

*Man's actions are the picture  
book of his creeds.*

*—Ralph Waldo Emerson*

## Chipeta: Glory and Heartache

*by H. Bert Jenson\**

"It has pleased a great many people that the Steamboat Commercial Club Committee selected the name of Chipeta for one of the scenic points on the Rabbit Ear Highway." So wrote the Myton Free Press on August 4, 1921. Chipeta lived in a remote area of the Uncompahgre reservation in the Book Cliffs of eastern Utah at that time. Word of this naming may have reached her ears. That Chipeta was deserving of such an honor is not in question by anyone familiar with her peaceful exploits between the Utes and Whites in the late 19th century. But her health was greatly declining at that time; within three years she had passed away. Any such honor was too little, too late, and did nothing to meet the needs of the once-proud "Queen" of the Utes.

While most non-Indians extol Chipeta, recalling her years visiting Washington D.C. and befriending the white settlers in western Colorado, they keep the lame idea that this was her life. The truth is, these were but fleeting moments. Much of her life was an atrocity of poverty and neglect brought on by none other than those she helped most.

Chipeta was born June 10, 1843, a Kiowa Apache. When her parents were killed in a raid on their camp, passing Utes found Chipeta crawling around the deserted campsite and adopted her.<sup>1</sup> She became a member of the Taviwach (Uncompahgre) band<sup>2</sup> of the Ute tribe. Her beauty and congeniality are legendary. At age sixteen she married Ouray, who was ten years her senior.

Ouray, "Arrow," was born in Taos, New Mexico, in 1833. His father was Jicarilla Apache; his mother, Taviwach (Uncompahgre) Ute. He was raised by a Mexican family, baptized by a Jesuit Priest, and formally educated at Taos. Ouray spoke Spanish, English, Ute and Apache. He returned to his people in 1850.<sup>3</sup>

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*Chipeta*  
*Outlaw Trail History Center Collection*

In 1853, Ouray married Black Mare. She died in 1857, and he married Chipeta in 1859.

Ouray became a subchief of the Taviwach band soon after their union. She and Ouray loved each other very much and were inseparable. Whether at home, or on diplomatic journeys to the Nation's capital, they were together for the next twenty-one years, until Ouray's death in 1880.

At age five, Ouray's son was kidnapped by the Sioux while on a hunting trip with his father; Chipeta was not with them. Though

Ouray searched for his son, he was not found. It is a general misconception that this lost son was the issue of Ouray and Chipeta. It was in fact, Black Mare's son, Queashegut (Little Left Hand), who was kidnapped.<sup>4</sup>

Some accounts say Black Mare died in childbirth, others that it was due to snakebite. Regardless of the cause, Chipeta was evidently appointed to watch over this child after Black Mare's passing. It is possible that Chipeta was the stepsister to Black Mare and that it was her duty to take over household chores upon her sister's death.<sup>5</sup> The notion that the child was Chipeta's must lie in the fact that she loved him very much--as her own. She had raised this boy from infancy. Her loss, and that of Ouray, was never filled; Chipeta was unable to have children.

The fact that Ouray loved Chipeta is founded in the fact that he could have, as a great chief, taken another wife in order to have more children. He did not. And while testimony at the settlement of Chipeta's estate says *she* had *no* natural children,<sup>6</sup> she and Ouray did take in and raise to adulthood, three other children.<sup>7</sup>

Due to leadership abilities which he developed, the United States government recognized Ouray as *head chief* of all the Utes. The fact is, some Utes listened to him, others did not. But he earned the respect of many, enough to give him considerable clout. His word was accepted as wisdom in most things.<sup>8</sup>

Starting in 1868, Chipeta accompanied Ouray to Washington D.C. several times for treaty negotiations. Both had seen the terrible armament of the anglo armies, and the vast numbers of their people. They were convinced the best way for the Ute people to survive was to make the best treaties possible and live by them in peace. Resistance was futile; they knew that.

Ouray made the statement: "the agreement an Indian makes to a United States treaty is like the agreement a buffalo makes with his hunter when pierced with arrows. All he can do is lie down and give in." He told his fellow Utes: "my beloved brethren, it's no use your kicking; the white man has a gun for every tree."<sup>9</sup>

Ouray's vanguard position in the battles of diplomacy were misunderstood by some of his people, who thought he was lying down, giving in, a coward before the white rifles. Some sought his life. Chipeta and Ouray, like other heads-of-state, lived under constant pressure and, in later years, had armed guards posted at their residence.<sup>10</sup>

The most incessant pressure the Utes felt was trespass by whites onto Indian lands, and lead to most, if not all, treaty negotiations. White intruders wanted Indian lands.

