The Apache are spiritual and believe in the Creator whom they call Ussen. Fasting and prayer are a way to honor all aspects of their lives. The Ga-he and Gaan dancers, unique to Apache culture, protect Apaches, guiding their ceremonies and bestowing power.

This territory is now distributed over two national boundaries: the Southwest US and North Central Mexico, and a small portion encompasses the Trail of the Mountain Spirits National Scenic Byway.

The Chiricahua Apache believe that they were created here in their traditional homeland territory and their culture and people, the Ndé, predate all others that have attempted to settle here.

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Geronimo Memorial

In 2004, a monument was dedicated near the Gila Visitor Center to recognize Geronimo, Apache Medicine Man and War Chief. Still formidable in his late fifties, he led one of the last small bands of Apaches to hold out against overwhelming numbers of US and Mexican military forces. His final surrender in 1886 effectively marked the end of the Indian Wars.

Geronimo was born in the U.S. "near the headwaters of the Gila River." Place of birth was of importance to the Apaches. Customs included the burial of the umbilical cord at the birth site. Whenever an Apache returned to their birth site, it was customary to roll on the Earth in the four directions.

Geronimo's bravery and skill in battle were legendary. Apaches believed that bullets could not kill him. In 1909, he passed away of natural causes in Oklahoma, a prisoner, exiled from his homeland.
In Apache creation stories, the Chiricahua believe that they, animals and plants all shared and spoke the same language - a culture in perfect harmony with its homeland. They were intelligent, resourceful and resilient. They stood in the way of invading nations, the Spanish, the Americans, and protected their families, homelands and way of life.

By 1885, many had been forced on to reservations and had accepted that way of life. History remembers the Chiricahua Apache unwilling to surrender. Led by Geronimo, a group of 35 Apache warriors, women and children, evaded thousands of troops on both sides of the US – Mexico border. Inexhaustible, Geronimo considered fighting to the last warrior, but members of his band missed their families and the “promise” of a reunion persuaded them to discuss surrender.

Geronimo's band finally surrendered and were shipped in boxcars to Florida as prisoners of war. The ultimate betrayal of their surrender agreement was that they were not allowed to see their families as agreed in their terms of surrender. Thus ended the freedom of the Chiricahua Apaches in their traditional territory. A future of uncertainty had begun.

The Ndé, more widely known as the Chiricahua People, or simply the Apache, are composed of four bands: the Tsoka-ne-ndé (Chokonen), Tce-he-ndé (Chihene), Nde-nda-i (Nednhi) and the Be-don-kohe. They consider themselves distinct and independent groups; however, they share the land and its resources. Their cultural practices are similar and they cooperate as one tribe.

Today, the pride Apaches feel in their traditional homeland and way of life is evident. They value their unique culture with its spiritual and holistic possession of home territory and in their traditional mobile lifestyle. It was a society that organized as band groups. They led a life of hunting and gathering. Their behaviors were governed by strict rules of social conduct and high standards of physical prowess. They once ruled a territory that would now extend over five states and two nations.

Famous Ndé leaders who called the Gila region home include: Pluma, Mangas Coloradas, Delgado, Victoria, Loco, Nana and Geronimo. The Gila National Forest is a wild monument to the Ndé culture. To the Apache, this region was a treasure of resources: timber, wildlife, waterways, food, abundant transition zones, grassy valleys, plains, sheltering mountain ranges, minerals and the open space and freedom to promote a mobile way of life.
Mangas Coloradas (Dasoda-hae) CHIHENE. One of the most important Apache leaders of the 19th century. There are no known photographs of Coloradas. It is said that his son Mangas, pictured here, looked much like his father.

Victorio (Bitu-yu) CHIHENE. He always held hope for a home reservation in his beloved Ojo Caliente (Black Range Mountains). He became known as a great war leader and strategist.

Loco - CHIHENE. Driven to war to survive, he always negotiated for peace. He and 400 of his band endured captivity at San Carlos. As a young man, he survived a Grizzly bear attack, killing the bear with a knife.

Nana (Kas-tziden) CHIHENE. He was universally feared and respected for his fighting ability. He led survivors of Tres Castillos, Chiricahua Massacre to safety into the Sierra Madre mountains of Mexico.

Cochise - A chief of the Chokonen from the Chiricahua and Dragoon mountains. He married Dos-teh-seh, the daughter of Mangas Coloradas, in the 1830s. There are no known photographs of Cochise. His proposed reservations, which in every case, Congress failed to ratify: Ojo Caliente, Chiricahua Mountains, Mangas Springs, Dragoon Mountains, Gila Wilderness, Mimbres River, and Lake Valley Agency.

* November 2011 - East Sill Apache, Chiricahua Reservation established in Akela Flats, NM.
The Chiricahua people take pride in the memory of the powerful and wise leaders who embodied the Apache way of life from time immemorial.

Mangas Coloradas, "red sleeves," of the Tci-he-nde (Chihene) band, or Red Paint people, was of enormous physical stature and a great leader. As a warrior diplomat, and through strategic marriages of his daughters to neighboring bands and tribes, he was often able to raise large raiding and war parties to provide for and protect his people. Many warriors followed Mangas Coloradas throughout Apacheria on successful campaigns. His home country was the reaches of the Mogollon and Burro mountains, and like many, he preferred life in the wild and far from any settlements. Victorio and Geronimo often joined him on his campaigns.

After Mangas Coloradas' murder at the hands of American military - mysteriously shot while "trying to escape" - Victorio provided direction for the Chiricahua bands. Victorio's tactical and strategic abilities as a guerrilla fighter are legendary, and though he advocated for peace and a permanent home and reservation, he was driven to war by the greed and deception of the dominant society.

Lozen, sister of Victorio, was the epitome of the warrior woman, serving her people in deeds and ability and love. Her power as a medicine woman healed and saved many warriors and people. Apache culture provided for the acquisition of power. With power came great responsibility and burden. When used wisely, it was greatly respected, as was Lozen's ability to sense and foretell the direction of the approaching enemy, allowing the band to avoid detection.

Today, descendants of these desert mountain people live mainly in Oklahoma, New Mexico and Arizona. The Byway runs along the path of ancient trails that became roads. The routes were used by Apache to migrate seasonally or to avoid pursuit. Apaches today are scattered across the southwest. They hold on to their language and culture and have not forgotten their past, a time when their ancestors roamed freely from the Sierra Madre to the Horse Mountains and beyond.

They survived a genocidal war waged by the American military. The American government did not keep the promises of reservation land in this area. They lost possession of Ndé Benah (Apache Land), though they believe that they will always retain spiritual possession of this land.

Modern society now recognizes the close and intimate relationship Apaches maintain with the Earth. We can all learn a valuable lesson from the legacy of the Apache.
The powwow is a cultural gathering meant to promote community well-being and native culture. This social, competitive and intertribal event is hosted by the Red Paint Tribal Council.

Powwow is a native people's way of meeting together to join in dancing and singing, making and renewing friendships. It is open to the public, Indian and non-Indian alike. During this spectacular Native American gathering, dancers, drummers and singers compete for prizes in a number of styles and gender categories.

For more information:

www.redpaintpowwow.net