

Spiritual Connection between RMC-UCC & the Ute Tribe

By Kenny Funk, former Guest Services Manager of La Foret explains:

We all know La Foret to be a sacred place; a place where our prayers are lifted on high and our spiritual wounds are healed. La Foret was gifted to the United Church of Christ for that very purpose, and we are proud to uphold that mission to this day. The spot was chosen for its scenic beauty and its favorable location, but only recently did we learn that this spot was cherished by another culture well before Alice Bemis Taylor viewed the property. The Southern Ute Tribe graced these lands and left subtle evidence of their presence. One Ute Medicine Tree and two Prayer Trees have been identified here at La Foret with the help from our friend who lives among the Utes.¹

The Medicine Tree is the largest tree in our area and has marks indicative of its namesake. With a small strip of bark, 6-12", peeled away at a level that corresponded with the location of the illness on the patient's body, the Medicine Man would use the bark in a healing ceremony.² The Medicine Tree at La Foret, just off the road toward the chapel, is a very large tree with a slight bend to the southwest.³

The Prayer Trees are unique in shape; they come out of the ground take a 90-degree turn and then reach for the sky. The sapling was tethered with Yucca rope parallel to the ground and everyone circled the tree and prayed. They believed the tree would hold their prayers for 800 years and each breeze would give their prayer new breath. They are located close to the meditation trail, and in close proximity to one another. The trees are a true sign of faith and hope. In ceremony, they were used in conjunction with tobacco pouches. A pouch was buried under the tree and others hung from the branches to blow in the breeze, releasing the prayers.

When we have guests at La Foret, we visit the trees and discuss how in modern times in America we have lost the connection with past and future generations. We talk about how important it is to be thankful of those who came before us and be mindful of those who are yet to experience the gifts we have been given.

The Ute were excellent stewards of the lands, leaving very little disturbance of the earth. The Ute were a very spiritual people, and if we would choose to listen, they could teach us a great deal about how to live *with* the earth, not just *on* it.

There are many of these trees in Teller County and surrounding areas and they are very sacred to the Ute people. To have them on La Foret is a real blessing and should be treated as such

¹ Tom Thompson, friend of La Foret on a tour with La Foret staff - Feb. 24, 2006.

² Celinda Reynolds Kaelin "*Ute Culturally Scarred Trees*", 2003, page 2.

³ *Ibid.*, page 4.

Discoveries continue

Since 2006, when the presence of the Ute Culturally Modified trees on the La Foret property became known to us, two more prayer trees have been tentatively identified on the property.

One is located at the top of the steps that lead down to the Lower Fire Circle and the Labyrinth. The second was identified in the summer of 2011 and is off to the right side of the road, shortly after one passes the yurts.

As research continues and we learn more of this priceless legacy, an intriguing question arises. Historical records indicate that our La Foret benefactress, Mrs. Alice Bemis Taylor, was an avid student of Southwestern and Native American cultures. We can only wonder if she was ever aware of the earlier Ute presence on this property. Did she know about the trees? Did she consider their location when she chose the site for the placement of the Chapel? With two prayer trees and a medicine tree within such close proximity, one cannot help but wonder if her choice for the location of the Chapel was both well-informed and intentional.

We may never know the answer to this question. It is compelling, however, to observe that for the Utes that wintered here, certain areas were sacred ground. For Mrs. Taylor who chose to engage a famous architect to build a Chapel within a few hundred feet of three Ute-modified trees, this was a sacred place. And for the hundreds of campers who have gathered here over the last 70 + years, this place continues to be sacred space. And so as we live in gratitude for this precious legacy, we are left to ponder coincidence or providence?

When the ancient Ute were here

For as long as anyone can recall, the Ute people have lived in Colorado and environs, in the Land of the Shining Mountains. Utes say they have always been here; others estimate at least 10,000 years. Hunters and gatherers, they moved between summers in the mountains and their winter campgrounds down on the front range near what is now the greater Colorado Springs area.

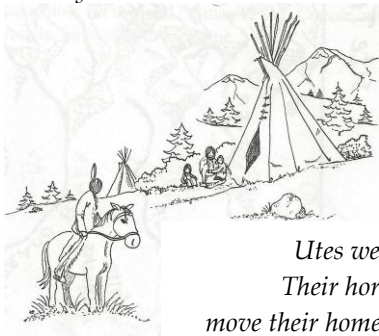
1600-1640 Utes earliest contact with the Spanish.

Trading for horses effected a change in their lifestyles and their ability to travel longer distances.

1824-1844 Trappers sought fur and trade in Ute lands. In Ute conflict with Mexico, and the U.S. war with Mexico, many, many acres of Ute land were lost to the U.S. government.

1859 Peak of the Colorado Gold Rush; miners and settlers arrive from the east.

1860-1880's The various bands of Utes were involved in several conflicts with encroaching eastern settlers. Sadly, by 1880, despite efforts of Chief Ouray and others, the Utes had lost the vast majority of their native lands and were removed to the Southern Ute and the Ute Mountain Ute reservations in what is now southwestern Colorado, and to the Uintah Valley reservation in Utah.



*Utes were tipi dwellers.
Their horses helped them
move their homes using travois.*

Two famous Utes



Chief Ouray and his wife, Chipeta



**La Foret Retreat
and Conference Center**

**6145 Shoup Road
Colorado Springs, CO 80908
719/495-2743 800/723-5323**

mail@laforet.org

*This brochure was created
by Rev. JoAnne Bogart, Boulder*

La Foret Sacred Ground of the Southern Utes



A Ute Prayer Tree

Our Legacy Our Sacred Trust