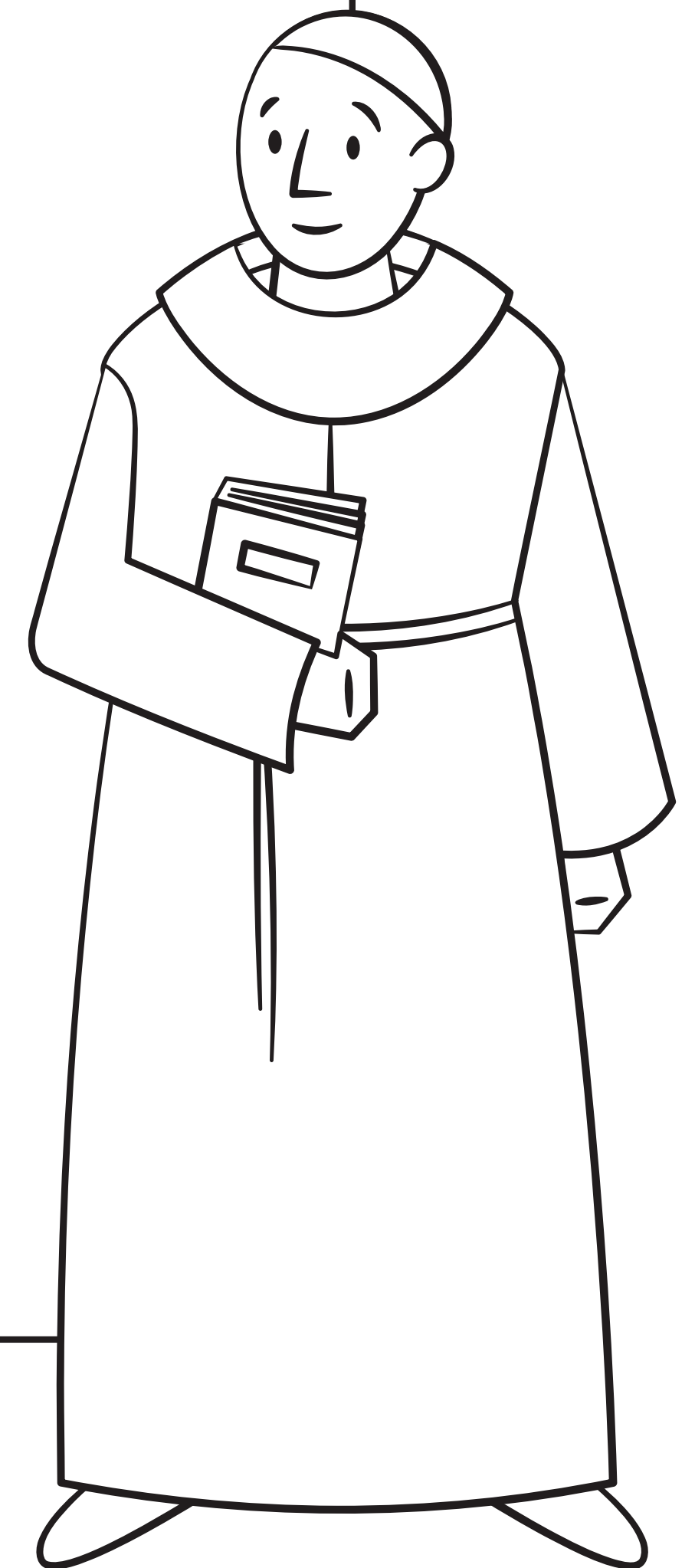




# The Adventure of friars Domínguez and Escalante

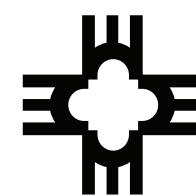
By Emily Soderborg  
Illustrations by Jenny Duff



AMERICA  UTAH

 Utah  
Historical Society

BYU  PARTNERSHIP



October 2025



**A** long, long time ago — in July of 1776 — two Catholic friars set off from Santa Fe, New Mexico, on a great adventure. They wanted to find a path to the new missions in faraway Monterey, California.

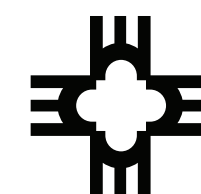
Father Francisco Atanasio Domínguez was from Mexico City. Father Silvestre Vélez de Escalante was from Spain. Each of them had come a long way from their homes to work in the mission towns of New Mexico.

---

A friar is a man in the Catholic Church who has a specific role. The name "friar" comes from the word "brother" in French, and they are known to be good brothers to everyone. They dedicate their lives to helping people, especially those who are poor or sick.

