



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Blanco Ranger District  
317 E. Market Street  
Meeker, Co 81641

(970) 878-4039 voice  
(970) 878-5173 fax

## *History of Meeker*

### *"Civilized Agriculture"* - Nathan C. Meeker

Nathan Meeker, a Government Indian Agent, arrived in the White River valley in 1878 with visions of developing a rich agriculture business. He saw the Indians as a threat and vowed to plow up their lands and convert the Ute Indians to farmers and 'civilize' them. This conflict led to the killing of Meeker and ten government employees, and is known as the Meeker massacre. This massacre resulted in the eventual removal of the Utes from their homeland to reservations. This was the last major Indian uprising in Colorado.

### *"Land of Many Uses"* - Theodore Roosevelt

During the late 1800's and early 1900's, many settlers arrived in northwestern Colorado. Along with settlers, were those who came strictly to make money, sometimes resulting in overuse of the land's rich natural resources. As a result, federal laws were passed to set aside 'Forest Reserves' to protect and manage the lands. The White River National Forest and Flat Tops Trail Scenic Byway are part of the 2nd Forest Reserve in the United States. While hunting in the area President Theodore Roosevelt learned of the adverse public sentiment toward the 'locking up' of the land. In 1897, the Organic Act was passed which mandated that the government provide timber, clean water and opportunity for other commodity production for the benefit of the public. This led to the creation of the U.S. Forest Service.

### *"Cradle of Wilderness"* - Arthur Carhart

Trappers Lake is known as the "Cradle of Wilderness" due to the efforts of Arthur H. Carhart. In 1919, his recommendations stopped further construction of roads and homes around the lake. The concept to protect areas such as Trappers Lake from development was the start of the Wilderness movement. This ultimately led to the Wilderness Act in 1964, which established Wilderness areas around the country.



United States  
Department of  
Agriculture

Blanco Ranger District  
317 E. Market Street  
Meeker, Co 81641

(970) 878-4039 voice  
(970) 878-5173 fax

### **SITE OF THE FIRST INDIAN AGENCY ON THE WHITE RIVER**

A historical sign on County Highway 8, which turns off Colorado 13, east of Meeker, points to the site of the first Indian Agency on the White River. It is nine miles east of Meeker.

The first Indian Agent came here in the fall of 1869 and set up the agency. He was Major D. C. Oakes. He was followed by Lt. Perry, Captain Beck, and Mr. Brown. In 1875, Reverend E. H. Danforth was the agent. He introduced the Northern Utes to farming.

In the spring of 1878, Nathan C. Meeker came over from Greeley. He moved the agency buildings to the eastern head of what is now known as Powell Park.

These records are taken from the War Archives in Washington, D. C.

### **POWELL PARK**

In October 1868, Major John Wesley Powell, his wife, Emma Dean Powell, and a party of 20 students and neighbors came to the White River Valley and established winter quarters in the wide open space, later known as Powell's Bottoms.

They spent the winter of 1868-69 exploring the White and Green Rivers, also the Grand and Yampa Rivers; the Yampa was then known as Bear River. Powell and his group waited in the park named for him for boats to be shipped to Green River, Wyoming; he and his men used these boats to explore the Green and Colorado Rivers and Grand Canyon in 1869.

It was here that he became acquainted with Chief Douglas and his band of Utes who were camped nearby. Here he began the first of his ethnographic studies of Indian language and culture. He took down vocabularies and participated in economic and ritual activities. He learned to speak the Ute and Southern Paiute language passably well. He became known as Kapurats--"Arm Off."

The white River Museum has a photo of one of the Powell cabins. Some old-timers remember it being on the river bank as late as the 1900's, and think it was washed away by the river.

This area visited first by Powell, later became the site of the Agency on the White River, established by Nathan C. Meeker. It is now known as Powell Park.

\*INFORMATION FROM LOCAL SOURCES AND Darrah's "Powell of the Colorado"\*

## **THE MEEKER MASSACRE**

The Meeker Massacre didn't take place on the site of the Town of Meeker. The town didn't exist at that time. It took place at the Indian Agency on the White River, on September 29, 1879. Nathan C. Meeker was the Indian Agent in charge of the Agency, which was located on the upper end of land now known as Powell Park.

There is a historical sign on Highway 64, about three miles west of Meeker. The sign gives the facts of the massacre and an arrow points to the flagpole marker on the actual site of the Agency buildings. The flagpole is topped with a copper ball, which can be seen at the base of the trees.

The marker is in the middle of a lush native hay field. In the pre-massacre days, the valley offered rich pasture and space for a racetrack for the Indians. But Mr. Meeker had visions of developing a rich agricultural business that would require a railroad to carry out the produce that could be raised. He saw the ponies as a threat to his plans and he threatened to plow up the racetrack and much of the pasture lands. He said that the Indians could get rid of their horses and work at farming.

