

A BRIEF

HISTORY OF OURAY

1. Ouray, Chief of the Utes

Ouray, Colorado is named after the most famous chief of the Ute Indian tribe, who made his home in the Uncompahgre Valley. The Utes first arrived in the San Juans about 1300 and by the mid 19th century considered the San Juans their land. The first treaty between the Utes and the U. S. government was signed in 1849. Ouray saw that fighting the white settlers and soldiers would bring ruin to his tribe and he tried above all else to be the white man's friend. Ouray said, "agreements the Indian makes with the government are like agreements a buffalo makes with a hunter after it has been pierced by many arrows. All it can do is lie down and give in."

When the government made war on the Navajo, Ouray brought in the Utes as allies. When his uncle and nephew were gunned down for no reason, he kept the peace. When whites broke treaties by mining the San Juans, he kept peace. In 1868 he won a treaty granting the Utes the entire Western Slope of Colorado "as long as the grass shall grow" and promising a large cash settlement. However, the U. S. government didn't even make the first payment. Again and again the government demanded renegotiation of treaties supposed to last "as long as the sun shall shine." Still Ouray kept the peace. For this he was very popular among the whites. President Hays said, "Ouray is the most intellectual man I have ever conversed with." In the Denver capitol dome, there are portraits of the founders of the state of Colorado. Only one was selected unanimously—Chief Ouray

2. European-Americans Reach the San Juans

The first Europeans in the San Juan Mountains were probably Spanish trappers and traders who came hunting for furs and gold. They found traces of silver, but did better with trading beads and blankets for pelts and hides. In 1776, as America was declaring its independence, Father Escalante was exploring this area. The nearest he got to Ouray was Log Hill Mesa, just south of Ridgway. An old arrastra and other Spanish artifacts found east of Silverton are some evidence Spanish miners tried their luck in the San Juans.

Among the first European-Americans in the San Juan Mountains were the members of the disastrous 1848 Fremont expedition. John C. Fremont, an experienced explorer, was sent by the U. S. Congress to try to find a transcontinental railroad route. However, he led his men into the San Juan Mountains in the winter causing ten men to lose their lives. In 1853 Captain John Gunnison came across Cochetopa Pass looking for another transcontinental railroad route. In 1860 the Charles Baker party prospected in what is now Silverton. Ouray was first explored in the early 1860s but the big rush occurred in the summer of 1875. The town was incorporated in October of 1876.

3. Cascade Creek: Ouray's First Water Supply

In 1880 the first water system brought water from Cascade Creek down to a ditch along what is now Main Street. People could fill their buckets from the wooden boxes along the ditch. In case of fire, a line of people forming a bucket brigade could fight it. However in the fall there isn't much water in the creek and in the winter it can freeze up. Soon Ouray turned to Oak Creek as a better water source because it flows all year long due to the hot springs flowing into it.

4. Flumes & Floods

If a heavy snow pack, warm weather, and a heavy thunderstorm all happen at once, Ouray floods. Boulders bounce down streambeds like marbles. Huge trees are undermined, fall in and are snapped like matchsticks. If something catches the debris, a natural dam is formed and water goes everywhere. After many houses were destroyed, flumes were built to keep the water flowing.

In 1929 there were three disastrous flash floods. It rained so hard you couldn't see a block away, but you could hear the water roaring down toward town. The river flooded the power plant, took the railroad section house, and almost got the depot. Bridges and roads vanished. The Hot Springs Pool filled with mud, rock and debris. We still occasionally have floods today that can close local highways but modern engineering equipment keeps these closures to a minimum.

5. The Railroad Comes to Ouray

In the early 1880's Ouray desperately needed a railroad since all ore shipped out and supplies shipped in had to come by wagon. The Denver and Rio Grande built their Ouray branch in 1886, which meant great prosperity for the mines above Ouray. Ouray was now a boomtown and many of its beautiful buildings were built in the first few years after the arrival of the railroad. Otto Mears built the Silverton Railroad from Silverton to Ironton in 1888-89. For five years it was the most profitable railroad per mile in the U. S. By 1890 there were several thousand people living on Red Mountain and Ouray's population had grown to over 2500. The railroad had brought incredible prosperity to Southwestern Colorado.

