

In eastern Utah, history revisited

Surveyors rededicate a marker from which the government drew boundaries for reservations.

—by Brandon Loomis

What a story a 4-inch bronze cap planted under the pavement of State Route 121 has to tell! From this spot, the U.S. government drew the boundaries of the 2-million-acre Uintah and Ouray Indian Reservation and later sold half the land to white settlers for \$1.25 an acre. So much of the Uintah Basin's bittersweet pioneer history emanated from this point five miles east of the farm village of Neola; a rededication ceremony in September brought this history to live again.

"I've struggled with what to say today," said Ute Historical Society member Larry Cesspooch before offering a rededication prayer of the marker, "because this is not a good thing for us [tribal members]. It's like showing you something that's always going to remind you of what happened. But we can't change the past. We can only move forward."

Before using a preserved eagle wing to waft smoke from a sweetgrass rope in the four directions during his inaudible prayer, Cesspooch said he would pray for cooperation among peoples for a better future. "You all have souls," he said. "Pray for the same thing."

In the 20th century, Utah paved Route 121 using the east-west line of the marker—officially known as the 1875 Uinta Special Meridian—because it already divided



Larry Cesspooch saying a prayer at the dedication of a historical marker commemorating an original survey marker about five miles east of Neola, Utah. [Rick Egan / *The Salt Lake Tribune*]



A marker for the initial point of the Uintah Special Meridian sits in the middle of Utah Highway 121. [Rick Egan / *The Salt Lake Tribune*]



properties. That's when some surveyor stuck a nail in the asphalt, marking the meridian below, and left it for posterity to ponder. And on Friday September 12, on a clear day that made it plain why the original surveyors started their work from a point on these brushy heights, in full view of the red bluffs miles distant, white and Indian Utahns alike commemorated a shared heritage.

About 100 members and guests of the Utah Council of Land Surveyors dedicated a roadside monument and placed a new brass cap on the actual meridian point through a new manhole in the westbound lane.

John Stahl of the surveyors Council's Salt Lake chapter was moved to tears by Cesspooch's words, explain-



Jerry Tapoof talks about finding the original marker when he was the age of his 6-year-old grandson Chris. The marker is on the land allotted to Tapoofs' family. [Rick Egan / The Salt Lake Tribune]

ing later his reverence for this single pinpoint on the Earth's crust—45 degrees, 25 minutes and 58.4 seconds latitude on the World Geodetic System [WGS84], 109 degrees, 56 minutes and 7.5 seconds longitude.

There were only 38 such meridians set in the 1800s for designating U.S. public lands; the only other in Utah is at the southeastern corner of Temple Square in Salt Lake City. Only six of the meridians were specifically pegged to survey Indian lands. Most of the others have historical monuments.

"This one just sort of slid into the past," Stahl said, until Council and U.S. Bureau of Land Management surveyors took an interest in digging it up. They did that this summer and erected a stone monument next to the road.

"Surveyors are crazy about the history of their craft," Stahl said. This was made evident by the dozens who giddily crowded the manhole Friday to hold out digital and cell phone cameras pointed straight into the hole at the new 4-inch bronze cap. The memory of an 1875 survey is especially poignant, Stahl said. Whereas today's practitioners carry satellite-guided locators, their 19th century counterparts hoisted chains and compasses across the desert in wagons.

Like others in Friday's crowd, he sheepishly confessed to hiking Utah's deserts for a glimpse of the old chiseled stones that mark quarter-mile intervals on public lands. "It's a treasure hunt," he said.

Others recounted the names of "iconic" federal surveyors who plotted the West's boundaries, and BLM surveyor Dan Webb beamed when he boasted of being the last to touch the old meridian marker—the one replaced at the site in 1953 and now buried three feet underground—before the surveyors capped it in concrete this summer and then affixed the new marker with epoxy on Friday.

But the meridian's darker history also weighed on Stahl as he researched the place this summer for language to place on the marker. He learned how President Teddy Roosevelt took from the tribes half of what President Abe Lincoln had given in the original two million-acre reservation. With a push from Congress, the president in 1905 declared that the surveyors who delineated for every tribal

family 160 acres plus 40 for each individual member had given enough. After carving out additional lands for tribal grazing and forest commons, the government opened the rest to white settlement.

He choked up as he recounted the history, but the plaques he helped write for the monument carry no hint of the emotion. "You don't need the emotion in it," he said. "You can see it in the facts."

To Cesspooch, the history of family land allotments on the reservation is a mixed one. Before his ancestors agreed to settle here in the 1860s, they "knew no boundaries." It's a mind-set that in some ways survives. "We just use the land for a short time in our lives," he said, "and then we move on."

But in economic terms, the allotments have helped sustain families. The Uintah Basin is oil and gas country, and Cesspooch is an heir to a number of plots with valuable mineral rights. In boom times, it has meant \$500 a month to him. These days it's more like \$50, and he's looking for a job.

The monument itself is on the allotment of the Tapoof family. That family donated the space for a highway pull-out at the stone monument. Like the plaques, Jerry Tapoof purposely avoided emotionally charged language when he addressed the crowd Friday. It was a moment for all Utahns, regardless of their skin color, he said. "We have to come together as human beings," he said.

Tapoof recalled wondering about the old marker before it was paved over. Later he read about its purpose and considered it an honor to help commemorate the area's history.

His sister, Marlene Tapoof, said she hadn't learned the marker's meaning until a few weeks ago—when surveyors descended on the reservation and started building a monument where the old meridian was. She is pleased with the result. "I'll come down and read it now and then," she said.

Bountiful-based surveyor Joe Richardson grew up in Vernal after his grandparents homesteaded in the Uintah Basin in the late 1800s. His father ran a service station, and Ute landholders used to bring their royalty checks to him because they trusted him. Asked how he felt about the historic selling off of reservation lands, Richardson chose to look ahead.

"It's not just who can do the most with what they grab first," he said, "but how can we work together as a society."

He's a surveyor, though, and the kind of a guy who refers to his phone number as his "contact data" when he's giving it to you. So that old nail in the road, and the cap three feet below, are hallowed marks of precision that have their own almost biblical grip on him. "Getting coordinates right is central to a just society," Richardson said, and "this is where that trust begins in this particular arid valley. "The right to own land as a private individual is right up there with the right to practice your religion," he remarked.