Sheridan in Chicago, who contacted General George Crook in Omaha. Cook sent orders to Major Thomas Tipton Thornburg at Ft. Steel, Wyoming (west of Rawlins, Wyoming). Major Thornburg, who is infantry, contacted the Calvary Unit at Fort D.A. Russell (located at Cheyenne, Wyoming).]



Major Thornberg

The three units that made up the White River expedition were the 3rd Cavalry Company E, the 5th Cavalry Company D & Company F and the 5th Infantry Company B. The infantry left Fort Fred Steel headed to Rawlins, Wyoming (fifteen miles away) on September 21, 1879. At Rawlins they met up with the two cavalry units and on the 22nd the expedition left with 191 soldiers and 16 civilians. They made their first camp at the Willows (some eighteen miles south and west of Rawlins). The infantry was riding on wagons and the officers and cavalry were mounted. Their scout, Rankin, had never made the trip to the White River Agency so he recommended that they hire Charlie Grafton Lowry as a scout once they reached the Snake River. On the 23rd they went from the Willows to Soldiers Wells (20.6 miles). On the 24th they went from Soldiers Wells to the Snake River (25.5 miles). On the 25th they went from the Snake River to Fortification Rock (24 miles). There Thornburg set up a reserve camp and left thirty men of the 5th Infantry Company B. On the 26th they traveled from Fortification Rock to the Yampa River (19 miles) where they met the Utes for the first time who asked about what they were doing. On the 27th they traveled from the Yampa to Williams Fork (15.3 miles). On the 28th they traveled from Williams Fork to Deer Creek Camp (9.8 miles). Then on the 29th they went from Deer Creek Camp to Milk Creek (11.5 miles). All total the distance traveled was 158.7 miles. The Battle of Milk Creek started around noon on September 29 when Thornburg crossed Milk Creek and entered the Ute Reservation. The battle lasted until the morning of October 5, 1879. On the night of September 29, other Utes not involved in the Milk Creek Battle attacked the White River Agency and killed Agent Meeker and nine other men and took three women and two children hostage. Reinforcements for the troops at the Milk Creek Battle came on the morning of October 2 from Captain

Frances Dodge. There were 2 civilians and 35 men from 9<sup>th</sup> Calvary Company D. These buffalo soldiers were from Ft Garland in the San Luis Valley. The 9th was on patrol near Steamboat Springs, Colorado when they were informed that a battle was going on at Milk Creek. They came to aid of the trapped soldiers but were also trapped by the Utes. The leader of the 9th Calvary, Captain Frances Dodge, along with buffalo soldier, Private Henry Johnson, were awarded the Medal of Honor in 1898 for their actions at Milk Creek.

On the morning of October 5<sup>th</sup>, 20 officers and 254 men of the 5th Calvary arrived, and the Utes withdrew. Lead by Colonel Wesley Merritt, the 5<sup>th</sup> had travelled 170 miles in three days from Fort D.A. Russell. Indian agents also arrived along with representatives from Chief Ouray with instructions to stop the battle. One hundred and forty-two hours after the battle began on September 29, 1879 until it ended on October 5, 1879, the Battle of Milk Creek was over. Ten soldiers were killed, along with three civilian wagon drivers and forty-two others were wounded. The estimate of Utes killed ranges from 23 to 37. The exact number is not known.

Other Army reinforcements soon arrived. They included six companies of the 4th Calvary from Ft Clark, Texas, and five companies of the 9th Calvary from Ft. Lewis in Pagosa Springs, Colorado under Colonel Edward Clark. The total combined forces under Colonel Merritt grew to approximately 1500 men. This force went after the Utes holding the captives taken from the attack on the White River Agency; Nathan Meeker's daughter, Josephine, and wife, Arvilla, and Mrs. Shadruck Price and her two children. The Utes flee with the hostages south to the Colorado River and camped near the future town of Rifle, Colorado. They evaded capture by the Army for sixteen days. On October 21, 1879 after 23 days of captivity the Utes released the hostages to Charles Adams, a general in the Colorado Militia, and three of his friends and some Umcompahgre Utes who were not involved in the battle. Adams was a lifelong friend of Chief Ouray and Chipeta who had been working with the Utes to release the hostages. The release occurred near what would become the town of Mesa, Colorado.

On November 4<sup>th</sup>, 1879 at Greeley, Colorado General Adams conducted an official investigation of the incident and captivity. In 1880 the United States Congress held an inquiry at which Adams, Ouray and Chipeta testified, along with some of the Utes involved in the White River Agency take over. As a result of the inquiry, Congress passed the Ute Removal Act of 1880 and the Utes of Northern Colorado were removed to Utah into the new Ouray section of the reservation. Included in the relocation were Ouray's own people, the Umcompahgre Utes, who had nothing to do with the battle or the White River Agency incident. The moving of the Utes was done by the Army in 1881.



Chief Jack, Ute circa 1880's

This act also officially established Camp White River also known as Cantonment of the White River. The camp was used in 1879 by the troops that remained after the Battle of Milk Creek and then staffed

by Lt. Colonel Daniel Huston and troops of the 5<sup>th</sup> Infantry on June 6, 1880. Camp White River was at the current town site of Meeker, Colorado and was occupied until August 7, 1883. The original buildings now serve as the Meeker Museum.

The Milk Creek Battle was reviewed by the military and twelve soldiers received the Medal of Honor, our nation's highest award for bravery in action. Sixteen soldiers received Certificates of Merit for Gallantry in Action, four received Distinguished Service medals, and thirty six received Indian War Campaign medals. Colonel Merritt's march of 170 miles in three days became text book legend for how to advance troops into action.

The removal of the Utes opened the former reservation to settlement and allowed for the settlement of Rifle in 1882.