6. Ouray & Tourism

Native Americans came to Ouray to hunt, escape the heat, enjoy the beauty and to use the hot springs. Chief Ouray had a winter home here next to the Wiesbaden Hot Springs. The spectacular scenery and the transportation system built to service the mines made the San Juans a natural tourist destination. The "Rainbow Route", which took passengers by stage from Ouray to Ironton and then by train to Silverton, Durango, Rico, Telluride, Ridgway and back to Ouray, was billed as the "most magnificent mountain trip in the known world." Today the "San Juan Skyway" is a National Scenic Highway and still among the most magnificent mountain trips you can take. By the turn of the century, Ouray was already becoming a tourist town called the "Gem of the Rockies" and "The Switzerland of America."

7. Mining Around Ouray

Ouray owes its mineral riches to more than twenty volcanoes in the San Juans, one of which was right here. Cracks, or faults, associated with those volcanoes allowed valuable minerals to work their way up from deep inside the earth. The first mining done in the area was placer mining. Placer gold is gold which has been washed out of the veins in the mountains and into the streams. Lode mining is digging out the ore from the veins themselves. A prospector with a pan can do placer mining, but "hard rock" mining is an expensive proposition which takes dozen or even hundreds of miners and a great deal of capital.

In the 1870s and 1880s this area was a silver mining region. However, a crash in the price of silver in 1893 caused most of the mines to close. Only those with high values in gold continued in production. The last major Ouray County mine, the Camp Bird, has been closed for more than 25 years. A few years ago its mill was sold and transported to Mongolia. However, some local mines are reopening to mine for valuable mineral specimens.

8. Red Mountain Mining District

The historic Red Mountain Mining District lies on the north side of Red Mountain Pass. Some of the richest silver mines in the state were located here, including the Yankee Girl, National Belle and Guston Mines. Otto Mears' famous Silverton Railroad climbed Red Mountain Pass to serve these mines. Many of these sites can still be seen from US Highway 550, "The Million Dollar Highway," and are easily visited on County Road 31. Much of the historic district has been preserved for generations to come by the Red Mountain Project, which has placed more than 9,000 acres of land into perpetual conservation easements.

9. Tom Walsh and the Camp Bird Mine

Tom Walsh, millionaire patron of Ouray, grew up poor in Ireland soon after the potato famine. He arrived in America in a time when many discriminated against the Irish. Hard work, intelligence and good luck made him one of the richest men in America. He owned the Camp Bird Mine, one of the largest producing mines in the West, and he was very generous to Ouray. He donated to all the churches of Ouray, paid off the mortgage on the Miners Hospital, and gave the town a library stocked with books. His miners lived in a bunkhouse that was more like a fine hotel and ate meals as good as one would find in the best restaurant and served on fine china. After Walsh died of cancer in 1910 his daughter Evelyn bought the famous Hope Diamond but, living up to its curse, she was plagued by years of family misfortune.

10. Then & Now

A hundred years ago, if you were looking out over Ouray, you would see a bigger town and there wouldn't be so many trees blocking the view. Then the population was about 2,200, now it's much less than half that. The need for wood for mine timbers, lumber and fire wood resulted in most trees being cut. With all the wood and coal fires, the air wasn't as clean. Mines and mills discharged into the river, so the water wasn't as clean. With sounds of stamp mills, steam trains, burros, horses, blasting and even the occasional gun fight, Ouray was a noisy place. Ouray is one of the few areas whose ecology is better today than it was 100 years ago.

If you would like to learn more about Ouray history, please visit the Ouray County Museum at 420 5th Avenue. The Smithsonian has called our museum "the best little museum in the west." You can also take a self-guided Historic Walking Tour of Ouray.