---

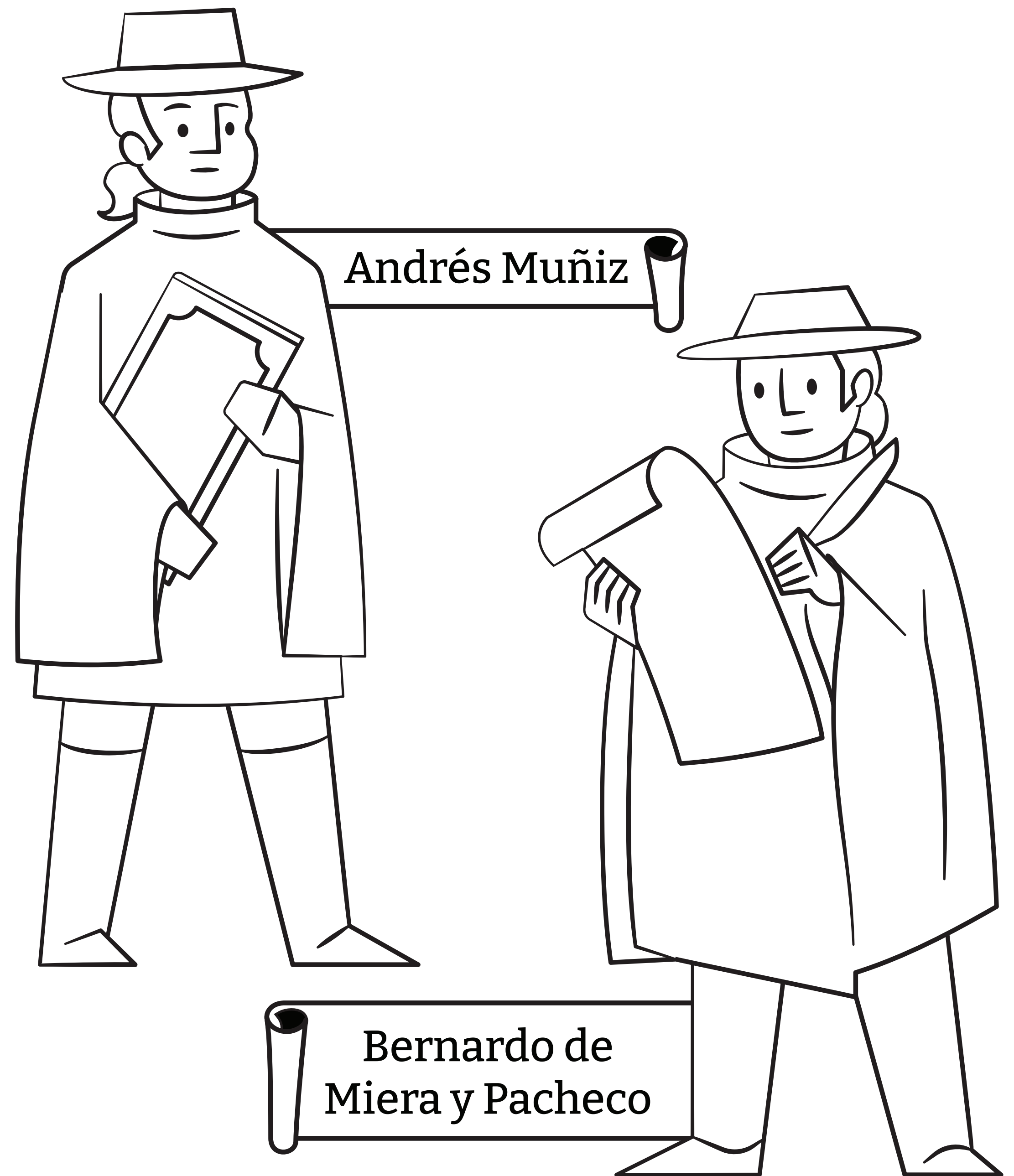
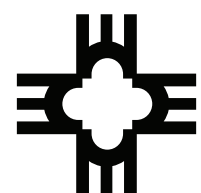
Fathers Domínguez and Escalante also wanted to share their religion with Native American people they met on their journey.

