

This couple traveled from Scotland to Delta for the Council Tree Pow Wow to celebrate their 50th anniversary. Photo courtesy Council Tree Pow Wow web site.



## Western Colorado Cultures

**T**his essay explores life in western Colorado by looking at the cultures and traditions of two different groups. American Indian peoples have interacted with the western Colorado landscape for thousands of years and continue to do so today. The area is also home to many people who are engaged in agriculture and livestock businesses. Their way of life, too, enriches the story of the region. Celebrations of very different ways of life as well as classroom activities will help bring the history and geography of Colorado alive.

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Look for these icons for resources accessible on this website



**Audio**



**Video**



**Lesson Plan**

**Standards:** Information in this essay can be presented to help meet these Colorado Model Content Standards according to various age groups, abilities, and grade levels, depending on the class.

**History 1, 2, 3, 4, 6**

**Geography 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6**

**Resources:** A wide variety of resources are directly accessible on this website.

- **Audio and Video** segments related specifically to this essay showcase American Indian, German Russian, Latino and Cowboy cultures (also available in cassette and vhs form from CCA.)
- **Lesson Plans** related specifically to this essay include the following:  
Exploring Cowboy Life through Cowboy Poetry, Quilting Across Cultures and Latino Cultures.

Please see Lesson Plan and Resource Sections to access these resources and notations throughout the essay for ideas!

### About the Author

This section was prepared by Ronna Lee Sharpe (B.A. History/Anthropology from the University of Colorado at Denver; M.A. American Studies/Folklore from the George Washington University). As State Folklorist for Western Colorado, she is based at the Museum of Western Colorado in Grand Junction. Her work in western Colorado since 1989 has also included associations with Colorado Mountain College and the Western Colorado Interpretive Association. Ronna Lee has taught classes on Folklore and Colorado History, created exhibits in many different venues, spearheaded a cultural heritage program with Colorado's Scenic and Historic Byways, and coordinated cowboy poetry gatherings. In 2004, Ronna Lee produced "Tourism with Tradition: Interpreting the Cultural Qualities of Colorado Scenic and Historic Byways" and "Unaweeep/Tabeguache Scenic and Historic Byway Tour." She lives in Loma, Colorado with her husband Tom and at least a dozen horses.

## Western Colorado Cultures

By Ronna Lee Sharpe

### Introduction

What does a beautiful piece of beadwork from southwestern Colorado have to teach us about geography? What does a fruit orchard in central western Colorado have to teach us about history? How does a rancher in northwestern Colorado braiding leather into a pair of beautiful reins teach us about both?

"Folklife" is simply the ways of thinking and living—the traditions—that grow out of the vibrant interaction between people and places, between nature and culture. And "folk art" refers to those cultural elements we can touch such as a quilt or a saddle; to those we can hear such as an ethnic song or a cowboy poem; and those things we can see such as a dance at a Pow Wow.

Colorado's Western Slope is an ideal place to study history and geography through folklife and folk art. After all, it was nature that brought people here in the first place. ("I wonder what's on top of that mountain/down that river/through that forest?") And it is the ongoing human relationship with nature that established, and continues to shape, the character of western Colorado. ("Now that we're here, what do we do?"). Two of the "groups" of people who are largely responsible for fashioning life as we know it in this area today are American Indians and Farmers and Ranchers. Many elements of folklife and examples of folk art that descend from each of these groups survive. We need only know how and where to look and what questions to ask and of whom. Suddenly, a history standard brings to mind the face and hands of a talented craftsperson. Suddenly, a geography standard brings to mind the story of a fascinating place that students can visit someday. Suddenly, the story of the people in this place we call western Colorado comes to life.

### American Indians in Colorado

Many different groups of American Indians enrich life in Colorado. The archaeological record tells us that for at least twelve thousand years, people have been carrying out the activities of daily life in what we now call the Western Slope. There is no written record of native life during most of that time, but every tribe has and knows its history. How can that be? The standards suggest that history can and should be studied through multiple sources and from various perspectives (History 2.1). American Indian culture provides a perfect opportunity to do just that. To people with no formal written language, oral history, legends, family stories, art, and artifacts are history (HS 2.2). The study of beadwork and the Bear Dance explores the history, daily life, and beliefs of contemporary people who are closely linked to their ancestral ways (HS 6.3). Through daily life and annual celebrations, which revolve around a calendar based on nature and culture, Ute religion and philosophy are transmitted from generation to generation (HS 6.1).



Northern Ute Scholarship winner for 2003. Photo courtesy of Council Tree Pow Wow web site.