General Edward M. McCook was appointed Colorado Territorial Governor in 1869. In a report to the Indian Commissioner on September 30, 1870, McCook said:

One-third of the territory of Colorado is turned over to the Utes who will not work and will not let others work. This great and rich country is set aside for the exclusive use of savages. A white man secures 160 acres by paying and preempting; but one aboriginal vagrant, by virtue of being head of a family, secures 12,800 acres without preemption or payment.<sup>11</sup>

Such rhetoric was joined by other anti-Indian sentiment, both verbal, and written, and led to flagrant abuses in trespass by white settlers and miners in particular.<sup>12</sup>

In 1873, Felix Brunot, a Washington bureaucrat, was trying to negotiate with Ouray and his people for the San Juan Cession on behalf of mining interests. He thought that if he found the long-lost son of Ouray, the great chief would readily sign any agreement, whether it dealt with mining intrusions or not.

The son had been traded away or stolen from the Sioux by the Arapahos. This is where he was finally found. Taken to Washington D.C., he served to lure Ouray there for treaty negotiations. The boy was too much changed to return to his people and refused to admit relationship to Ouray.<sup>13</sup> Nevertheless, the San Juan Cession became reality.

Further north, the White River Utes were being encroached upon by white settlers and miners also. Accusations by these intruders, that the Utes were molesting them, were fanned by general disagreements between the Agent and the Utes and led to the Meeker incident in 1879. The whites called it a massacre and the actions by the White Rivers started a movement to relocate *all* Indians out of western Colorado, even the Uncompahgre.

It had been Ouray who ordered all Ute hostilities towards the whites stopped, bringing a swift end to that infant war. Chipeta rode her pony four days and nights to secure the safety of the Meeker women held hostage and led them to her home in the Uncompahgre Valley. She felt remorse and wept over them.

This is not the only time Chipeta had taken action to save white lives. "Once, upon learning of a raid to be made upon her white neighbors, she mounted her pony and swam the Gunnison River at flood time, and delivered her message in time to save the settler's lives."<sup>14</sup>

This, nor any other help Ouray and his wife had given over the

years, received any consideration from white politicians. Leaders of the Uncompahgre were coerced into signing the Agreement of 1880 which forced them off from their lands along the Uncompahgre Valley.

Unlike previous visits to Washington where Ute leaders were treated like royalty, the 1880 negotiations delegation, including Chipeta, met with "active hostility and was given an armed guard. To the public, all Utes were 'murderers.'"<sup>15</sup>

Within months of this signing, while visiting the Southern Utes concerning removal, the great Ute leader Ouray, died August 24, 1880. Chipeta was with him. Honoring his wishes, that he be placed where no white man could find him, she quickly solicited the help of Southern Utes to take him to a secret location on a high plateau.

Congress, fearing that without Ouray the removal agreement would fail, quickly ratified it, appointing a five-member commission to oversee relocation of the Utes. In a no-where-near majority vote, bought with bribes and intimidation, the Uncompahgre ostensibly "ratified" the agreement.

By the next Spring, 1881, they were beginning to understand what was happening to them. "They claimed they had given up only their lands in the mountains and that they should remain in the valleys."<sup>16</sup> All reasoning fell on deaf ears. Government relocation efforts continued.

In June, the Commission ignored relocation guidelines and arbitrarily decided to resettle the Uncompahgres on the confluence of the White, Green, and Duchesne Rivers—not in Colorado, but in *Utah* Territory. This location was hurriedly approved by the Secretary of the Interior who declared the Uncompahgre be moved to Utah forthwith.

As an agency and roads and bridges were built for an effective resettlement route to Utah, "the actual removal of the Utes from their reservation was resisted by the Indians by all means at their disposal, short of actual war."<sup>17</sup>

In August the Commission informed the Government of their failed efforts to get the Uncompahgres removed. Nine companies of cavalry and an equal complement of infantry were mobilized. The Utes were surrounded and told to be ready to leave in two hours. Six pieces of field artillery were placed over the Ute camp to emphasize the order.

