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A nomadic plumber found mysterious stones on his land — so he became the first person to return land to the Ute Indian Tribe

“It was a dream I couldn’t hold onto”



Aaron Ontiveroz, The Denver Post

Rich Snyder is a plumber who bought a remote piece of land in Costilla County in southern Colorado. Upon discovering Ute artifacts, he gave up the land and his cabin to the Ute Tribe. He is the first land donor in a campaign by the tribe to seek new rights and establish a new presence in their ancestral Colorado lands. Snyder posed for a portrait at Red Rocks on Monday, Aug. 5, 2019.

By **ANDREW KENNEY** | The Denver Post
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On the internet, the property seemed perfect: a few acres on a mesa in southern Colorado for \$3,000 — and Rich Snyder had just about \$3,000.

“I’m from Iowa, and the farmland goes for about \$10,000 an acre anywhere,” the 42-year-old bachelor recalled recently. “I didn’t even look at the land, I was just so excited about it — I called her up.”

But as he would soon discover, this wasn't Iowa.

Snyder's purchase in 2015 of a piece of desert near the New Mexico border would put him face to face with rattlesnakes, artifacts and haunting dreams. It was a purchase that would result in the loss of most of his worldly possessions — and lead him into the arms of a people he'd never met.

This is the story of how Rich Snyder, a plumber and artist with a semi-nomadic lifestyle, came to reckon with America's sins and reparations. Though he didn't know it then, he would soon become one of the only people in the United States to pay reparations in land, an idea with growing popularity among indigenous scholars.

A wanderer in the West

For 20 years, Snyder had been a wanderer. The second-youngest of six children in a blended family, he grew up a thoroughly average kid in Sioux City.

"I always did just enough to keep my parents happy," he said.

By 2015, he had figured out a living, staying at friends' places and building up hide-holes across the West. In recent years, he found a new sideline: sculpting metal trees from leftover copper and selling them at [Roy's Last Shot](#), a restaurant and inn in Denver's foothills.

So, as it happened, he had cash in his pocket when he spotted an advertisement for a property some four hours south. The listing was nothing unusual among the thousands of acres that are routinely listed for sale in the West's far reaches: 2.51 acres on Wild Horse Mesa, also known as San Pedro Mesa, a great berm of earth above the San Luis Valley.

"It's stunning up there," said Char Pruett, the land broker who listed the property. But the lot didn't stand out in her memory — she has sold plenty of land to retirees and drifters looking for an off-grid life in southern Colorado.

San Luis, in its wind-swept vastness, is one of the last frontiers of America life. Crisscrossed by half-marked roads and largely lacking in utilities, the land "is not free but it is cheap — some of the cheapest in the United States," as Ted Conover [wrote in Harper's this year](#), describing the isolated modern homesteaders of the valley.

Pruett's website hinted at the desert majesty of the place.

It mentioned herds of wild mustangs and showed great sage plains, sand-blasted street signs and, fatefully, the distant hump of Ute Mountain.

Snyder gave little thought to how he'd survive on the haunches of a desolate mesa.

It was a chance to own something, a break from other people's houses. It would be a place to make his art and listen to Jimi Hendrix on his eight-track player. For Snyder, who resembles John Hickenlooper with his pale blue eyes and high cheekbones, life in the American West has grown lonelier these past few years.

"On the margin — you hit it right on the head," he says of his life. He "sees rents going up" while "my wage stays the same."

"Whose land was this?"

A few weeks after buying the land, Snyder made the half-day drive to see it. He found eight sleeping horses and little else. The land — once part of a sprawling ranch — was parceled out along sandy roads in the shape of a typical subdivision, but most of the hundreds of neighboring properties were empty.

"There's no fences out here. There's no signs that say, 'No trespassing,'" he said. "It's just open desert with nice, sandy roads cut in."

On that first day, he had his first premonition that this land would not be his. After falling into an afternoon nap, he dreamed that his tent was gone and indigenous children were touching his skin. He snapped awake, packed his truck and left for a hotel.

"I didn't really think of it as haunted," he recalled. "I was just thinking I had a weird dream. It's sort of lonely, out there, in the middle of nowhere."

Eventually, he returned.

On his second visit he found strange arrangements of stones forming several fireplaces and branching chimneys along the hillside, he said. But the dream didn't return, and so he stayed. Eventually, his brother and father arrived to help him build a small cabin equipped with solar panels.

But as he stumbled upon more seeming artifacts, the questions mounted in his mind. There was a stone ax, he said, and a rock table that he believes was used for skinning and butchering animals. He figures that roadwork above his property changed the land's drainage, washing out sand and revealing the artifacts.

"Then I started (wondering) — who owns this land?" he said. "Whose land was this?"



Rich Snyder on his former land in southern Colorado.
(Courtesy Robert Lucero)

A millennium in the valley

Human history in the San Luis Valley extends an estimated 12,000 years, since the last ice age, based on the discovery of ancient spear points and other artifacts.

In the most recent millennium, the evidence shows that the Ute people traveled between hunting and gathering lands in families and larger groups. Archaeological evidence places them in the San Luis Valley by 1100 A.D., according to a U.S. government history, while Ute ancestral history says they have lived in Colorado since time immemorial.