There are many places and many activities in western Colorado that provide opportunities to learn about American Indian culture. Northwestern Colorado has examples of ancient rock art paintings that are hundreds, perhaps thousands, of years old. The artwork they left behind is now protected in the Canyon Pintado Historic District along Highway 139 between Douglas Pass and Rangely. Visitors can read a description of the art on a sign located at a rest area along the highway. This type of art provides a good way for students to understand the difference between primary resource, the rock art itself, and a secondary resource, interpretive material about the rock art (H 2.2). It is also a good way to explore the “ways places and regions reflect cultural change” (G 2.3). This area, which was once home to native people who hunted, gathered and did a little bit of farming, is now primarily ranch land. It has also become a well-used transportation corridor and more recently a Scenic and Historic Byway. Along this route, students can readily explore “the processes, patterns, and functions of human settlement” (G 4.4).

The people who pecked and painted figures in Canyon Pintado may be long gone. But American Indian tribal culture lives on. Most of Colorado was once the homeland of the Ute people. Nomadic bands moved throughout the region according to seasonal migration patterns. Pursuing game animals and the availability of food growing in different climates, the Ute people followed the renewable resources throughout the year (G 5.3). During the winter months, they gathered in camps located in moderate climates. Daily activities and annual events were finely tuned to their environment. Their cultural calendars were based on plant and animal life cycles, on seasonal changes in weather and length of growing season (H 1.2).



Artists of many American Indian cultures carry on traditional art forms today. For demonstrations of Navajo Sandpainting and Weaving in western Colorado, watch *Just Plain Art* sections 1 and 5.

Things changed, however, when individuals as well as government and business interests became more fully aware of the vast potential wealth contained in the Ute homeland. Perspectives clashed on how the land and its resources should be used (G 5.3). Nomadic Utes resisted efforts to change them into a sedentary agricultural people. The Ute “homeland” became smaller and smaller. Others moved in to explore and extract resources from the area. Towns emerged in traditional Ute gathering places. Few better opportunities exist for “gathering and analyzing, and reconciling historical information, including contradictory data, from primary and secondary sources to support or reject hypotheses” (HS 2.1) than undertaking the study of what happened during this volatile period in



Colorado’s history. For information on Ute history and culture listen to *Do Not Pass Me By* Volume 2 Side A #7 (Cynthia Kent).

While the history of ancient tribal life in Colorado is a rich resource for exploring history and geography, contemporary American Indian culture can also be experienced in many different ways. Each September, in the central-western Colorado town of Delta, the three Ute tribes welcome Indian and non-Indian visitors alike, to a spectacular event. The Council Tree Pow Wow celebrates the cultures of many tribes by showcasing traditional art, music, dance, and stories. While special educational programs are offered for children, the event provides a wonderful opportunity for everyone to experience American Indian culture through its rich and varied art forms (H 6). Further south, on one of Colorado’s two Ute Reservations, the Southern Ute Indian Cultural Center and Museum welcomes

visitors to explore tribal life through exhibits of traditional historical and contemporary objects as well as interpretive information. There, one can view first-hand, the extraordinary work of talented and generous Ute artists such as Orian Box. One of the artists featured in *Master/Apprentice: Colorado Folk Arts and Artists* [M/A page 8], he was a master artist who graciously passed on his skill and knowledge of art and culture to many apprentices during his lifetime.



For examples of American Indian music listen to *A Calling Card for Friendship* Volume 2 side A # 12(Gary Keene) and #13 (Denver Dakota Singers). See more information on Native American cultures in Resources Section.

### Agriculture and Livestock in Western Colorado

One can't travel very far in western Colorado without encountering some type of celebration of the region's agricultural heritage. The Palisade Peach Festival occurs every year, regardless of the size and condition of the crop. Paonia's Cherry Days recently celebrated its fiftieth anniversary. The Olathe Sweet Corn Festival draws hundreds of visitors each year. Dove Creek proclaims itself the Pinto Bean Capitol of the World. Meeker's Championship Sheepdog Trials have international significance. Every county fair brings together generations to show and appreciate the best livestock. Cooperation and friendly rivalry abound at ranch rodeos which showcase the skills of the working Colorado cowboy and when neighbors gather for Sunday afternoon roping practice. Every spring, neighbors gather to help one another brand new calves and celebrate the year's "crop." And throughout the region, cowboy poets and musicians tell and sing the stories of their life and work. Each of these examples provides an opportunity for exploring the history of western Colorado through multiple and various types of primary sources (H 2.1). Likewise, they can provide the inspiration for examining the physical and human characteristics of places (G 2.1) and for understanding the effects of interactions between human and physical systems (GS 5).