On August 27, a three-weeks ration was issued to the Uncompahgre and they began the long march to their new reservation. Captain James Parker of the Fourth Cavalry describes what he saw:

The next morning, shortly after sunrise, we saw a thrilling and pitiful sight. The whole Ute nation on horseback and on foot was streaming by. As they passed our camps their gait broke into a run. Sheep were abandoned, blankets and personal possessions strewn along the road, women and children were loudly wailing.<sup>18</sup>

Ouray and Chipeta had been well accepted on early visits to Washington. She had many expensive gifts showered on her: money, china, silverware--thousands of dollars worth. Ouray drove a nice carriage with matched horses, was a successful farmer, and received a salary from the Government for working as an interpreter and negotiator. He and Chipeta lived in a well-furnished, six-room adobe home which had been built for them in the Uncompahgre Valley.<sup>19</sup> They had a fenced, five-hundred acre farm with fifty acres in hay, grain, and vegetables. The ranch had quarters for the hired help, storehouses, granaries, stables and corrals. The pasture was dotted with two-hundred head of horses and mules, and even more sheep, goats and cattle. Chipeta's house was furnished with iron beds, rocking chairs, tables and chairs, rugs, stoves, and other...furnishings. Chipeta even took on the burden of polishing silver and washing china. They owned a piano...<sup>20</sup>

Chipeta even learned to play the guitar and developed a beautiful singing voice. William Saunders was a reporter for the City of Ouray paper, and visited Chipeta. He writes:

Chipeta got use to my presence very soon and gave free rein to her natural vivacity, talking in Spanish, mostly about two pets she had, a mountain lion and a deer, which she had trained to consort with each other on most friendly terms. Her voice was low and clear and melodious and she talked with a fascinating play of feature and gestures...(Chipeta) rode like an Amazon and she and (her) horse might have been one, so perfectly did her body meet the movements of his. Her horse was a sorrel, a pony she told me she had raised herself.<sup>21</sup>

Ouray and Chipeta were the only Indians who ever ate at the table of the agent and employees at the agency. They were always welcome, and frequent guests. All of this was stripped away in less than a year of Ouray's death. Chipeta was a mere 37 years old.

To this point in her life Chipeta had gone from total freedom of the old Utes, to subjugation. She had been forced by treaty from one homeland to another--each smaller, each one more worthless. With each move there had been a grinding, a wearing away of culture and pride. The intangible box in which she now found herself, was even more belittling, and the aura of well being, worse. She was left with

nothing. The next 44 years, until her death, would be spent in dire poverty and neglect.

Chipeta still had her people, however. The great task of helping the Uncompahgre adjust now fell in large part upon her shoulders. She most certainly would have born much of the pressure during this time. A respected leader and well thought of by her people, she was allowed always, and often by invitation, to sit in council meetings. This is an honor no other Ute woman had ever known.<sup>22</sup>

The new Uncompahgre Reservation was a "desert"<sup>23</sup> and the Uncompahgre people were shocked and dismayed. "The bleak, poor land could not have been more different from the lush mountain home they were forced to give up."<sup>24</sup> Chipeta sought to live as her people and moved into a tepee lodge as they did. She used her remaining monies to support several orphaned children and fought for the rights of her people.

Chipeta's heart was still in the lands of her youth. Newton Castle, an early trader to the Utes, told of a chance meeting between them.

"She was pathetically eager to hear about Uncompahgre country...Far into the night [we] sat before the fire and talked of the changes that had come...Finally Chipeta arose...and said, 'Too much fences!' With this dictum she slipped noiselessly into the dark."<sup>25</sup>

In 1884 she opposed a survey that essentially barred Utes from entering Colorado ancestral lands. The Brunot Agreement of 1873, provided that the Utes could hunt upon ceded Colorado lands "so long as game lasts, and the Indians are at peace with the white people."<sup>26</sup> It was legal for them to return there, and they did.

In 1887 Chipeta and others returned to Colorado on a hunting trip. They were attacked by the militia who wounded a number of Utes and killed several others. About five thousand pounds of dried meat, twenty-five hundred goats and sheep, and several hundred head of horses and cattle were taken by the posse. In fact, all the band's lifetime possessions.<sup>27</sup>

Troops finally arrived from newly established Fort Duchesne and escorted them back to the reservation. Only part of the stolen chattels were ever returned and none of the Utes was reimbursed for their losses. Chipeta had lost more in the raid than any other person.

