



## Reading #2 The Fur Trade

### Unit 1 Lesson 2

The first U.S. citizen the Ute people met may have been James Purcell, a fur trapper from Kentucky who wandered into their lands in 1805. Fur trappers, mostly French, had been visiting Ute lands since the 1700s. By the 1820s, the Rocky Mountains were crawling with U.S. and Mexican fur trappers—and the fur trade had become an important part of the Ute economy.

In general, the Ute people got along well with the trappers, who shared their lifestyle—living off the land, moving constantly, following game (animals), and made good trade partners. The Ute people made regular visits to Fort Vasquez, Fort Davy Crockett, El Pueblo, and other fur posts, where they exchanged beaver pelts for tools, clothing, flour, gunpowder, and other supplies. They traded most often at Fort Uncompahgre, which fur-trade veteran Antoine Robidoux opened in the late 1820s on the Gunnison River, in the heart of Ute territory (today's Delta, Colorado). The Ute people also made occasional trips onto the eastern plains to visit Bent's Fort, the busiest marketplace\* on the Santa Fe Trail. Here they traded with merchants\* from the United States, Mexico, and half a dozen Indian tribes.

Because the trappers never tried to own the Utes' land, they generally received a warm welcome. The Ute people befriended such fur-trade legends as Kit Carson, Louis Vasquez, Jedediah Smith, and Old Bill Williams. The well-known trapper Jim Bridger wed a Ute wife - a wise business decision for trading with Ute bands. Until well into the 1840s, the fur trade remained a key part of the Ute economy.

\*marketplace: a place in a town where products are bought and sold

\*merchant: someone who buys and sells goods especially in large amounts

Source: This reading is excerpted, with permission, from *The Ute Indian Museum: A Capsule History and Guide*.

(Denver: History Colorado, 2009).