See **Lesson Plan** Exploring Cowboy Life through Cowboy Poetry



For examples of cowboy poetry and music in western Colorado listen to ***Do Not Pass Me By*** Volume 1 Side A #1 (Nyle Henderson), Volume 2 side B #10 (Nyle Henderson and Baxter Black), ***A Calling Card for Friendship*** Volume 1 side B #3, #8, and Volume 2 Side B # 4 (Bill May)



The Raber Cabin on the Grand Mesa in western Colorado, is a restored family cow camp on the Grand Mesa, Uncompahgre and Gunnison National Forest. Upon completion of the restoration, cowboy poets and Raber family members gathered at the cabin for a celebration. Photo by Ronna Lee Sharpe

### History of the Area

Exploration: western Colorado has been home to humans for thousands of years. Early hunting, gathering and farming in the area set the stage for life as we know it here today. But it was largely unknown territory to outsiders before the arrival of government survey teams in the middle 1800s. Scientists, journalists, map makers, photographers, artists and engineers explored and documented the topography, geology, and natural resources of the region. How these adventurers "demystified" the Western slope is itself a fascinating story that students can experience by studying not only the maps, but also the processes, used to acquire original information (G 1.1).

After the area had been explored and the Utes were removed from the area in 1880, western Colorado offered little resistance to settlement. A constant flow of homesteaders and cattlemen throughout the 1880s brought people, animals and crops. The land was free and open and newcomers sought out the perfect environments to raise and graze cattle and sheep, and to establish orchards

and fields. The use and meaning of the land and its resources changed considerably from the ways of the nomadic peoples (G 5).

Students will be better able to understand why ranching and agriculture became a successful way of life in western Colorado if they first understand the physical processes and patterns that created the complex environment of land, air, weather, water, animal and plant life here (G 3.1). In this place that seemed to present nearly unlimited opportunity for human activity (G 5.2), small-scale scientific and technological developments transformed a desert floor into an oasis and rugged high country into summer grazing pastures. Throughout the region, fences, ditches, canals, roads, crops thriving in neatly defined fields and bountiful orchards speak to the success of humans and their technology in controlling and using the physical environment (G 5.3, G 5.1).



For music including a song about Routt County history listen to ***Do Not Pass Me By*** Volume 1 side A #5, ***A Calling Card for Friendship*** Volume 2, Side B #5, #6 (Ed Carpenter).

As the Western Slope was being “settled,” relationships between people, institutions, and the land changed dramatically. Homesteaders, cattlemen, sheep ranchers, farmers and the government bumped into one another more and more frequently. Each group, each person, felt an inborn right to the land. Differing points of view emerged and clashed. Personal and political behaviors played a large part in the way policies developed regarding use and management of the area’s resources (G 6.2, H 4.3, HS 5.1, G 1.3, G 4.5).

The story of agriculture and livestock in the area is also a study in culture and cultural diversity. Many first-generation Americans or foreign-born people brought their own special cultures with them when they came to western Colorado to work on or establish farms and ranches. Individuals and groups interacted with others in the area, preserving and adapting their own traditions into new social and physical environments as they formed new communities (H 3.1).

There is no one history of the area. Rather the story must be constructed from multiple perspectives. Oral histories, legends, art and artifacts vary from culture group to culture group but are important elements in understanding the story of the region (H 2.1). Germans from Russia, Mexican laborers and Basque shepherders brought very different languages, stories, philosophies, beliefs, foods, art forms and farm landscapes with them (H 2.1, H 2.2, G 6.2). For examples of Dutch Hop Music of the



Germans from Russia listen to ***Do Not Pass Me By*** Volume 1 Side B #3, ***A Calling Card for Friendship*** Volume 1 Side A #3, Volume 2 Side B #7 (John Fritzler and Band). Today, these cultures can be experienced in many different ways. For instance, many towns have German-American clubs whose meetings often feature traditional foods and stories from the homelands. Mexican Independence Day and Cinco de Mayo events in many communities draw the Latino population together for cultural celebrations featuring traditional music, dance and food. Recently, the Basque community organized to save a Grand Junction landmark of great importance to their group. One corner of Canyon View Park now features an old handball court built in the traditional Basque fashion, rather than the two modern courts that were planned as part of the park development. The site became a cultural rallying point, and even somewhat of a sacred place, for a group of people who are still an important part of western Colorado’s story (H 6.3).



See Latino **Lesson Plan**.