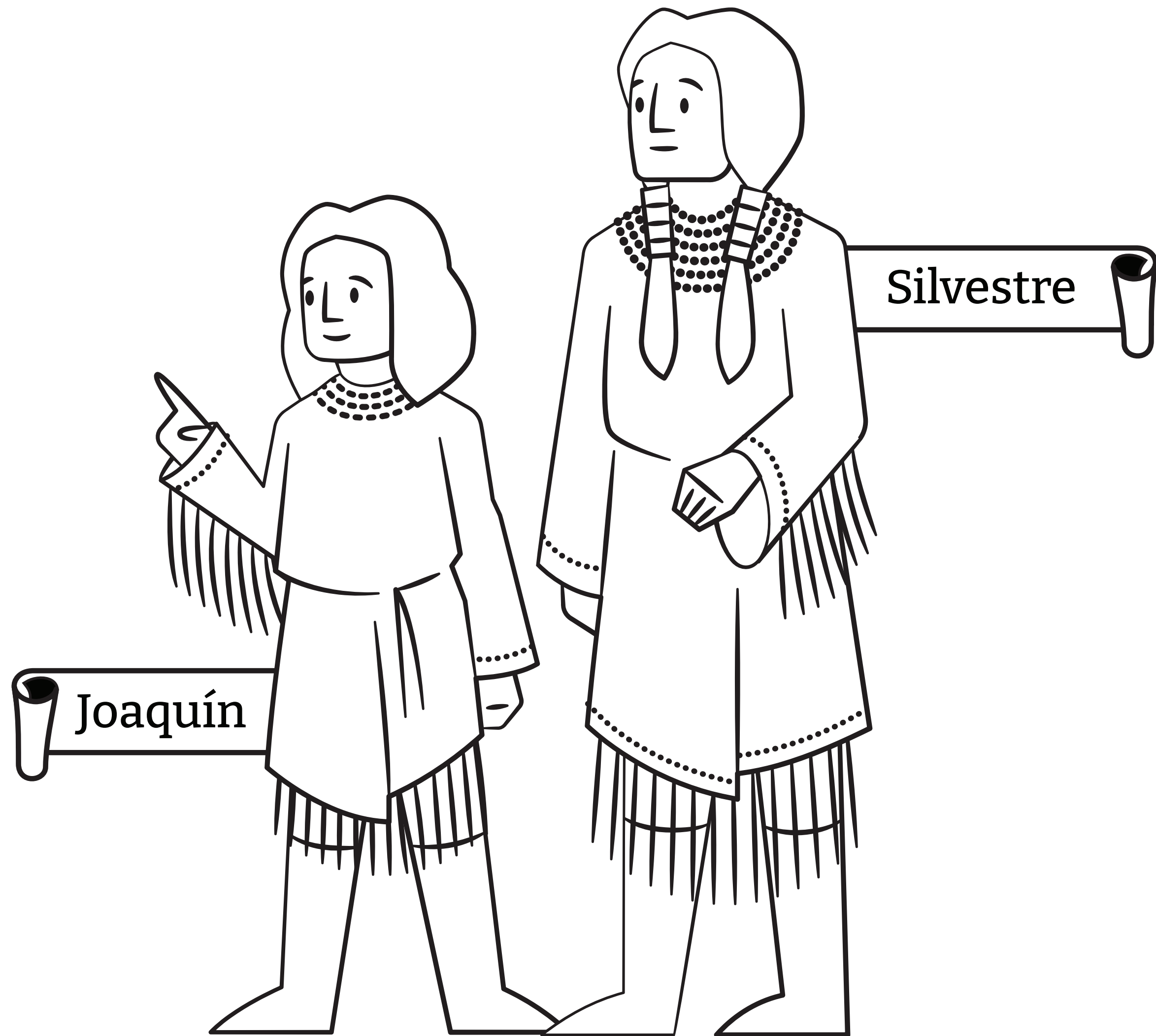


**D**omínguez and Escalante gathered a group of men with different skills to join the expedition. One was a mapmaker from Spain named Bernardo de Miera y Pacheco. A man named Andrés Muñiz was a translator who could speak the Spanish and Ute languages. He was from New Mexico.

They gathered supplies: food and clothing for themselves, blankets, beads, and knives to trade with the people they would meet on their journey.

They traveled north out of New Mexico into what we now call Western Colorado.

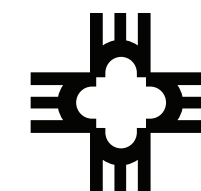




On the first day of September, they met a large community of Sabuagana Utes.

The friars asked if someone could join the expedition to help them find their way through the Utes' homelands (we now call this area Colorado and Utah).

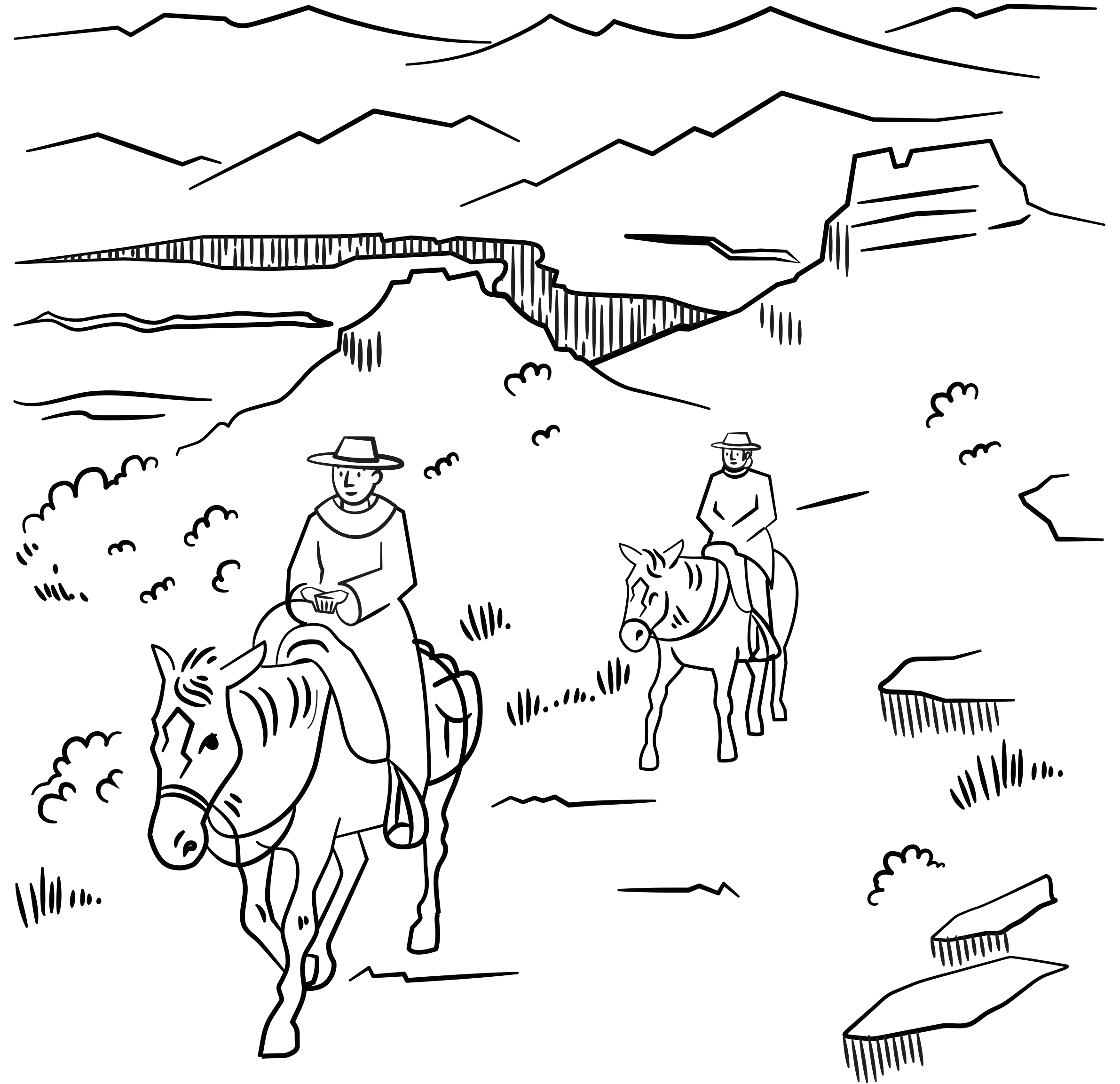
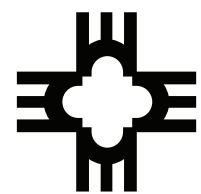
Two Timpanogos Utes who were living in the village agreed to guide them to the place they were from. It was many days' journey to the west, near a big lake. The friars gave their Ute guides Spanish names: Silvestre and Joaquín. Silvestre knew the way. Joaquín was only 12 years old.