### **Nathan C. Meeker**

This was the final straw that brought on the massacre. Nathan C. Meeker was killed. Ten men, employed as carpenters by the Government, were killed. Mrs. Meeker, her daughter Josephine, Mrs. Price and her two small children were taken captive by the Indians.

Because of the heroic efforts of Chipeta and Chief Ouray, the women were finally released after being held captive about 23 or 24 days.

The army arrived while smoke still drifted over the burned out agency, and came on to the present site of Meeker, where they established the Camp on the White River with 2,100 soldiers.

The Indians were ordered banished to a reservation in eastern Utah. This order was finally carried out in 1881 when 1,458 White River and Uncompahgre Utes were moved. Chief Colorow was the last Ute who passed on the junction of the Colorado and Gunnison Rivers on September 7, 1881.

In 1927, the citizens of Rio Blanco County placed the sign indicating the site of the massacre in Powell Park. IN front of the sign is a large granite boulder with an engraved plaque, in memory of Nathan C. Meeker, and naming the ten men who died with him:

W.H. Post	Henery Dresser	Mr. Price	
George Eaton			
Carl Goldstien	Frank Dresser	E.W. Eskridge	Fred
Shepard			
Athur L. Tompson		Unknown Teamster	

When the army moved out in late 1883, they sold all the buildings--officers' quarters, barracks, hospital, barns, ect. to the people who had come in and were waiting eagerly to take up land, settle down, and make a town.

The readymade town was named Meeker in memory of the martyred Indian Agent Nathan C. Meeker. The area was first a part of the Routt County, then the area was divided and Meeker was in Garfield County. A later division formed Rio Blanco County and Meeker became the county seat, which it still is.

The Meeker Museum is located in Greely, in the house once occupied by the Nathan C. Meeker family.

Nathan C. Meeker was born in Ohio in July 1813, and was killed by the Utes during the massacre on September 29, 1879. He and his family are all buried at Greely, Colorado.

As a young man, Mr. Meeker taught school in Ohio and Pennsylvania. He was later connected with a New Orleans daily paper, also the New York Mirror, and the Louisville Journal. He wrote literary sketches and poems. He wrote books, one of which he dedicated to President Pierce. He married a lady who was a native of Connecticut. She shared his aims and ideals for the betterment of humanity. Meeker was hired by Horrace Greely to edit the Greely Tribune in the town of Greely which Meeker founded and named in honor of his friend, Horace Greely.

## **THORNBURGH BATTLEGROUND**

The Thornburgh Battleground is on County Road 15. The turnoff from Highway 13, east of Meeker, is marked by a blue State Highway sign:

### **Access to National Forest Yellowjacket Pass**

Right at the turn a brown sign says:

#### **Yellowjacket Pass Thornburgh Battleground 17 miles**

The monument of the Thornburgh Battleground has been moved to a roadside location, and an arrow indicates the battleground itself.

It was here, on Milk Creek, that Major Thomas Tipton Thornburgh, Commander of the 4th Infantry, was ambushed by Ute Indians on the morning of September 29, 1879. Thornburgh was en route to the Agency on the White River to support Nathan C. Meeker. He was one of the first men killed at the start of the battle which developed into a four-day siege.

Captain Payne, second in command, got the troops organized and dug in behind a barricade of dead horses and mules, though he had two wounds himself. In the afternoon, his forces withstood a direct charge and then the Utes withdrew. Payne realized they could be held there until they starved, if they didn't get help.

Joe Rankin and John Gordon were the only two men who knew the country well enough to go for help. Payne assumed that the Indians would be guarding the trails and would capture and torture anyone trying to get away.

Rankin and Gordon volunteered to take the risk. George Monquin of Company F and Edward F. Murphy of Company D volunteered to give back-up support. If they all got away, Gordon was to head for Gore Pass in search of Captain Dodge. Rankin planned that the two Corporals would take the Fortification Creek road to Price's supply depot, while he rode hard for Rawlins and the Western Union. They carried messages written by Captain Payne. Once the messengers were safely away...they assumed safely, as there was no sound of gunfire..., Payne handed over command to Captain Lawson and passed out.

Captain Francis Safford Dodge and his company of Negro soldiers had been stationed in Middle Park since July with orders to check the Utes and get to White River if needed. After several alarms, which petered out, he had decided to return to Middle Park on Tuesday morning. At noon Wednesday he met John Gordon in Hayden, and began a fast march to Milk Creek. With John Gordon as guide, and 35 cavalry "Buffalo Soldiers," Dodge aimed to get to Milk Creek early and catch the Utes asleep. Enroute they saw a freight wagon that had been

destroyed. Later, George Moquin and his two helpers were found dead, the threshing machine ordered by Meeker destroyed, and the steam engine upset in a gulch. Stunned and grieving, John Gordon led on. At sunrise, the relief party reached the besieged soldiers and got into the barricade before the Utes could stop them. Of course, they too were pinned down, but they brought hope of more help coming and the morale of the besieged men improved.

