

## *More to Meeker Massacre than historical stereotypes*



By Kathy Jordan

Because the Meeker Massacre has always fascinated me, among my research projects has been the transcript of the testimony from the congressional hearings about that historic event.

But none of what I have read in the past can hold a candle to the newly released book “Troubled Trails” by Bob Silbernagel.

I had learned in my research into the massacre that Nathan Meeker, for whom the town of Meeker was named, was not the best choice as Indian agent for the White River Ute Reservation. Nevertheless, he was appointed to the job in 1878.

Before Meeker entered the picture there was already tension between the Ute Indians and the Whites, which was escalated by the 1861 Homestead Act that allowed white people to move into Ute territory.

By 1876 newspapers across the new state of Colorado were calling for the Utes to be removed from any land that could be mined, farmed or ranched. Their motto was “the only good Ute was a dead Ute”.

Meeker ended up as an Indian agent so he could repay a debt he felt he owed the family of newspaper Publisher Horace Greeley. While working for Greeley at the New York Tribune, Meeker convinced Greeley to help start a utopian colony. That settlement, known as Union Colony, is the present-day city of Greeley.

Meeker was off to a bad start. His contact with Indians had been negligible, and from the get-go he wasn’t interested in the Ute cultural heritage or what the Utes had to say.

Meeker’s decision to move the agency to the Powell Park area, where the Utes had lived and hunted for generations, was a big mistake. The Ute men had a racetrack for

their prize ponies there, the meadows were their hunting grounds and served as a place where the Ute women did the farming.

To add to Meeker's problems, the Bureau of Indian Affairs had adopted a strict policy that adult Indian males must participate in farming. If they didn't, government food due them would be withheld. The Utes knew this mandate was not in their treaty, and the incident sparked a complete lack of trust on their part because they believed that Meeker had made that decision and was not telling the truth.

Despite Meeker's effort, the Ute males refused to become farmers. Their belief was that farming was for women, with the men doing the hunting.

The situation was escalated when in the late summer of 1879 Meeker decided he was going to plow up the Utes' racetrack, believing it was the root of the reason why the Utes didn't want to farm.

There are several versions of what was said that day, but Meeker's decision to plow up the racetrack was the trigger with the Utes, and some shouting, shooting and possible shoving did occur, according to the transcript.

Meeker sent a telegram to Washington, D.C. requesting immediate protection.

Washington responded by sending Major Tipton Thornburg from Fort Steele, Wyo., to the White River Reservation.

Twice Nicaagat, a leader of the younger Ute men who was known as "Jack" by the Whites, met Thornburg at Fortification Creek and asked Thornburg what he was doing on their reservation. Twice Thornburg told him he would assess the situation and let him know. That evening the Utes started having war dances at the agency.

On Sept. 29, 1879, Thornburg's troops and the Utes met at Milk Creek, and a shot was fired. Although it was never established who fired the shot, the battle was on. Thornburg died there.

The soldiers were pinned down. Indians were killing the soldiers' horses so they couldn't ride away. Soldiers were stacking dead horses to make a barrier for protection from the Indians' bullets.

Meanwhile the Utes set the White River agency on fire, and killed 12 men, including Meeker. The Utes captured women and children including Meeker's wife, Arvilla, and his daughter, Josephine.

Chief Ouray, leader of the Uncompahgre Utes, sent Joseph W. Brady to Milk Creek to tell Colorow, a White River Ute leader, and Jack to stop fighting the troops. Brady rescued the trapped men.

After 23 days Susan, Chipeta's sister, convinced the Indians that they needed to send the captives home, and they were set free.

If this outline has whetted your appetite for the complete story of the massacre, Silbernagel's book will answer your questions.

Mike Perry, Executive Director, Museum of Western Colorado, summed it up: "Through Silbernagel's meticulous research we can more fully appreciate the social, economic and cultural difference that created the 'perfect storm' of distrust and misunderstanding of the two cultures".

Silbernagel's book is available at The Daily Sentinel, Barnes & Noble, the Museum of Western Colorado and on Amazon.

For all of you looking for the perfect Christmas gift for the history enthusiast, the author will be signing books at the Museum of Western Colorado, Fifth and Ute, Saturday from 10 a.m. to noon.