The men rode on horses. A pack train of donkeys and mules carried their supplies. They traveled through high mountains, deep canyons, and dry deserts. Some days, they rode more than twenty miles.

Some parts of the land were hard to cross. The group followed Native American trails, which were very different from the roads the friars were used to. They squeezed through narrow canyons, hiked up steep ridges, and pushed through chokecherry and scrub oak bushes, and closely grown poplar trees.

Sometimes, their Ute guides went faster than the rest of the group, making it hard for the others to keep up. The travelers got many scrapes and bruises. Their horses and pack animals grew tired. Everyone worked hard to keep the expedition moving.



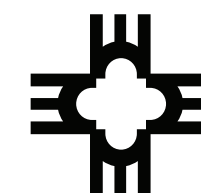




Every day, Father Escalante wrote in his journal about the lands they traveled through. They saw sparkling springs, wide open spaces, deep forests, and mighty mountains. They looked for places where there was clean water and plentiful grass for their animals to eat and drink.

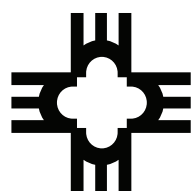
On the day they entered what is now Utah, they hunted a bison to provide food for their group. The next day, they crossed a big river called the Seedskadee. The friars named it San Buenaventura, which means “good luck” in Spanish. Today we call it the Green River.

They could see the Uinta Mountains on the northern skyline, pointing toward the west.



On September 23, 1776, the expedition came out of the mountains into a beautiful valley with a large, clear lake. This was the home of the Timpanogos Utes. The lake was named Timpanogo. Today, we call it Utah Lake. The place where the explorers entered the valley is now called Spanish Fork, and the valley is now called Utah Valley.

Father Escalante was impressed by the valley of the Timpanogos. The people lived in many villages around the lake and along the four rivers that flowed into it. They were expert fishermen, who were known across Ute country as the Fish Eaters. The wetlands around the lake and rivers created a wealth of food. Along with fish, there were water fowl, rabbits, deer, roots, berries, fruits, nuts, and seeds, such as flax and hemp.

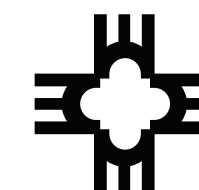




When they arrived in the valley of the Timpanogos, the explorers saw smoke signals rising into the sky. The people were spreading the news of their coming.

At first, some Timpanogos men came out with weapons, worried that the visitors might do them harm. But Silvestre, the Ute guide, had led the expedition from Colorado to his own homeland. When he spoke to the Timpanogos in their language, they put away their weapons.

People came from all of the villages to see the newcomers, who looked so different from Native Americans in their appearance and dress. The friars were eager to talk with the Utes. They stayed in Utah Valley for four days.

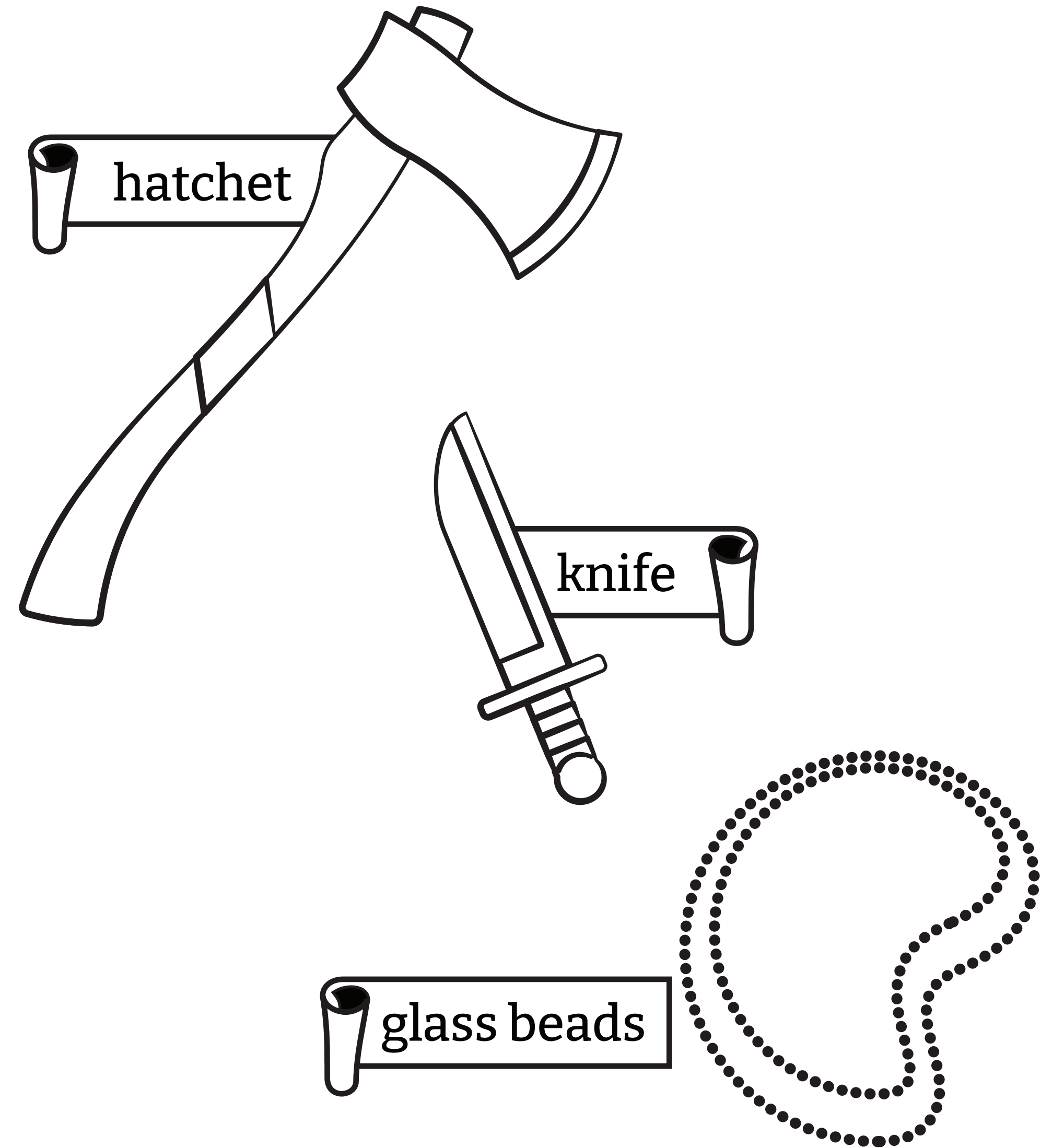
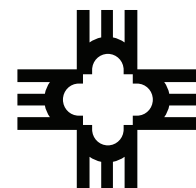