As if this were not enough, the General Allotment Act (Dawes Act) went into affect that same year.<sup>28</sup> Chipeta was assigned to a site in the Bitter Creek Canyon area in the Book Cliffs of eastern Utah. There was no water on the land for irrigation. Her family spent the summers in cabins near the head of Bitter Creek running their sheep

and some cattle. They would spend the winter months near the mining town of Dragon. She had remarried at sometime to Com-mo-gu-uech. Even with his help, life here was meager at best. He died in 1905.<sup>29</sup>

George E. Stewart pleasantly recalled his first meeting Chipeta and considered it one of the great honors of his life. "I was bashful and timid about meeting this great lady." George said. "I will never forget how she came to me, the crowd pressing around, and lowered herself to my level. Then, she reached out and gently touched my face. Kissing, as we know it today, was not known among the early Indians," George explained. "A hand slid gently down the cheek was this most affectionate gesture. By her touch she had kissed me, and then she quietly said in Ute, 'The boy is frightened.'" This became George's "Indian name," "Boy Afraid."

He was teased for his name, and in subsequent years Chipeta re-named him a second and third time. The name that finally stuck was Utiev (Turkey). "In those days 'turkey' didn't carry the derogatory meaning it does today." George clarified. "My Ute friends have always called me that with respect." Then he concluded, "Chipeta was one of the most loving persons I have ever known."<sup>30</sup>

At the age of 73 Chipeta was still fighting for her people, asking the Government to have water brought to the Uncompahgre allotments.<sup>31</sup>

It seems that some question concerning the government's lack of gratitude toward Ouray's wife, Chipeta, came to the attention of the Indian Commissioner in 1916. Chipeta had been moved from her old and comfortable home near Montrose, Colorado, some thirty years before. Now, the government, remembering her, wanted to hear how she was faring.

When interviewed Chipeta said that representatives of the government came to her at Montrose and told her that she could have a better home if she would move to Utah. She had moved, but had not gotten a better home. When asked if there was anything that the government could do for her she replied, "No, I expect to die very soon."

Full of remorse at such neglect on the part of the government, Commissioner Cato Sells suggested that she be presented with some furniture....The agent suggested that a gay shawl would be a suitable gift.<sup>32</sup>

The gift was received after a charade of sending it to Washington so Commissioner Sells could send it back, presumably so it would have the Washington D.C. post mark. This "gaudy shawl," as Fred Conetah calls it, did nothing to get water onto her peoples' ground or help in any other way. "The Government's supposed remorse was as



always, short sighted and worthless." Chipeta suffered from cataracts in her old age. Surgery didn't help, and she went blind. "When she was in this condition her relatives, with whom she lived, used to stretch a cord from her [door] out into the bush. By following this, she could get some privacy from the household. On August 9, 1924, she died at her brother, McCook's camp, a hundred miles from the agency, and was buried after the Indian custom, in a shallow grave in the bottom of a small wash tributary to Bitter Creek."<sup>33</sup>

Chipeta had joined the Episcopal church in 1898.<sup>34</sup> Perhaps that was part of the reason that some, driven by their own Christian ethic, could not stand to leave her buried in the "Indian custom," and sought to reinter her "honorably." If a sacrilege was ever committed it was in the disgusting competition of western slope Coloradans for the bones of Ouray, so he and Chipeta could rest forever together. It was in the greed of these same people to build a mausoleum thus to create a tourist attraction, and in the blatant ignorance that by so "honoring" the couple, they could at all redeem themselves from their guilty past.

By their past treatment of her they had in essence, spat upon Chipeta, deceived, denied, and discarded her, and her people, in a litany of perfidious whitewash. Those few years in which she and her husband led in greatness and peace, are remembered by the whites simply because they were monumentally productive for *them*, the intruders.

Chipeta was great because of the service she gave and her perseverance with insurmountable problems, poverty, and dejection. Her life speaks for itself. As one "old Indian" told George E. Stewart: "Chipeta needs no monument. If you'll look, she rides the evening sky, on the resplendent rays of the glorious sunset. The birds speak her name, Spring That Runs Clear. The deer speak it too. Even the coyote cries for Chipeta."<sup>35</sup>

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup>Smith, P. David, *Ouray: Chief of the Utes*, (Wayfinder Press, Ouray, Colorado, 1986), 52.

<sup>2</sup>At the time of Chipeta's birth there were approximately twelve bands of Utes scattered across the lands that would become known as the states of Utah and Colorado. With the coming of the whites, the Utes were decimation by disease and war. Certain bands joined together for the common welfare of the whole, and others were forced together as the United States Government arbitrarily pushed them onto newly created reservations. Formerly independent bands lost their identity and assumed one of several designations. Chipeta's band was no longer referred to as the Taviwach, but became known as the Uncompagre.

<sup>3</sup>Elmo Scott Watson, "Chief Ouray, The Dictator of the Utes," as printed in *The Mylon Free Press*, August 3, 1922.