Spanish conquerors arrived in the 1500s, and centuries later the United States would take much of the valley from Mexico in the wake of the Mexican-American War. As white settlers arrived in large numbers, they forced the relocation of the Ute people into the reservations of southwestern Colorado and Utah — reservations that were later whittled down as minerals were discovered.

Since then, the Ute people have recovered only shadows of the land where they lived, including rights to [hunt and fish](#) in the Brunot area.

Emailing the Utes

Snyder lived on his land intermittently for three years. He came to love the meteors flashing above and the wind across the valley. But he grew exhausted: The property was lousy with rattlesnakes, and Snyder had two dogs. And, driven on by his discoveries, he couldn't shake his sense of the land's history, that it shouldn't belong to him.

"It was a dream I couldn't hold on to," he said.

In mid-2018, he went to utetribes.com, the homepage of the Ute Indian Tribe of the Uintah and Ouray reservation in Utah.

Snyder wrote a simple email, reading in part: "Would love to have the land checked out and give it to your people ... it has given peace to me to be there."

The response came shortly from Robert Lucero. He's not of Ute ancestry himself, but he founded the tribe's new Ute Land Trust, which aims to reconnect the tribe with their ancestral lands across the West.

Lucero already was remarkably successful in that role. A California woman gave the tribe \$250,000, describing it as "[returning what was stolen](#)" from her family's homesteading profits on former Ute land near Craig in Colorado. The tribe also [recently purchased](#) 1,150 acres near the Utah reservation, and Denver's East Colfax Neighborhood Association also has paid several hundred dollars in reparations to the group.

It's part of a larger movement among the First Nations to re-establish the rights of indigenous people to ancestral lands.

"This is a whole, incredible movement, I think, that is going on in many tribes," said Daniel Wildcat, a professor at Haskell Indian Nations University in Lawrence, Kan., and a Yuchi member of the Muscogee Nation of Oklahoma. "We're not talking about real estate. We're talking about something more fundamental in terms of indigenous worldviews and tradition."

He has argued in [The Washington Post](#) that reparations to indigenous people should focus on land, not just money, and he points to the Great Sioux Nation's refusal of [more than \\$1 billion](#) from the federal government. The U.S. Supreme Court ordered the financial settlement over Sioux claims that the U.S. illegally seized the Black Hills in

South Dakota.

Until Rich Snyder came along, though, no one in recent memory had offered the Utes land.

“It was moving. It was moving and questionable, I guess. Why would someone want to give back their land, that they own, to the Ute tribe?” said Edred Secakuku, a member of the Ute Indian Tribe’s Business Committee, the tribe’s elected governing body. “With everything in our history, we learn not to trust, we’re always on the defense, and that’s just natural for us.”

But when Robert Lucero visited the land, he found that the unlikely offer was legitimate.

Lucero didn’t have the expertise to date the artifacts on the land but, by the end of his short visit, Snyder had handed over the keys to the cabin. Snyder deeded the property to the Ute Indian Tribe in September 2018, followed by another property he had purchased on the same road.

The San Luis Valley is more closely affiliated historically with the Southern Ute Indian Tribe, which is based today in southern Colorado, than the Ute Indian Tribe of Utah, which took possession of the land. Those questions will be settled as the land trust continues its work, Lucero said.

“They’re probably as happy as me now”

Snyder estimates that he sacrificed \$5,000 worth of material and \$4,500 worth of land between the two parcels. And his bank accounts were empty, he said.

“I still had my Subaru. It was a 2001 Forester, and it’s still running. And my dogs. And just a little cabin up in Wondervu that a guy in Texas was renting to me,” he explained. “I couldn’t even actually pay rent. It was a loss, for sure.”

Lucero saw that the reparation would hurt Snyder, but he honored his request.

“What I detected in him when I first met him, was that he is an individual who is independent, who is very strong to what he believes — and he makes by with what he has,” Secakuku said.

Small though it was, the exchange of land symbolized something greater.

"Our ancestors are there," Secakuku said of the Utes' ancestral lands. "Their spirits are still there. Their history is still there. Our medicine, our songs are still there, in the way we believe."

Lucero plans to expand the Ute Land Trust in the coming months, including through events in Denver and Aspen, which once was called Ute City. The tribe isn't using Snyder's former land yet, but it could one day become a place for members to visit and stay.

A year later, Snyder's finances are only starting to recover, and he has returned living part time in Iowa. But he found something he sought: a sense of connection in the vast West. Members of the Ute tribe brought him on stage last year at the National Congress of American Indians in Denver, where he was wrapped in a ceremonial blanket and asked to speak to the crowd. Later, he was given a huge buffalo fur at the Bear Dance on the Uintah & Ouray Reservation.

"I never felt energy like that in my life. I never did anything that good in my life," he said. " ...The day someone finishes paying off their 30-year mortgage, they're probably as happy as me now."

Sometimes, though, he still browses property listings on the mesa. The land has its draw. Perhaps, he thinks, he could still have a place.

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