**S**ilvestre told the Utes about the friars' goal to find a route to California, and how they practiced peace with the Native Americans they met. The friars gave the Utes gifts — glass beads, a knife, and a shiny metal hatchet. They needed food to continue their journey, and the Utes gave them dried fish.

The friars said that they would like to return to Utah Valley one day to live among the Utes and teach them about their religion. The Utes invited them to return soon.

Joaquín wanted to go along with the friars to California. Silvestre wanted to stay with the Timpanogos. So the friars convinced another Ute, whom they named José María, to guide them.

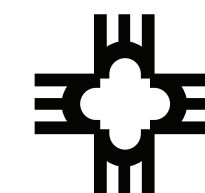




The group left Utah Valley and headed south through what we now call Juab Valley. As they went, they met many Native Americans, different from the Timpanogos people.

The Native men in this area had beards. They met a very old man who was kind and wise. He had such a long and full beard that he reminded the friars of an ancient hermit. The old man told the friars how to find the nearest river — the one we now call the Sevier River.

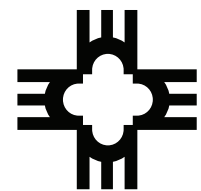
On the last day of September, twenty Native American men came to meet the travelers. They wore blankets made of rabbit fur, and some wore tiny, polished bone jewelry in their pierced noses. Father Escalante was very interested in the type of clothing and jewelry the men wore, and wrote about it in his journal.



**f**all had arrived, and the explorers hoped to make their way to California before winter. They walked many miles each day, and for a while the weather was very hot.

The group walked across two deserts, where there was no fresh water to drink. One time they thought they saw a lake, but their eyes tricked them. It was a salt flat. Another time, they found wetlands. But the water in them was salty and made the horses sick. Their thirsty horses ran away in the night. The next day, they had to go find the horses before they could continue their journey.

The travelers were tired and grumpy. They began to argue and fight. On October 5, their guide, José María, left the group and went back toward his home. He didn't like how mean they were being to each other. Now the only Ute in the group was 12-year-old Joaquín.

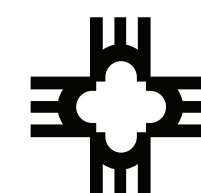




Later that day, it began to snow. It snowed all night and all the next day. Snow covered the Mineral Mountains and the desert below. The travelers were cold and wet. They had no wood to make a fire for warmth. The ground was snowy and soggy, and the animals' feet sunk in the mud. They had to wait another cold, wet day before they could travel again.

The travelers worried about what to do. Some wanted to keep going to California. Others said they couldn't go west across the desert without water. Some feared they would get stuck without food all winter. They couldn't agree.

They talked and argued as they traveled south. On October 11, Father Domínguez convinced them to stay together for safety and make their way back to Santa Fe. They were near the place we call Cedar City today.

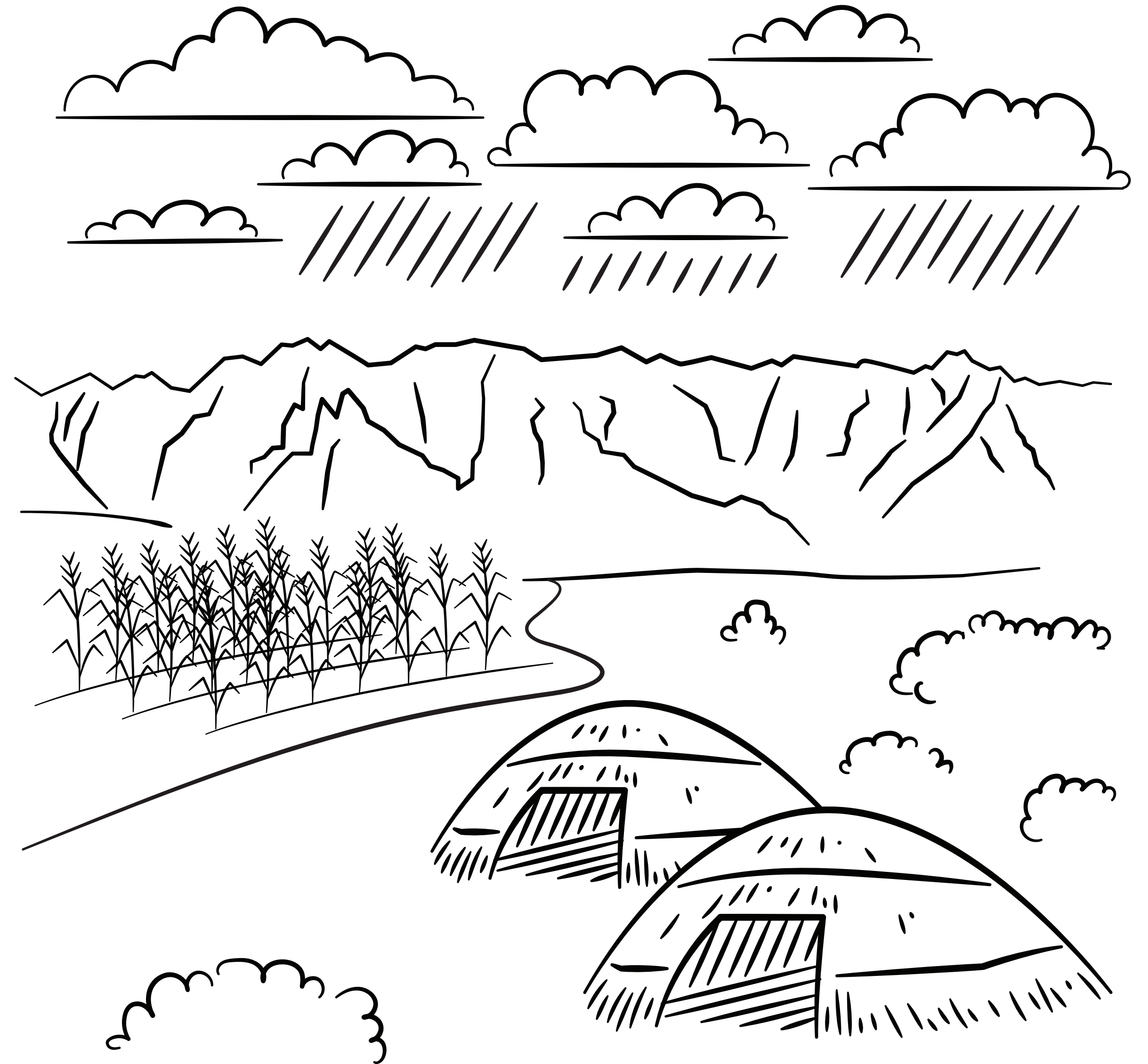
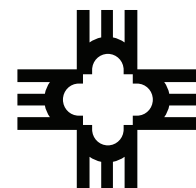


