

Saguache Creek Valley

A.D. 635

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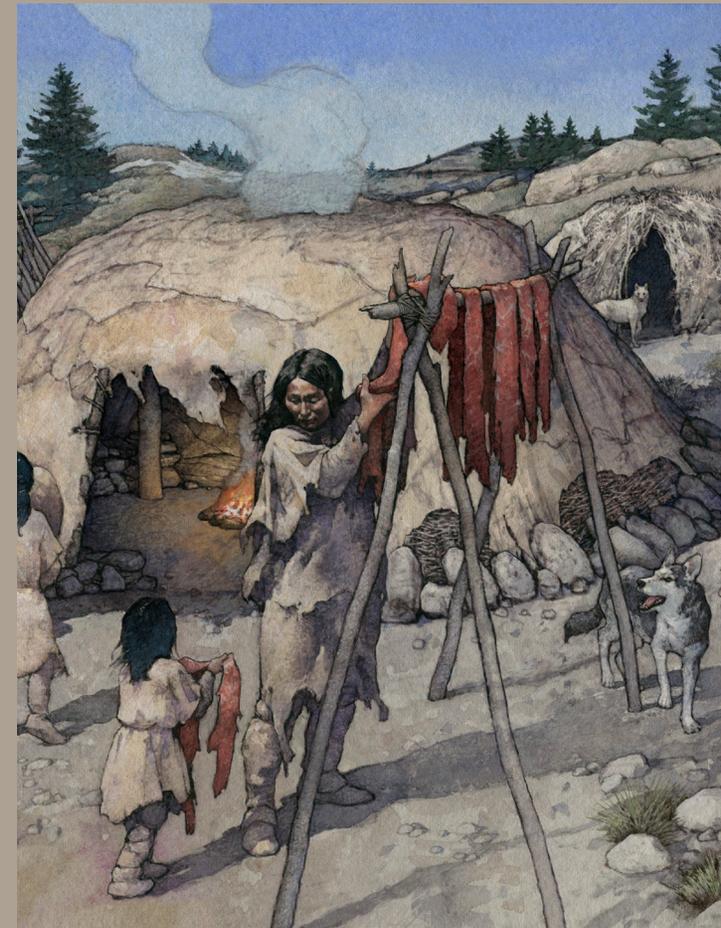
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The artist's reconstruction, as well as the information presented in this brochure and in the accompanying 10-minute video entitled "People of the High Mountain Valley: Native American Pathways and Place," is based on archaeological research carried out in the Saguache Creek valley. You can help preserve the history of Saguache Creek and the San Luis Valley by leaving archaeological sites undisturbed. To learn more about Colorado archaeology and historic preservation, visit History Colorado at www.historycolorado.org. To learn how to obtain a copy of the video, or a poster-size version of the artist's reconstruction, contact Paleocultural Research Group at www.paleocultural.org.



www.paleocultural.org

Illustration by Greg Harlin.
www.wrh-illustration.com



Interpretive Guide

This artist's reconstruction shows what life might have been like for the Native American families who lived along Saguache Creek nearly 1400 years ago.

Native Americans began making regular visits to Saguache Creek about 4000 years ago. Those early visitors came during the late summer or fall. They stayed only briefly, camping in rocky coulees close to the creek and hunting elk, deer, and prairie dogs on the wide floodplain and dry hillsides. When their packs were full, they returned to their families, bringing the mountains' bounty with them.