By noon of the same Thursday, Colonel Wesley Merritt left Rawlins to relieve Thornburgh, accompanied by a force of four companies of cavalry, 150 foot soldiers in wagons, and a number of reporters, including John C. Dyer of the New York world. They reached Milk Creek Sunday morning, October 5, and met no resistance from the Utes, probably because Chief Ouray had sent orders to Chief Jack's camp to cease fighting and withdraw.

Merritt set up a new clean camp and moved the 43 wounded men away from the stench of the battlefield. Thirteen bodies were buried temporarily. Four days later, reinforcements under colonel C.C. Gilbert, from the 7th Infantry at Fort Snelling, Dakota Territory, arrived as the Thornburgh survivors were leaving under escort of Captain Dodge's Company D.

On Saturday, October 11, Merritt arrived at the Agency of the White River, to find a scene of desolation and destruction. The bodies of the civilian employees lying where they fell, Mrs. Meeker, Josephine, and Flora Ellen Price kidnapped by the Indians, and the naked, battered body of Nathan C. Meeker, the last agent to serve at the Agency on the White River.

\*\*Massacre - The Tragedy at White River by Marshal Sprague

### **Early History of the Town of Meeker**

*The following article was written by Mr. W. D. Simms of Meeker, Colorado, now deceased, but one whom the community will never forget for his insight and keen interest in the early founding of the town, and his avid interest that contributed to the progress and growth of Meeker.*

*In 1949 the State Historical Society of Colorado, the Chamber of Commerce and citizens of Meeker dedicated a rock monument to the early founders of the town; it is on the courthouse lawn.*

Our town came into being under interesting and peculiar circumstances. Soon after the Meeker Massacre (September 29, 1879), a permanent military camp was established and built on this spot. When the work of construction and been finished, there appeared one of the most complete and efficient military

establishments to be found on all the frontier. The buildings were erected in regular order, facing inward, along with the four lines of a quadrangle or parade ground extending approximately 800 feet from east to west and having a width of 475 feet. This is the ground presently occupied by the courthouse and grade school buildings.

The soldiers' barracks were situated along the south border of the quadrangle and consisted of nine long adobe, or more familiarly known as "dobbie" brick buildings, constructed with walls 16 inches in thickness, wooded floors, shingle roofs, and brick chimneys. On the north borderline of the parade ground were five commodious two-family log residence buildings used as quarter for the officers and their families. Four of them still stand in their original locations three of them have undergone but slight change in appearance. Two similar structures were located at the west end.

### **WHITE RIVER MUSEUM**

In the center of the eastern extremity there stood a large log hospital building. This in later years served the settlers as the first school, the first church, and was the center of all community activities. In this building in 1884 the first Fourth of July celebration was held. ( A fifth officers' residence building was moved around the corner on 5th Street and its appearance altered).

A flagpole stood in the center of the parade ground, and the military reservation was laid out in extending four miles each direction from that flagpole, and any person within that eight mile square area was subject to military rule.

To the south and southwest of the military buildings, various structures were located, such as quarters for the civilian employees, the post Trader's or Sutler Store, the Officers' Club and the Soldier's Club, known and the "Bounce" house. The two latter were amusement and recreation places, with billiard, pool and card tables, and also where the essence of "barley-corn" was dispensed.

This post was known as the Military Camp on the White River, and presented a spectacle of color and interest. Several hundred soldiers were quartered here, mule and ox-drawn supply trains coming and going, soldiers drilling on the parade ground, military bands playing, and occasional calvary troops on maneuver.

One man witnessed that most colorful scene, Mr. Ed P. Wilber. As a young man he wandered into Rawlins, Wyoming, in April 1882, looking for work. There he met John C. "Jack" Davis, manager for the J. W. Hugus Mercantile and freighting

interests, operators of the Post Traders' store and the White River Camp. Mr. Davis was looking for "bull-whackers" and "mule-skinners" to bring in the first supply train of the year, and gave Mr. Wilber a job "skinning" a six-mule, two-wagon outfit in that 20-wagon supply train. They came south from Rawlins on their 180-mile journey, crossing Snake River, then over Iron Springs divide, down through Lay, crossing Bear River (also known as the Yampa River) on the government bridge below the Duffey Ranch, out through Axial Basin, over Nine Mile Hill and Four Mile Hill. Mr. Wilber's wagons were loaded with lumber, with a barrel of beer strapped high on top the lead wagon. Coming over the rough road down Nine Mile Hill, the strap broke and the barrel tumbled to earth with a mighty crash, and Mr. Wilber told that "the bull-whackers and mule-skinners had a right nice party there in the sagebrush." After 20 days of travel, they arrived at the camp on a Sunday morning; the military band was playing on the parade ground in honor of the occasion. The caravan halted and when the band finished playing, Mr. Wilber turned around and said, "Well, boys, right here is where I am going to stay so long as I can make a living." Mr. Wilber lived a life filled with many exciting incidents of the last frontier. He contributed liberally in the time and effort toward the development and advancement of Meeker and Rio Blanco County.