<sup>4</sup>Samuel Stanley, "Chief Ouray, Warrior and Statesmen," *Wild West*, March 1972, Vol 4:2, 27-31.

- <sup>1</sup>Smith, 1986, 52.
- <sup>2</sup>WPA Work Project, "Chipeta," completed for Colorado State Historical Society and available at Regional Room, Vernal, Ut.
- <sup>3</sup>Smith, 1986, 58.
- <sup>4</sup>Fred Conetah, *A History of the Northern Ute People*, Edited by Kathryn L. McKay & Floyd A. O'Neil (Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1982), 106.
- <sup>5</sup>Chief Ouray, as quoted by Smith, 1986, 72, 79.
- <sup>6</sup>Smith, 1986, 143.
- <sup>7</sup>McCook, Edward M., Territorial Governor of Colorado in a letter to Indian Commissioner Parker, September 30, 1870, as quoted by Smith, 1986, 85.
- <sup>8</sup>It was the graciousness of Ouray and Chipeta, despite the intrusions of so many whites, that preserved one of the greatest legacies of history for the Uintah Basin. Preston Nutter was a young man traveling with Alferd Packer in 1873 when they trespassed onto Ute lands in southwestern Colorado. Warned by Ouray not to attempt a crossing of the mountains due to snow, Nutter, and others, accepted the invitation of Ouray and Chipeta to winter with them. Those few who went on with Packer either died or were killed and eaten by him. Preston Nutter lived to become one of Utah's great cattle barons with headquarters in Nine Mile Canyon.
- <sup>9</sup>Stanley, 1972, 27-31.
- <sup>10</sup>Wallace Starke and Albert B. Reagan, "Chipeta, Queen of the Utes", *The Vernal Express*, May 26, 1932.
- <sup>11</sup>Stanley, 1972, 27-31.
- <sup>12</sup>Conetah, 1982, 112.
- <sup>13</sup>June Lyman and Norma Denver, *Ute History: An Historical Study*, ed. Floyd A. O'Neil and John D. Sylvester, (Salt Lake City: University of Utah, 1970), 36.
- <sup>14</sup>Captain James Parker as quoted by Conetah, 1982, 113.
- <sup>15</sup>Lyman and Denver, 1970, 91.
- <sup>16</sup>Smith, 1986, 137.
- <sup>17</sup>William Saunders, as quoted by Smith, 1986, 140-1.
- <sup>18</sup>Starke and Reagan, *The Vernal Express*, May 26, 1932.
- <sup>19</sup>Commissioner of Indian Affairs, Annual Report, 1883, 153. As quoted by Conetah, 1982, 113.
- <sup>20</sup>Conetah, 1982, 113.
- <sup>21</sup>Mrs. Newton Castle, "Chipeta, Famous Ute Chieftain's Wife: Friend to Pioneers," as told to J. Melody Raber, *The Vernal Express*, December 11, 1941.
- <sup>22</sup>Rockwell, *The Utes*, 182-187.
- <sup>23</sup>Duchesne Chapter of the Daughter of the Utah Pioneers, *Early History of Duchesne County*, Mildred Miles Dillman compiler, (Springville, Utah: Art City Publishing Company, 1948), 83-4.
- <sup>24</sup>The General Allotment Act (Dawes Act): The enactment of 1887 and amendments in 1891, 1906, and 1910 authorized the president to parcel tribal land to individual members in tracts of 40, 80, or 160 acres, called allotments. The Secretary of Interior was to negotiate for the purchase of the surplus land remaining after all eligible Indians had received their shares, and the proceeds were to be devoted to the education and civilization of the tribe...Each allotment was to be held in trust by the U.S. for 25 years or longer, after which the government would issue a fee patent...Individual members of the tribe upon receiving patents were to become citizens...The Dawes Act of 1887 cut tribal landholdings from 138 million acres to roughly 48 million acres in 1934." (June Lyman and Norma Denver, *Ute History: An Historical Study*, ed. Floyd A. O'Neil and John D. Sylvester, Salt Lake City: University of Utah Press, 1982, 43.)
- <sup>25</sup>WPA Work Project, "Chipeta," Regional Room, Vernal, Ut.
- <sup>26</sup>George E. Stewart, interview by writer, July 24, 1989, Notes, H. Bert Jenson Collection.
- <sup>27</sup>Conetah, 1982, 135.
- <sup>28</sup>WPA Work Project, "Chipeta," Regional Room, Vernal, Ut.
- <sup>29</sup>Ibid.
- <sup>30</sup>Rockwell, *The Utes*, 258.
- <sup>31</sup>Stewart interview.