

FIRST DRAFT

Domestic chores marked Utes' use of site on Uncompahgre Plateau

Sometime around 1870, a small group of Ute Native Americans gathered on the east side of the Uncompahgre Plateau to undertake domestic chores. The group — probably an extended family band — spent weeks or even months at what is now called the McMillen Trade Goods Site.

The Utes who stopped there refurbished their ammunition and created beadwork and metal decorations for their clothing and their horse bridles.



BOB SILBERNAGEL

They cut metal from flattened tin cans to make cone-shaped decorations known as tinklers. They used metal tools such as a triangular metal file, a crude tweezers and a folding pocket knife.

"It's one of those sites where you feel like the people who were here walked away from it yesterday," said Curtis Martin of Palisade, the principal investigator for The Wickiup Project, which conducted a recent archaeological assessment of the McMillen Site.

For example, there was a nearly straight line of small glass beads tracking across a good portion of the 7-acre site.

"Someone walked across the site or rode a horse with a broken bead string," Martin explained.

Elsewhere, the glass beads and the metal items were deposited in concentrated clusters, evidence of where the Utes of 150 years ago spent time working on them.

Martin led the assessment of the McMillen Site last August, and completed a report this month for the History Colorado-State Historical Fund. Colorado Preservation Inc., a Denver-based nonprofit that works to preserve historical sites throughout the state, acted as the administrative organization for the project.

An earlier study showed the Utes of about 1870 weren't the first natives to visit the site.

In fact, there is evidence of brief native occupations in the Archaic period, perhaps as many as 1,000 years ago or more.

Those visitors worked to flake arrowheads and spear points from stone. There were no metal materials or tools for them, no glass beads and no horses.

More recent than the Archaic visitors were prehistoric Utes — who lived in this region prior to contact with Europeans or soon after the Spanish arrived in New Mexico. Pieces of Ute brownware pots found on the site are evidence of this.

The McMillen Site is west of Montrose on U.S. Bureau of Land Management property. That earlier study was conducted by University of Colorado archaeologist William G. Buckles in 1961, while he was still a graduate student. He wrote about it and other Ute sites in his 1971 doctoral dissertation.

Sixty years later, in August 2021, it was re-examined by Martin and a team working with him that included Holly "Sonny" Shelton as crew chief and two anthropology students from Colorado Mesa University, as well as other volunteers.



PHOTOS COURTESY OF CURTIS MARTIN

Crew Chief Holly "Sonny" Shelton, seated at right, works with volunteers Heather Prosser and Kendra Kissel to examine tiny glass beads in their on-site laboratory at the McMillen Trade Goods Site.

In 1961, Buckles could dig up items and take them to a laboratory to be examined.

Martin and his team, however, adhered to a strict "non-collection" strategy. All artifacts they found were photographed and described at the site, then returned to the exact location and depth at which they had been found.

The items Buckles collected 60 years ago are now archived at the BLM's Canyons of the Ancients Museum and Visitor Center in Dolores, and Martin was able to examine them in conjunction with his assessment of the McMillen Site.

He also worked closely with the BLM and officials with the Ute Tribe in Fort Duchesne, Utah, and the Southern Ute Tribe in Ignacio in determining how to explore the site while protecting culturally sensitive items.

They used a metal detector to find many of the metal trade goods, while the glass beads were discovered on the surface, or in small mounds near the surface.

But they found no remnants of wooden structures such as wickiups, storage sheds or brush fences — the kind of structures that Martin has studied for nearly 20 years as lead investigator first with the Colorado Wickiup Project and now with what's called The Wickiup Project.

"The uniqueness of this site is that it's covered with trade goods, but there is no evidence of wood structures," Martin said. "So, as we examined the site, we tried to find evidence of where there might have been wickiups or other wooden features."

Because no wooden structures were found, the team could not use tree rings to date the site. However, Martin's team had two other sources to indicate when the Utes visited the site.

First, there were the glass beads. Throughout his career, Martin has learned that glass beads were larger during the earlier decades of European/American trade with natives.

As the trade continued, the natives sought smaller beads for decorations, and the glass-making companies in Europe complied.

Based on the tiny beads found on the McMillen site, Martin is convinced the site had to be occupied sometime between 1860 and 1880.

Evidence from ammunition found on the site was even more specific.

Photos of all of the shell casings and spent bullets or musket balls found on site were sent to Douglas Scott, a retired National Park Service archaeologist and an expert



Project leader Curtis Martin at the McMillen Trade Goods Site in August 2021, along with two volunteers from Colorado Mesa University: Heather Prosser, left, and Kendra Kissell, right.



The rusted remains of a pocketknife found at the McMillen Site.



A piece of metal found at the McMillen Site, cut from an old tin can and ready to be rolled into a conical tinkler.

in 19th century weaponry used in the American West.