In the late summer of 1883, the Government started removing the soldiers. When nearly all were gone, a sale was held on the 13th of August, and the buildings sold at auction. There were but few here to buy and the buildings brought trifling sums. Newton Major, manager of Hugus & Co., bought the first adobe building for \$100, into which he moved the Hugus store. Mrs. Susan C. Wright came in from her claim at the foot of Nine Mile Hill, just outside the military reservation, and bought the second one. Charley Dunbar bought the third, and these two pooled interest and opened the Meeker Hotel. Mr. George Allsebrook bought the one where the Odd Fellows Building now stands (400 Main Street, now called the Ruckman Building) for \$30. Samuel Fairfield bought the last of the officers' quarters for \$100. Then came one long blast of the bugle; the last of the soldiers marched out and the few settlers were in possession of a ready-made town, which they unanimously named Meeker in honor of the slain Indian agent, Nathan C. Meeker.

Shortly thereafter, a gentleman from Denver, Mr. D. M. Richards, a promoter, came in and organized the Meeker Town Company with a membership of 20 persons. This company is usually referred to as the Townsite Company. He was a great "booster" and put forth much effort into getting the people interested in securing the county seat for Garfield County at the upcoming election.

Carbonate, a booming mining camp 22 miles north of Glenwood Springs, had been named the county seat at the time Garfield County was created in the spring of 1883. Several thousand people had rushed in during the winter, waiting for the snow to melt so they could scoop up the gold reported to be underneath; but when the snow melted, the gold had apparently disappeared, and the

population likewise rapidly disappeared until by late summer only the postmaster, the county clerk, and a few prospectors remained. Two men from Grand River, now the Colorado River, went up there one night with a pack mule, seized the county records, and packed them to Glenwood Springs. This kidnapping of the county seat afforded Mr. Richards abundant ammunition for his campaign. There were but few settlers on Grand River and the White River was believed to have a slight edge; but when the votes were counted on election day, Meeker lost the county seat by 27 votes and elected one commissioner. It was said at the time that Glenwood Springs counted a lot of men living in Aspen, Pitkin County.

The results of the election, coupled with the fact that while the post had been abandoned, the military reservation had not been returned to the public domain, and it was uncertain as to when this would be accomplished. Consequently, no filing could be made on the townsite or any other land within the 64-square-mile area around the flagpole. Mr. Richards, discouraged and apparently believing there was little chance of booming the town and making it a quick profit, took his departure and did not return.

But the 19 remaining members of the Town Company were not discouraged when they found themselves to be merely "squatters" on the forbidden ground. They were not so much interested in quick profits as they were in making their "squatter" town a better place in which to live. Three members of the Town Company, Samuel Fairfield, Frank E. Sheridan, and Ed P. Wilber, laid out the town ditch with a tripod and constructed it in the spring of 1884. Lateral ditches were constructed and little rivulets of pure, cold water ran down both sides of all the streets in the occupied portion of the townsite.

Upon recommendation of Mr. Thomas Baker, the old parade ground was set aside as a town park. The Town Company enclosed the entire area with a picket fence. Under the supervision of Mr. Baker, Box Elder and Cottonwood trees were planted, lateral ditches run to provide irrigation water, and the completed town park was turned over to the citizens free of all cost.

The town was incorporated in 1885 and Willan H. Clark was elected mayor. The newly elected mayor, being a surveyor, made a plot of the town and steps were at once taken to procure a patent. It was not until 1887 that they were able to cut through all the government red tape, when the mayor made filing on behalf of and for the use of the citizens.

In July of that year, Mayor Clark, James L. McHatton, president of the townsite, and Dana Thayer, town clerk, drove to Glenwood Springs and made final proof on the Meeker townsite. The mayor then issued deeds to each citizen for the lot or lots occupied for the consideration of \$2.63 per lot, that amount being the proportionate cost of procuring patent plus legal expense.

The town of Meeker was the first, and for more than 20 years, the only incorporated town in all northwestern Colorado. It was the hub, the business and

banking center of that vast territory. The settlers from Bear River came to Meeker to trade and do their banking, and many of the settlers came from Grand River until the Denver and Rio Grande Railroad was constructed. Four men, J. W. Hugus, John C. Davis, Newton Major, and Dana Thayer, through their collective efforts in establishing the firm of J. W. Hugus & Co., Merchants & Bankers, provided the magnet of attraction for drawing business to Meeker. The settlers had little money and no security to offer. This pioneer firm sold them supplies on credit to bring their land into production, then loaned them money to get a start in cattle.

