

Coyote Valley: Deep History in the High Rockies, by Thomas G. Andrews

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Book Review

COYOTE VALLEY: DEEP HISTORY IN THE HIGH ROCKIES. By Thomas G. Andrews. Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, England: Harvard University Press, 2015. 331 pp. \$29.95 (hardcover). ISBN: 978-0-674-08857-3.

Thomas Andrews has written a compelling biography (deep history) of the Coyote Valley (“Kawuneeche” in Arapaho), which occupies the westernmost section of Rocky Mountain National Park. Flanked by mountains that soar to elevations more than 1000 meters above it, the Colorado River (known as the Grand River until 1921) meanders through the valley for more than 30 kilometers before emptying into Grand Lake.

In his introduction to this remarkable book, the author asks: “What if you were to take one small stretch of soil and explore the story of people and nature there over as long a span of time as the scientific and historical evidence would allow? What could you learn about that place—and what, in turn, could that tiny corner of the earth reveal about broader patterns of human–environment interaction across time and space?”

The book is divided into three main sections, each describing the groups of humans who have inhabited Kawuneeche: Native Peoples; Settlers; Feds. The intensely-researched narrative reveals a fascinating and dramatic chronology of actions and policies, some of which have resulted in unintended consequences.

The First People visited Coyote Valley roughly 13,000 years before present; but deserted it when the massive Colorado River Glacier, 450 m thick, started advancing. After the ice had retreated, some 9300 years ago, they returned. For many millennia, small family groups of Nuche (Utes) as they called themselves, occupied the valley in summer and early fall.

“The numerous sacred sites identified in and around the Kawuneeche remind us that even as the practitioners of the Mountain Tradition labored to

incorporate energy and nutrients from the valley’s ecosystems into their own bodies, they also took pains to honor, enlist and assuage the sacred powers that governed human interactions with other entities.”

For a remarkably long time, the Nuche were protected from the advance of Spanish explorers, European trappers, and American settlers, in part because of the Kawuneeche’s rugged isolation. Eventually, however, they were dispossessed of their land and forced onto reservations. The author describes the brutal process in the clear, compelling style that characterizes his writing.

In the 1870s, American miners began flocking to the valley, which was teeming with native fish and game such as deer, elk, and bighorn. Beavers were well on their way to making a comeback, having been over-trapped prior to the collapse of the fur trade in the 1840s.

Prospectors found neither gold nor silver. The mining town of Gaskill, which once had a population of 100, lasted 5 years: Lulu City, once home to 500 residents, lasted 6. On the heels of the miners came ranchers, farmers, homesteaders, and resort owners. They built fences for their livestock and replaced native grasses and willows with fields of non-native crops and hay.

In the early 1880s, entrepreneurs from Larimer and Weld Counties explored the high forests of the Coyote Valley in an attempt to locate possible sites for a reservoir at the head of the Cache la Poudre River. They were successful and staked out a route for an irrigation ditch that “would intercept several streams on the eastern flanks of the Never Summer Mountains and divert their waters into the Poudre River.” Eventually the Western Slope water would flow in what came to be called the “Grand Ditch.” It would then make its way down the Poudre Canyon, on the Eastern Slope, to irrigate farms and ranches near Greeley and Fort Collins.

In 1909, Enos Mills, a “quirky figure” and disciple of John Muir, stepped up his campaign to help

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create what would become Rocky Mountain National Park. He enlisted the help of James Grafton Rogers, president of the newly formed Colorado Mountain Club. In 1914, Rogers helped facilitate a remarkable event: Three Arapaho men (one a translator) from the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming took a pack trip through the proposed park. Oliver Toll recorded the names they recalled for various peaks, valleys and lakes. Many of these appeared on a map of the would-be park's boundaries in an attempt to make the area more appealing to prospective supporters in the U. S. House and Senate.