"Doug said nothing we found was from before 1868, and none of it was made later than 1880," Martin reported.

Since that fit closely with the dates established based on beads, Martin is confident the site was occupied by the Utes sometime from the late 1860s through the 1870s.

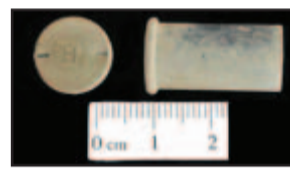
At the site, there was evidence that the Utes had at least one muzzle-loader, based on a .50 caliber ball and percussion cap that were found.

Additionally, the Utes must have had several Henry or Winchester repeating rifles, based on spent cartridges found. There was also a tiny ball likely fired from a small-caliber rifle or a shotgun.

Ammunition from a big-bore Spencer rifle showed the resourcefulness of these Utes, who apparently had no Spencers of their own. The team found several empty Spencer cartridges that had not been fired.

The Utes at the McMillen Site "pried out the lead and took the gunpowder" from the Spencer ammo to make ammo for their own weapons, Martin said.

Also found at the site were buttons made from



An empty cartridge from a repeating rifle, with indentations showing where the rifle's firing pin struck the cartridge twice. It is one of several found at the McMillen Site.

shells, ball buttons and tubular glass beads. Altogether, the team found 221 different artifacts at the McMillen Site.

"The findings were above and beyond what we expected," Martin said.

They demonstrate that Utes in the latter half of the 19th century not only had up-to-date trade goods, but they were adept in using or modifying them to suit their needs.

Martin and his team strongly recommend the site be considered eligible for the National Register of Historic Places.

Even though it is not now threatened by human activity, that designation would help protect if threats arise in the future.

Martin has also recommended periodic monitoring of the site to ensure it is not being damaged, as well as some test excavations that could help determine where there were wickiups, campfire hearths or other important features on the site.

Sources: Interview with Curtis Martin; Introduction to "The Archaeological Assessment of the McMillen Trade Goods Site in Montrose County, Colorado," by Curtis Martin.

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Partnership keeps private 14er peaks open to hikers

By JASON BLEVINS
The Colorado Sun

MOSQUITO RANGE — Colorado Fourteeners Initiative trail builder Sarah Barringer looked up from her trail work on the switchback heading to the ridge below Mount Bross. A man was taking a shortcut, causing the kind of erosion that she was repairing.

"Please stay on the trail," Barringer said.

"Don't tell me what to do," the man answered. "It's a free mountain."

Actually, it's not. The top of the 14,178-foot Mount Bross is owned by several people who are worried about liability and do not want hikers on the summit. Owners of the summits and trails leading to next-door 14ers Mount Democrat and Mount Lincoln share the same concerns, worried they could be sued if a hiker is injured in one of the many mine shafts and dilapidated mining structures on the mountains.

"I've had enough damage to the doors we try to keep secure on the mines. I've had gates cut. I don't know if I've ever been up there without seeing people standing on top of Bross, walking right by the sign that says 'Private property. No trespassing,'" said landowner John Reiber, whose father began assembling mining claims on the peaks in the Alma Mining District in the 1950s. "I definitely have concerns over the willingness of people to not follow the rules. I think from a safety standpoint, I'm not sure there is any way to really make folks stay on the trail. But we're trying."

Reiber in April 2021 closed the summits of Lincoln and Democrat to hikers.

But a unique partnership uniting trail advocacy groups, the Town of Alma, the Forest Service and Reiber's ownership

group has forged a tenuous plan that allowed hikers to return to the peaks late last summer. With regular surveys, education campaigns and a bunch of signs warning hikers to stay on the trail and not enter dangerous structures, the effort has helped assuage owner concerns over safety and possibly being sued by hikers who are injured on the peaks or in the century-old mine shafts and shacks.

But the agreement is temporary, and Reiber is not convinced it's working. That's why the rude hiker was so troubling.

"It's the kind of behavior that can shut down these mountains," said Kendall Chastain with the Colorado Mountain Club.

The partnership of trail advocates, municipal leaders, federal land managers and private landowners who own the Decalibron peaks, near Kite Lake in the Pike National Forest, could set a path for the many other locations where landowners are growing increasingly wary of allowing recreational access.

For decades, private landowners have been protected from lawsuits if they allow recreational access for no charge. That Colorado Recreational Use Statute was shaken in 2019, when the 10th Circuit Court of Appeals held the U.S. Air Force Academy liable for injuries suffered by a cyclist who crashed on a washed out section of paved trail on the campus.

Colorado Mountain Club, Colorado Fourteeners Initiative, Mosquito Range Heritage Initiative and Town of Alma have joined the Forest Service to not just repair damage and erect signs, but educate and enlist visitors in helping protect fragile alpine ecosystems.

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