The Indian trade was also a profitable addition to the business of the town. While the Utes were supposed to be on their reservation in Utah, many bands had permanent camps in the western part of the county, going to the Agency only to collect their "head money," then coming to Meeker to trade.

One January while taking inventory in the Hugus store, the clerks dragged out a lot of straw hats that wouldn't sell. This was cattle country and no cowboy in those days would wear a straw hat. Mr. Major, "Old Maj," as he was fondly called, gathered up an armload and went out to all the nearby business places, giving every man a straw hat, saying, "The first time the Indians come to town, put that hat on and get out and circulate around." A few days later when the Utes came in, those fellows were out on the streets in overcoats, wearing straw hats. The Indians immediately got the fever and wanted a hat like the "Mericat." They not only bought all of Maj's 25-cent straw hats for a dollar each, but bought yards and yards of fancy colored ribbon to tie them on, got on their ponies and started for camp 20 miles down the river, wearing their straw hats in the snowstorm.

Two outstanding leaders were George S. Allsebrook and James L. (Uncle Jim) McHatton, the former, a fine Christian gentleman. In the spring of 1884, he organized a Sunday School and held the first religious service, the forerunner of Saint James Church. He was the chief influence in building a full roller process flour mill, and extended the Agency ditch in Powell Park to Strawberry Creek. He was the leading spokesman in the movement for the creation of Rio Blanco County. Uncle Jim McHatton brought in the first saw-mill and in company with Frank E. Sheridan established the first lumber yard. He was the first to raise alfalfa successfully. He was always a liberal contributor to everything for the advancement of the interests of the town and its citizens, and during the last 20 years of his life developed two splendid ranches.

Mrs. S. C. Wright, the only woman member of the Town Company, was sometimes called the "Mother of Meeker." This appellation perhaps stemmed from an incident of the winter of 1883 when the little village was snowed in, with no communication with the outside world. The food supply had been taxed by the arrival of several who came in during the winter, and by the late wintertime the supply of white flour was exhausted. "Old Maj" had plenty of cornmeal in the store, but most of the ladies were unskilled in its use. Mrs. Wright said, "Maj, bring that cornmeal over to my kitchen and we will see what can be done about

the situation." From that time until the arrival of the supply train in the spring, the settlers ate "Mother Wright's good old southern-style Johnny Cake."

It would require hours to tell the full story of early Meeker. Time will not permit further comments on the experiences and accomplishments of that most remarkable group of pioneer people, the founders of Meeker, who were so outstanding in their possession of strength of character, self-reliance, and an undying faith in the future.

### **THE UTE WAR OF 1887**

Carryover hostility from the Meeker Massacre, September 29, 1878, was the probable cause of the last major struggle of Indians versus White Man, resulting in the Ute War of 1887.

Chipeta and Colorow were the only surviving participants of the massacre that resulted in the Ute Indians being driven out of their "Shining Mountains" and banished to a reservation in Utah.

Ouray, the great compromiser, died before the exile. Ute Jack, war chief during the Meeker Massacre, was killed by a detachment of soldiers on the Arapaho reservation in Wyoming. Chipeta, widely known as a heroine for her efforts to save Mrs. Meeker, Josephine Meeker, and Mrs.. Price, followed her people into exile. Colorow, who assumed leadership of the Ute Indians on the Utah reservation, now knew that any further fighting with the whites would be a lost cause, advised moderation and caution to his people. In spite of his efforts, hostilities broke out in August 1887.

The Indians had continued to come back to the White River to fish, gather berries, and hunt. When the trouble started, they were camped at the forks of the White River. The main body of Indians were picking berries, and only a few old men, women, and children were in the camp.

A posse of settlers invaded the camp without provocation or warning, and two of them seized an Indian boy. Wish-e-up, the boy's father, tried to stop them and was shot for interfering. The posse released the boy and opened fire on the Indians, wounding three of them. The Indians at once abandoned their camp, sheep, and goats, and set out in a panic for the reservation.

## Chipeta

Chipeta was camped on Yellowjacket Pass, near the site of the Thornburgh Battle, when she was subjected to insults and indignities from a posse of white men, probably inspired by too much firewater. A friendly white settler advised Chipeta to leave, and she gathered her companions and fled, leaving her herd of 330 sheep and goats in the hands of the white men. The posse burned her tents and fired random shots at the fleeing women and killed an Indian boy named Woo-she-ant. Other young boys with the women, returned the posse's fire and drove them back.