For examples of Latino Culture in Colorado watch *Just Plain Art* #4 (Jose L. Baca, Mexican-American Matachines Dance) and #7 (Oliverio Lara, jarocho harpist).



Listen to *Do Not Pass Me By* Volume 1 Side B #1 (Latino music); Volume 2 Side A #1 (Spanish Colonial Family Band), #2 (Mexican and Spanish Colonial Music), #3 (Latino storyteller Angel Vigil).



On *A Calling Card for Friendship*, check out Volume 1 Side A #2 (*La Familia Manzanares*), #8 (Mexican American accordion player); Volume 1 Side B #1 (Spanish-Colonial, Mexican-American Music), #5 (Spanish Colonial Music), #9 and #10 (Mexican Music); Volume 2 Side A #4 (Mexican-American Music), #10 and #11 (Mexican Music), Volume 2 Side B #9 (Mariachi).

### Modern Western Colorado

Today, artists and craftspeople throughout the Western Slope show in their daily work how art grows out of the everyday life of working in close relationship with the land. They use skills and knowledge passed down from generation to generation, as well as personal experience, to fashion the tools needed by the working cowboy. Talented and creative leather workers braid rawhide and leather strips into reins, bridles and bosals. Not only do they function perfectly; they are also beautiful works of art. Saddle makers, whose first responsibility is to build a piece of equipment that fits and functions well, often take their craft further, tooling and carving beautiful patterns into the leather.

Ranching and agriculture are essential elements of the life and of the economy of western Colorado. Understanding the many traditions that have grown out of this important way of life provides an exciting way to study the history and geography of the area. Students can admire handcrafted reins and saddles. At the same time, they come to know that having a deep understanding of how those tools will be used is just as important as having the ability to make them. Understanding the wide range of skills and knowledge needed and the daily challenges faced by a cowboy on horseback can provide a new appreciation for the impact of history and geography on an individual's daily life. Listening to the poems, songs and stories of the cowboy and ranching life provides a wonderful way for students to contemplate how humans interact with their environment and how culture and art grow out of, and can teach us about, that interaction. (G 5) Even learning the etiquette involved in following or meeting livestock on the road, can teach many lessons.



For an example of a visual art form practiced by cowboys watch *Just Plain Art* #3 (Kenneth Smith, Horsehair Hitching).



Explore the verbal creativity in cowboy life with a **lesson plan** on cowboy poetry.

### Summary

This essay offers just a tiny sampling of the places, activities, and methods teachers and students can use to explore and examine life in western Colorado from many perspectives. It offers several ways to “apply knowledge of people, places, and environments to understand the past and present and to plan for the future” (History). But the region’s wealth and beauty is built upon a foundation that is not always readily observed. There is buried treasure here, overflowing with the stories that give our region its unique identity and its residents their personal and collective histories. Many have never been written down or recorded in any formal way. But the stories of the Utes and the stories of working cowboys are as important to our history as are the stories of presidents and soldiers. The study of a region’s folklife is the study of its people, of their cultures and of their traditions. To fully understand, we must turn to the art, music, craft, architecture, landscapes, ordinary objects of everyday life, and nearly forgotten family heirlooms, for these are the humble vessels that bear legacies from generation to generation.



Listen to a western Colorado cowboy poet and musician on *A Calling Card for Friendship* Volume 1 Side B #2 (J. Nathan May).

### Classroom Activities

#### Colorado Cultural Timelines and Maps

Students prepare maps and timelines from the perspectives of two of the different groups that were most involved in the settlement of western Colorado (Native Americans, Miners and Farmers/Ranchers). Students should consider the experiences of each group, their impact upon, and impressions of one another.

#### Neighborhood History and Culture

Students explore, either in person or through secondary sources, the historical and cultural resources of their immediate neighborhood and the entire region. See Art of Interviewing (grades k-12; history) **Lesson Plan**.



#### Colorado Cultures: Names, Locations, and Calendars

Students examine a cultural group (Native American, Miners, Farmers/Ranchers) by answering one of the following questions. What are the reasons for and meaning of names and locations of towns and places in western Colorado? How are cultures, their beliefs and their everyday activities reflected in poetry, song, and story? How do each group's cultural calendars vary?

#### Heritage Through Interview

Students find and interview people in their own community who have knowledge they are willing to share about the history and cultures of western Colorado. Suggestions for locating people to interview:

- Contact your local museum or chamber of commerce for longtime residents or others who are involved with the area's history.

- Contact the local historical society or the historical society of particular cultural groups. Talk to your local librarian.
- Explore the Resources section for regional artists and musicians, including those who represent particular cultures.
- Talk to family members or neighbors.