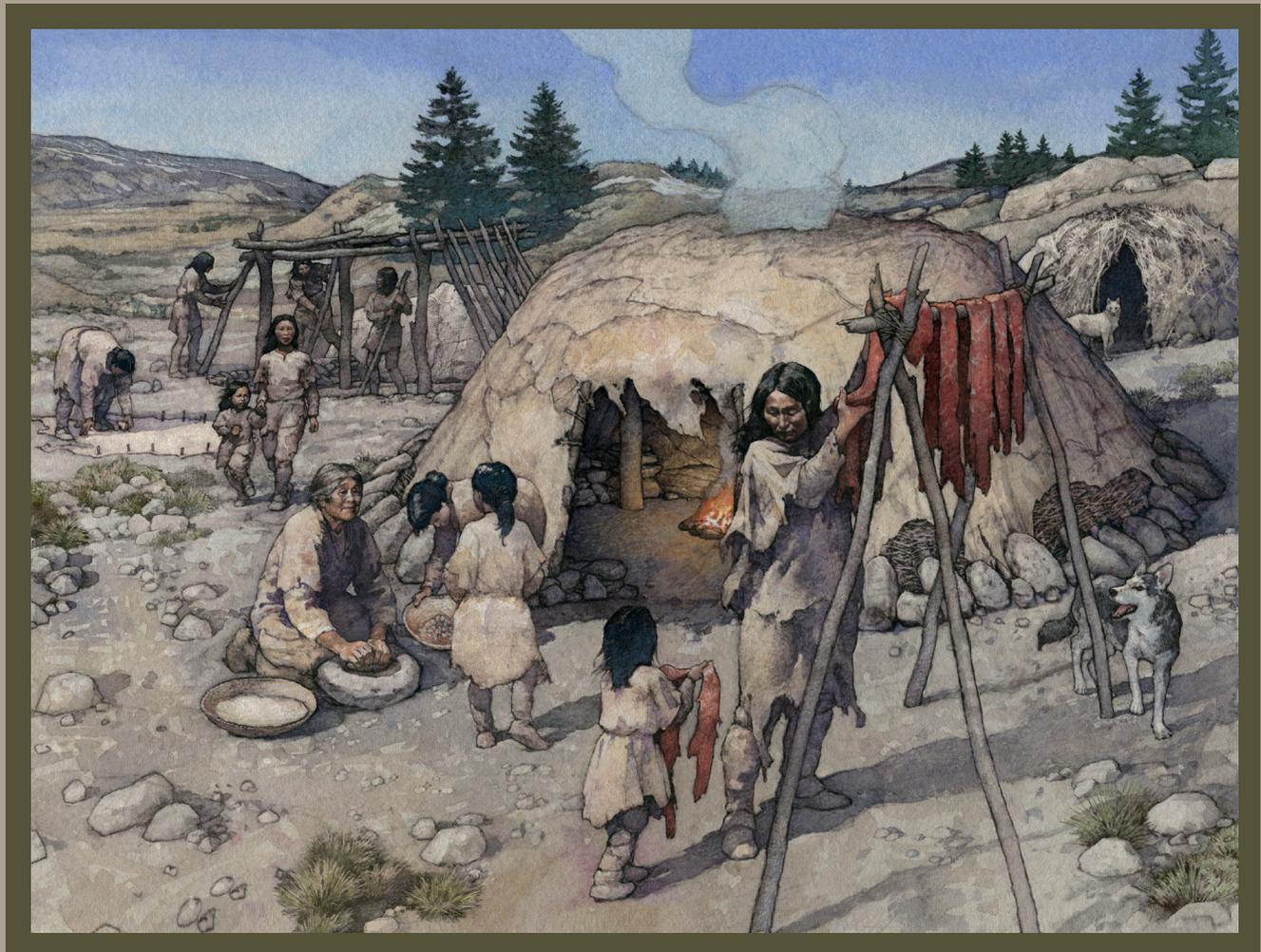
Periodic fall hunts continued until about 2500 years ago, when whole families began to stay in the valley until the snow fell in early winter. By about 1400 years ago, they were staying throughout the winter. To keep warm, they built stout timber lodges covered with willows and elk hides, as shown in the illustration. Their lodges faced the rising winter sun, harvesting its heat.

Men and women gathered edible plants on the floodplain and hunted animals in the nearby hills. They jerked meat, tanned hides, and ground seeds. Throughout the long winter they lived on the fall's stored harvest. Children learned all the skills they would need to thrive in this rugged landscape from their parents and grandparents.

In the spring, when green shoots began to appear on the floodplain and the days grew warmer, the families packed their gear to leave. Some families traveled west, over the divide at the head of the valley and into the high country beyond. Others went east, toward the broad valleys ringed by mountains. But many stayed near their winter homes, in the rolling hills and sage-covered parks. As they said their good-byes, the families knew that they would return in the fall, with a summer's worth of stories to tell.

What brought people back to this high mountain valley, year after year?

It held everything that hunting and gathering people needed to prosper. Raw materials to make the stone tools needed for hunting and tanning hides could be found throughout the nearby hills and mesas. Mule deer, elk, bison, and bighorn sheep were drawn to the ever-flowing creek. The Utes, who regularly visited the



valley in the 1700s and 1800s, called the creek that flows past the ancient houses “Coochumpah,” the River of Buffaloes.

Even during the coldest months the valley was a refuge for animals and the people who hunted them. The sheltering hills at the head of the valley blocked the cold winter winds that scoured the broad basins to the east and blocked the deep snow drifts that blanketed the mountains to the west. The native people who built the timber lodges knew that they could count on this landscape to sustain them through the winter. In some years the fall harvest filled their storage bins. In other years hunger stalked the camp. But through seasons

of lean and seasons of plenty this place remained dependable.

The valley was also an important travel corridor that linked the basins and plains to the east with the mountains and plateaus to the west. Ute bands regularly traveled through the valley, stopping briefly near the remains of the ancient timber lodges to gather pine bark and hunt deer. Fur trappers and traders on the Old Spanish Trail followed the Utes' paths into the valley.

Together, these factors—abundant resources, a mild climate, and interconnections to the wider world—made the Saguache Creek valley an attractive home to Native Americans for thousands of years.