In the meantime, several chiefs had held a pow-wow with sober, responsible white men in the office of the Meeker Herald, and had given assurance that all the Utes would return to the reservation. However, Governor Adams had called out the Militia and they were in Meeker, and definitely "on the warpath." They had come a long way to fight Indians and were set on doing it. By retreating, they felt the Indians had played a dirty trick on them, and every man-jack of them resented it. Therefore, against the wishes of the responsible pioneers, a detachment of the Militia went north to try to head off the Indians so the main body of the soldiers could reach them, before they got out of the state.

The advance guard caught up with the Indians as they reached the mouth of Wolf Creek near Rangely. Captain Pray of the Colorado Scouts and Major Leslie of the First Colorado Cavalry approached the camp for a pow-wow. Colorow and McCook, Chipeta's brother, went out to meet them. Leslie wanted the Indians to stay there until morning, but by now, they were thoroughly alarmed, and continued their retreat toward Utah.

When the Indians crossed what they thought was the Colorado-Utah line, they stopped running and made camp. They were so sure that they were safe, that they turned the ponies out to graze and did not send out a single look-out or runner. Early, on August 25, 1887, as the Indians were cooking breakfast, Major Leslie's force of scout soldiers surrounded the camp and opened fire on the Utes, without a word of warning. Ali-chee, a Ute with nerve and a fair command of English, ran toward the soldiers, asking them to hold their fire till the women and children could be removed from the camp. He was answered by a volley of bullets and crawled back, badly wounded. The braves then returned the fire, holding off the soldiers while the women, children, and old men fled for the reservation. When the braves thought they were safe, they followed, abandoning all their property.

As a result of this "war," the heroic soldiers had the satisfaction of killing one buck, two small girls, and a baby boy. They wounded two bucks and one boy

severely. Three soldiers were killed, so the Indians came out ahead in this miserable fiasco.

Pioneer settlers in Meeker and Rangely who had taken no part in the "war" were outraged by the action of the Militia. The regular Army officer sent to investigate the affair, reported that there was impending trouble between the settlers and the soldiers, as well as between the soldiers and the Indians. As a result, several hundred horses were returned the Indians, but the sheep and goats probably became the property of the first white man to get them. So ended the last armed conflict between Ute Indians and White men.

\*Information re-written from an account printed in The Range Call, Meeker, Colorado, July 4 & 5, 1948.

### ***THE MEEKER BANK ROBBERY OCTOBER 13, 1896***

One of the most dramatic and colorful events ever to occur in northwestern Colorado was the attempted robbery of the Bank of Meeker which occurred on Tuesday, October 13, 1896. For a few hectic moments, bullets flew thick and fast in this pioneer town, and when the fusillade was over, several Meeker citizens were nursing wounds, and the three bank robbers were dead. The lightning-like promptness with which they were disposed of was a tribute to those pioneer residents of Meeker and notice to the world that frontier men were without fear and shot straight and fast when the occasion required. The incident, a sensation throughout the nation, was played up by all the great newspapers of the country, and congratulations poured in from all parts of the nation.

It was later learned that a short time before the Meeker Bank Robbery, the famous Butch Cassidy gang, which headquartered in Brown's Park in what is now the northeast part of Moffat County but in those days part of Routt County and the most famous "Robbers' Roost" in the western United States, had just staged the successful robbery of the Montpelier, Idaho, bank and on their return bragged about how easy it had been to rob that bank.

Cassidy's story of his exploit, told with great gusto around campfires in the Hole, aroused the imaginations of some of the junior members of the gang and they decided to organize their own outfit, a sort of Junior Wild Bunch. Using the Cassidy methods, they could see no reason why they should not be equally successful. It was not long after this that the Junior Gang picked the Bank of Meeker which was a part of J. W. Hugus & Co., a firm which operated a number of stores and banks in northwestern Colorado and southern Wyoming in the pioneer days.

Three of the gang rode into Meeker on that eventful Tuesday, October 13. Had they been less careless with their gunfire in the bank, they might well have been successful with their first attempted bank robbery. Those two shots fired by one of the robbers shortly after they entered the Hugus Store were heard outside the store, and it wasn't long before everyone up and down Main Street knew what was going on. Nearly every pioneer in those days kept a gun near at hand and these hardy citizens weren't long getting them ready for action. The two shots fired in the store sealed the robbers' fate. For a more complete account of what took place that eventful day in Meeker, we quote from the Meeker Herald files of October 17, 1896:

"Tuesday, October 13, 1896, will stand as a red letter day in Meeker's history. On that day three bank robbers and would-be murderers were sent to their final account. The work of the hold-ups showed evidence of amateurishness in many particulars, but the lightening-like promptness by which they were disposed of showed the citizens of Meeker know how to act and shoot."