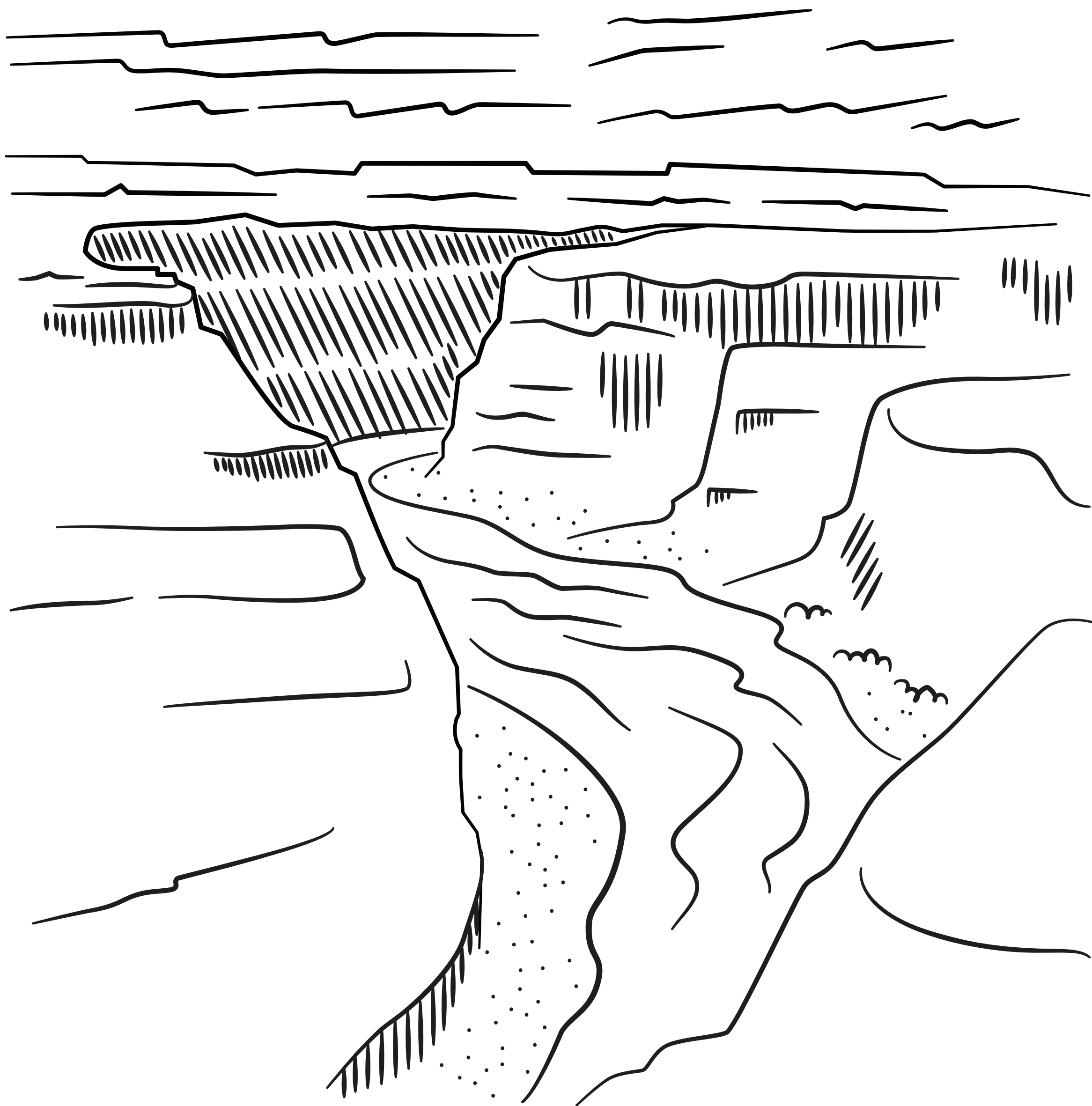


A few days later, they came to a Shivwits Paiute village with fields of maize (corn) and squash. They saw that the Shivwits were skilled farmers, who irrigated their fields and took good care of their crops. The friars were excited to find foods that were familiar. They hadn't seen corn since they left New Mexico, so it felt like they were getting closer to home.