The only problem was that the Nuche (Utes)—not the Arapahos—had been the dominant native people to occupy the area under consideration. The author writes: “The leaders of the Colorado Mountain Club cared little that the valley that they successfully renamed the Kawuneeche lay beyond the westernmost fringe of the Arapaho homelands.” (There is good evidence, however, that counters this assumption about the CMC leaders.¹)

In January 1915, Rocky Mountain National Park was established on 93,000 hectares of what had previously been National Forest land. “Most Colorado newspapers applauded the wisdom of federal law-makers, with the *Rocky Mountain News* trumpeting the successful park bill as ‘the crowning result of one of the best organized and most efficiently managed campaigns ever conducted by Colorado people to obtain any benefit for the state.’”

In order to gain the support of Grand County

¹Information comes from Harriet Vaille Bouck's article, “Arapaho Hunting Grounds Revisited,” pp. 105–106, reprinted in the June 1965 issue of *Trail & Timberline*, and from Janet Robertson's book, *Magnificent Mountain Women; Adventures in the Colorado Rockies*, pp. 44–47 (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1990).

In 1914, James Grafton Rogers appointed Harriet Vaille (Bouck) to head the Colorado Mountain Club's Nomenclature Committee. Its mission was to find out the Native Americans' names for geographic features in the proposed national park.

After an unsuccessful research trip to the Newberry Library in Chicago, Vaille later wrote: “President Rogers asked Dr. Livingston Farrand, noted anthropologist, for guidance.... Dr. Farrand was then President of the University of Colorado and kindly met with the [Nomenclature] Committee. He advised them to try to get some northern Arapahos from the Wind River Reservation in Wyoming. Among possible Indian tribes, these had known the region best and longest.”

residents, compromises were agreed upon: One was that the Colorado River bottomlands and the Never Summer Mountains would be excluded from the park. But, the author states, “The real trouble with the democratic vision that led Mills, McFarland, Rogers and their allies to embrace compromise, then, was not that it cast the park as a sacred wilderness where human beings had no rightful place”...but, that it “emanated from the strategic decision made by the park's early advocates to place the desire of people and the demands of politics above the needs of the natural world.”

These policies included the suppression of wild fires, the introduction of non-native fish to the park's streams and lakes, and the killing of predators such as mountain lions, coyotes and bobcats (as well as grizzlies and gray wolves, which vanished from the area). With no natural prey, elk populations increased alarmingly.

In 1930, the park's boundaries were expanded to include the Never Summer Range (a translation of the Arapaho name) but only with the condition that the Grand Ditch be expanded and, completed, which it was. The Coyote Valley bottomlands were also added to the park, which set in motion the eventual purchase of homesteads and resorts such as the Holzwarth Ranch.

By 1936, what had started out as a 1.2-m-wide hand-dug ditch, had doubled in width and been transformed into “a massive plainly visible, man-made structure coursing through the heart of Rocky Mountain's west side....” Occasional breaches ripped out earth, creating dramatic scars that were highly visible from Trail Ridge road. Today an estimated 60% of the Kawuneeche's water is siphoned off to the Poudre River and carried down to the plains.

In 1978, moose, never native to Colorado, were introduced to North Park. Within a year, they'd made their way into the Kawuneeche, subjecting its willows to “unprecedented threats.” In addition, a combination of climate change and the low water table of the valley due to the Grand Ditch, enabled a fungus, carried by red-naped sapsuckers (birds), to destroy young willows.

“The timing of the beaver's decline in the Kawuneeche...shows that the beaver's plight was not by agricultural settlement, but instead by the unintended consequences of natural regulation.

Growing herds of elk and moose subjected willow and beaver to far more pressure than cattle, horses, and homesteaders ever had. Fred Packard found some 600 beavers populating the Colorado River headwaters in 1939 and even in the 1950s, when the valley's domesticated herds likely neared an all-time high....Today, though, not a single active colony remains in the protected lands of the Colorado headwaters."

COYOTE VALLEY does much more than describe a cautionary tale for Rocky Mountain National

Park. By merging human history with ecological history, the author has forged a template for books about valleys—or other geologic areas— all over the world.

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