It was close to the hour of three o' clock in the afternoon when two of the gang entered the Hugus Building by the Main Street entrance. It was later stated that the three had been in town much of the morning and had been seen around the Harp Livery Barn. One of the men turned to the left and approached the cashiers window of the bank, which is portioned off in the usual bank fashion, and separate from the large store room. The other man proceeded down the right aisle toward the center of the store and simultaneously with the entrance of the two, a third member (Shirley, the leader) entered by the rear side door and approached the center of the room unnoticed. At the time the two men entered from the front, Joe Rooney, clerk at the Meeker Hotel, was making a deposit and the robber Rover (later identified as George Law) quietly waited until Mr. Rooney got through. As he stepped to one side the robber stepped up to the window and poking his gun through the grass railing fired a shot close to the head of David Smith, the Assistant Cashier, who was busy making his entry, ordering Mr. Smith to throw up his hands. Mr. Smith was a little slow in obeying the order and another bullet whistled past his head. Those two shots aroused Mr. Moulton, the local manager of the Hugus Company, who with Mr. Booth and other clerks were all busily engaged waiting on customers. They looked up to find that they were covered by heavy revolvers held by Shirley, who had come in by the rear door.

While this scene was being instantly enacted near the center of the store room, the robber in front (who had kept his eye on Joe Rooney all the time) moved to the bank office door and tried to force it open. Failing in this, he turned to Mr. Rooney and marched him down to the center of the room, where the other two robbers had already corralled everybody in the store, ordering them to keep their hands up.

Jim Shirley, leader of the gang, then stepped up to Mr. Moulton, saying: "Here Mr. Cashier, we want you," and leading Mr. Moulton to the bank office, ordered it

opened, which was done. Shirley was followed to the office by Law, demanding of Mr. Moulton where the money was. Mr. Moulton nodded in the direction of the cash drawer saying, "Help yourself." Law produced an old sugar sack and dumped the contents of the cash drawer, while Shirley had Mr. Moulton and Mr. Smith covered with his revolver. The robbers then ordered Moulton and Smith out of the bank office and had them join the other employees and customers who were being herded by "The Kid," later identified as Pierce.

The next thing on the program was to secure all the rifles and ammunition in the store, which was being attended to by the leader, Jim Shirley. He filled the magazines of three rifles, and then proceeded to break and render useless the remaining guns found in the store. All this consumed about five minutes of time, but those five minutes were fateful ones for the robbers. Taken in connection with the two shots fired at the beginning of the affair, they sealed the fate of the hold-ups.

These two shots attracted the attention of Tom Shervin, of the Meeker Hotel, who ran down to the Hugus corner and seeing what was up gave the alarm. C. J. Duffey who was passing at the time "caught on" and ran up the street spreading the alarm to Simp Harp at the Livery Barn, Ben Nichols, the Town Marshall; while Phil Barnhart ran down the street spreading the alarm in that direction. In a matter of minutes the Main Street was guarded and a dozen unerring marksmen were awaiting the appearance of the robbers.

After securing the rifles and extra ammunition, the robbers started filing out the side door with their prisoners as shields in front of them. First came Shirley, the leader, pushing Joe Rooney ahead of him as a shield; then the other robbers with messengers Moulton, Smith, Booth, W.P. Herrick, Victor Dikeman and the one or two other customers who were in the store. They had no sooner reached the street when Shirley spotted W.H. Clark near the corner of Hugus Grain Warehouse, raised his gun and fired at him, hitting Mr. Clark in the right breast, about two inches to the right of the nipple. After this shot was fired, the robbers marched the prisoners down the street twenty-five or thirty feet to where their horses were hitched to the rear wheels of the Hugus wagons. Here Shirley and Law started to untie the horses while Pierce, "The Kid" kept watch over the crowd on whom he had his rifle leveled. But as Mr. Moulton said afterwards they were getting tired of holding their hands in the air and somebody broke and ran. Then they all ran for cover and "The Kid" opened fire, shooting promiscuously at the fleeing prisoners, hitting Victor Dikeman in the right arm, inflicting a painful but not dangerous wound. Mr. Booth was struck in the left leg and Mr. Herrick has a finger cut in the same way.

The scattering of the bank and store people was the signal for Meeker's citizens to get to work and in less time than it takes to tell it, Jim Shirley and Pierce, "the Kid", were on the ground. Shirley with a bullet hole through the left lung and "The Kid" shot through the heart. It was afterward found that five bullets had

penertrated the body of "The Kid" and he died instantly. Jim Shirley was game to the last and emptied his revolver while lying on the ground before he died.

George Law, seeing his pals drop, ran in the direction of the river, but he hadn't reached the Miller House corner before a bullet in the right lung and another in the left leg brought him to the ground. He lingered fore nearly an hour before giving up the ghost.

County Attorney Ryan and the Herald editor tried to get a statement from George Law before he died , but he was sinking fast and all that could be gotten out of him in almost inaudible tones, were the names of the gang, which he gave as Charles Jones, Billy Smith, "The Kid", and George Harris, but it was later found these were all fictitious names and that Jones was Jim Shirley; Harris was George Law, and "The Kid" was named Pierce. Shirley was about 45 years of age, Law about 35, and "The Kid" Pierce about 21.