But they still had a long way to go. The explorers had to find their way through the rocky canyons without a Native guide who knew the country. They were searching for the Colorado River.

The weather was often cold and stormy. The expedition ran out of food. One morning, all they had left to eat were two little pieces of chocolate! In order to survive, they had to eat some of their horses.

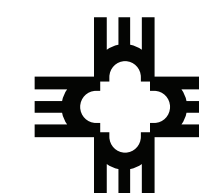




On October 26, they reached the Colorado River. It wound its way through a maze of red rock cliffs and canyons. Father Escalante wrote: “We were surrounded on all sides by mesas and big hogbacks impossible to climb.” The river here was too deep and fast to safely cross. They named this spot San Benito de Salsipuedes, which meant “get out if you can.”

For almost two weeks, they searched the canyons to find a place where they and their animals could ford the mighty river. They found a place where the river was wide and shallow. They had to climb down the canyon walls to reach the river’s banks. The cliff was too steep for the mules, donkeys, and horses, so they carved steps in the red sandstone for their animals to walk down.

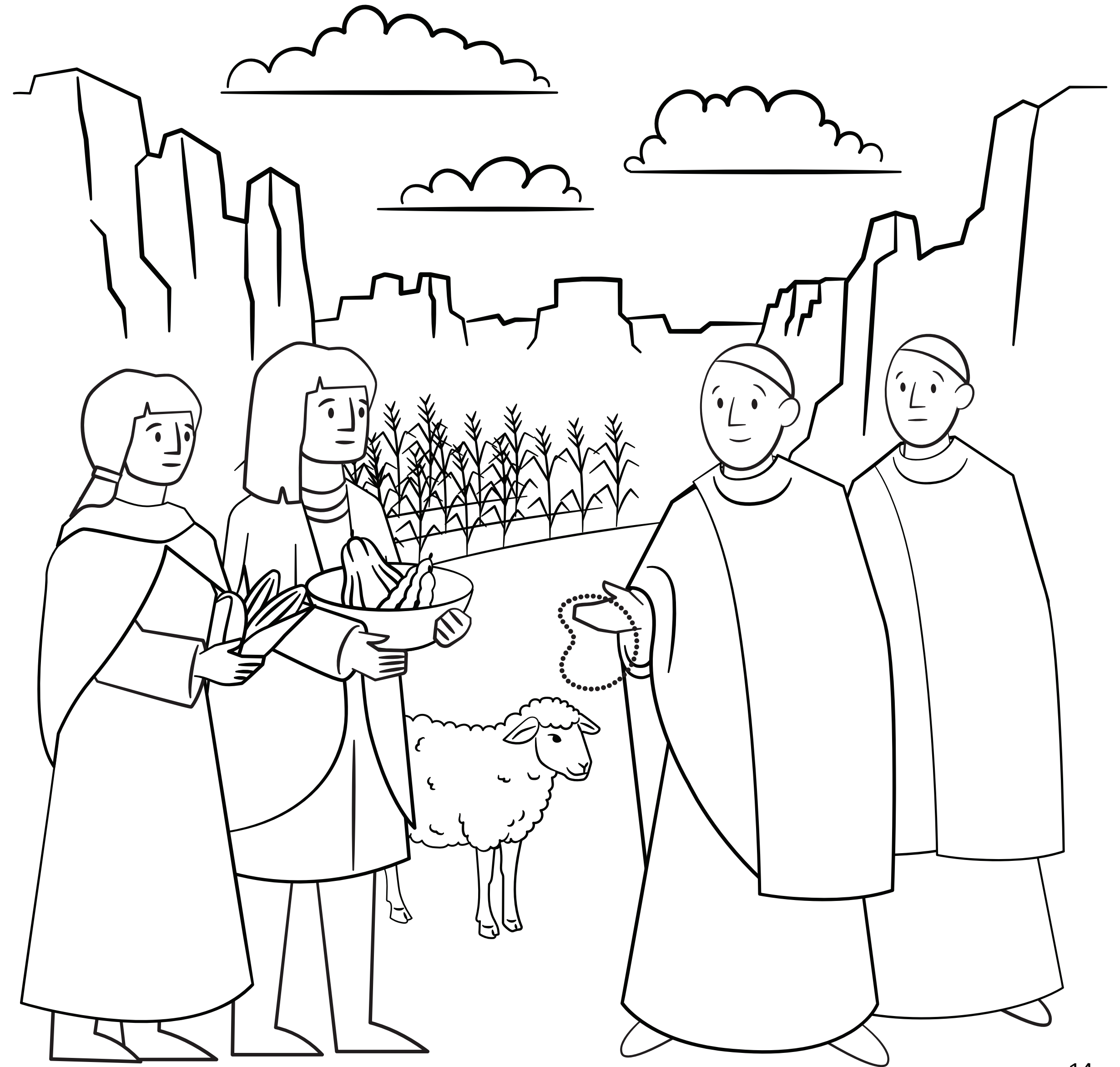
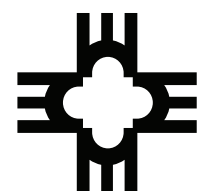
On November 7, they crossed the Colorado River. This place is now called Crossing of the Fathers. Today, it is covered by the waters of Lake Powell.



On the south side of the Colorado River, many of the Native peoples were farmers. Havasupai, Hopi and Pueblo peoples grew maize, squash, beans, and melons. They raised sheep and other animals. The explorers traded for food with Native villages as they made their way across Arizona and into New Mexico.