The Corner's Jury was brief and the three bodies were turned over to Undertaker Niblock and buried in Highland Cemetery. Link Tagert made a fast ride to get Dr. French back to Meeker to treat the wounded, all of which recovered nicely.

It was found later in the week that the three bank robbers had ridden into Meeker by way of the Mesa and had cut all the fences planning to make their escape that way, then circle north and back to Brown's Park. Seventeen days later Mr. Sam Wear came across the robbers' hideout at the head of Three Mile Gulch, a tributary of Strawberry. There he found three head of horses, three rifles, and bedding. The horses had been tied up; one was already dead from starvation, another so weak he shot it, and the third in bad shape but it did live. The bank robbers no doubt had this as their first relay after leaving the hold-up and planned to have fresh horses when they reached this point.

A strange part of the story is that after the excitement was all over, the sack containing the money was found in the Hugus Store. Those who were "herded" out are confident one of the robbers carried the money; no one could remember carrying it back. But anyway, there it all was intact and ready for the resumption of business by the Bank of Meeker.

A few weeks after the hold-up, a man stopped at the A. E. Proctor ranch on Curtis Creek. He told Mr. Proctor he knew Pierce, "The Kid" was one of two men who held up the Meeker-Rifle Stage near 13 Mile a year before. George Law was a brother-in-law of Charlie Crouse, pioneer of Brown's Park. Several White River Valley stockmen knew or had heard of Jim Shirley who had worked for Simp Harp at one time and Mr. Harp said was a good cowboy. Ed Fiarfield also knew Shirley and was the one who identified him."

\*COMPLIED BY R. G. LYTTLE FOR THE RIO BLANCO COUNTY HISTORICAL SOCIETY, MAY 1965.\*

**THE WHITE RIVER MUSEUM**

## **565 Park, Meeker, Colorado**

The museum is housed in one of the original officers' quarters in the camp on the White River--now in Meeker--built by the U.S. Army, following the Meeker Massacre at the Indian Agency on the White River.

The museum is a folk-type museum, housing Indian artifacts, pictures, and other items related to the Agency, including the plow that was the match that fired the massacre, pictures, furniture, and clothing used by the early families that settled here and named their new town in honor of the murdered Indian agent, Nathan C. Meeker.

There are three other officers' quarters buildings in the museum block. Two of them are private homes but retain the original outward appearance. The third houses the mortuary and has been covered with asbestos shingles. The fourth was moved around the corner and has been extensively remodeled. It is a private home.

The White River Museum building is owned by Rio Blanco County. The county employs a full-time curator, Iva Kendall, and an assistant, Margaret Bloomfield. Members of the Rio Blanco County Historical Society, Inc., act as caretakers for the museum and assist in its operation and maintenance. The museum is open in the summer months 9:00 a.m. till 5:00 p.m. six days a week and Sundays by special arrangement. Winter hours are 10:00 a.m. till 4:00 p.m. Monday through Saturday.

## **THE MEEKER HOTEL**

In the year 1847, a girl was born in Laurens, South Carolina, who was in later life to be one of the outstanding pioneers in the development and settlement of the Great West. Her name was Susan C. Ball. She and her husband moved to the state of Mississippi and lived there until his death. Susan C. Wright then journeyed westward to live for a time in Kansas, Nebraska, and Wyoming. In the spring of 1883, Mrs. Wright heard of the White River Country. She placed her claim for a homestead in the Nine Mile area, just north of what was then the Government Military Reservation, which was established to aid the white settlers at the time of the Meeker Massacre in 1878.

In the late summer of 1883 the government started removing the soldiers from the Military Reservation; and with this evacuation the government buildings were auctioned off and bought at trifling prices. Mrs. Wright bought one of the adobe buildings in Block Number One and established the Meeker Hotel. It

was also to become the first saloon in Meeker. Mrs. Wright bought the bar from Hugas and Company for which she went in debt \$1,500. Susan C. Wright was one of the most picturesque characters and history builders of the early West. Her policy in the conduct of the hotel business was that no person, regardless of financial condition, should be turned away without food or shelter; and with the easy and free hospitality of the day, the Meeker Hotel became a landmark of the West.

In the early 1890's Reuban Sanford Ball, Susan's brother, came to assist his sister in the hotel business. Susan C. Wright died in March 1893, and willed all of her property to her brother. In 1904 Mr. Ball greatly modified the appearance of the hotel to accommodate the growing patronage.

It was said that no town of its size in the state had a hotel that would at all favorably compare with the Meeker Hotel. Today the outside appearance still remains much as it did in the early 1900's, a landmark and reminder of the Old West -- in 1980 being put on the National Registry of Historical Sights.