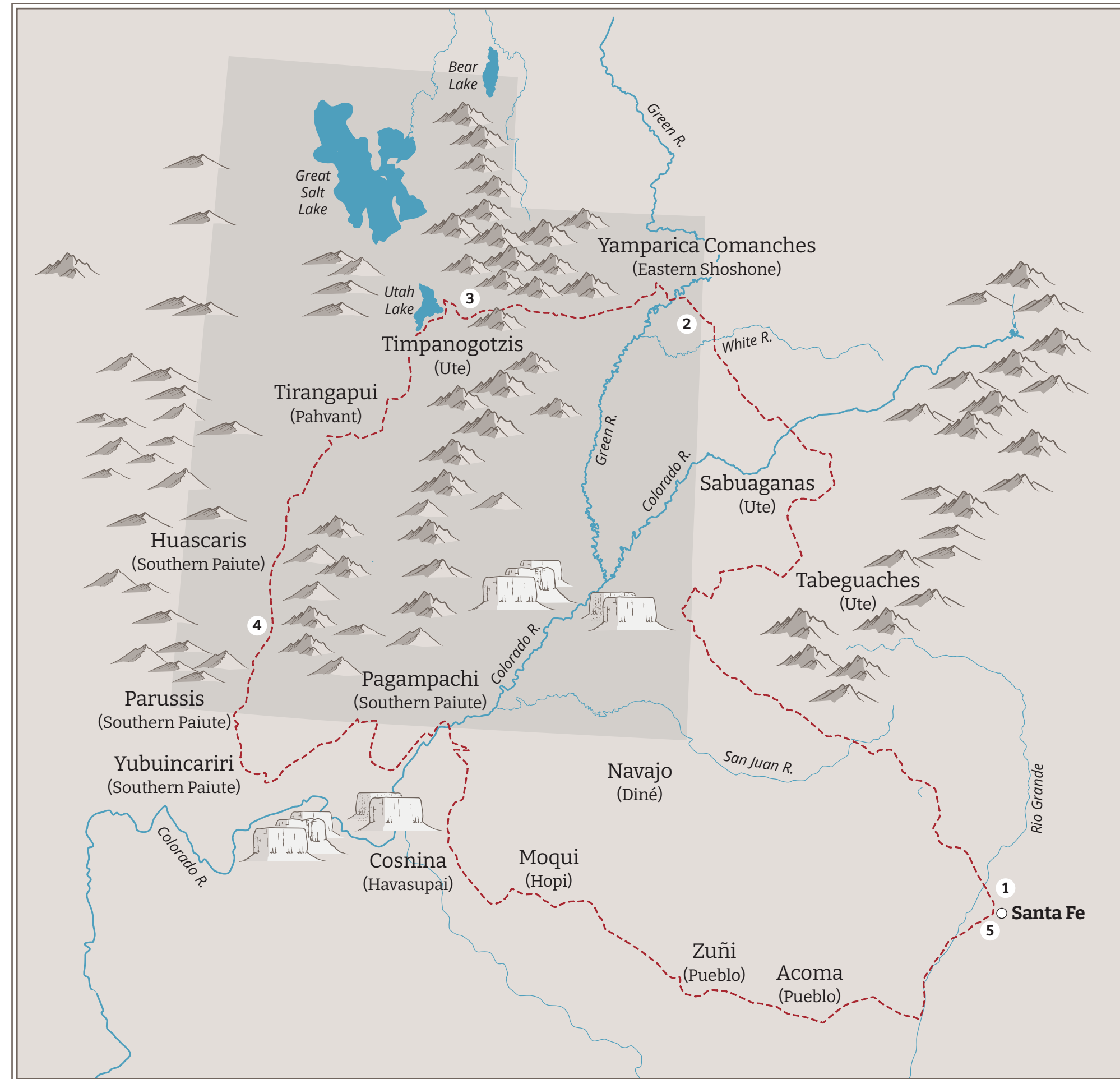
On January 2, 1777, the Domínguez and Escalante Expedition finally arrived in Santa Fe. They had traveled over 1,700 miles in 159 days!

They never reached California, but their trip was not a failure. They wrote journals, made maps, and shared what they saw: a land of high mountains and fertile valleys, deserts and rivers, mesas and canyons, and many different Native American peoples. They showed the world how beautiful — and big — this land was.





## 1776: Domínguez and Escalante in Indigenous Utah



### Expedition Facts

Total days - 158

Total miles - 1,700

Through present-day New Mexico, Colorado, Utah, and Arizona.

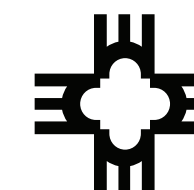
1. July 29, 1776 - left Santa Fe
2. September 10, 1776 - entered Utah
3. September 23-26, 1776 - in Utah Valley
4. October 12, 1776 - near present-day Cedar City
5. January 2, 1777 - arrived in Santa Fe

Timpanogos Utes (also called Timpanogots, Fish-Eaters, or Lagunas) lived from Utah Lake through the Sanpete Valley until the 1860s, when they moved to the Uintah Reservation.

In 1776, Domínguez and Escalante were the first European explorers to describe the land we now call Utah. Their maps and journals were the first written records of the lands and peoples who lived here. Some of the things the friars saw—like beavers—became very important to explorers who came after.

But their story also reminds us that history is complicated. After these explorers came, Native peoples' lives were forever changed. The Domínguez and Escalante Expedition introduced Utes, Paiutes, and other Native peoples to the rest of the world.

As more explorers, trappers, and settlers followed, they took land and food resources from the Ute, Paiute, Goshute, Shoshone, and Diné who had lived and thrived here for thousands of years. The settlers also brought new diseases, which killed a great many Native people. Despite these hardships, Native Americans endured and survived. Today there are eight federally recognized sovereign Tribal nations within Utah.





Draw a picture of yourself here!

**H**istory is full of journeys. Journeys that tell us about bravery, mistakes, friendship, discovery — and change. History is big, and sometimes it's messy. But learning about it helps us understand who we are and who our neighbors are.

Let's learn from history and learn about ourselves and others as we take our own journeys with kindness and curiosity — like Domínguez, Escalante, and all the people they met.

