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COURT VICTORY RESTORED THE UTES' HOMELAND OF DESERT, FOREST AND OIL

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One hundred twenty-seven years ago, a time when Utah waited for statehood and the rest of the nation fought its civil war, the Ute Indians settled their new homeland - a desert that would one day be part of Duchesne and Uintah counties and where eventually the region's lifeblood - oil - would flow.

But in the early 1900s, the Utes began to see their homeland, composed of the Uintah and Ouray reservations, shrink. After an apparent change of heart, Congress saw the Ute land as part of the public domain. Three million reservation acres fell out of Indian domain and under government control. In 1975 the Ute Tribe took action. With boundaries at the time consisting of only 1 million acres of reservation, the Utes sued Duchesne and Uintah counties and the state, demanding their original 4 million acres be recognized.

After years of litigation that bred acrimony between the Indians and non-Indians in the Uintah Basin, the U.S. District Court for Utah ruled in 1981 that the land had been legitimately reduced in size through a series of government actions.

But later, the 10th Circuit Court in Denver reversed the decision and ruled the original Uintah and Ouray reservations still existed. Basically, the land had been taken from the tribe, the court said.

On Dec. 1, 1986, the U.S. Supreme Court affirmed the lower court's decision without comment. The tribe had won its battle and 3 million acres - land that for generations had been in the hands of a dominantly Anglo public and its government - came under Ute control again.

Instantly, the tribe ruled over a huge windfall of desert, forest, and perhaps most important, a vast underground reservoir of oil. At the same time, residents of Roosevelt and the other small, rural towns that grow around the oil fields of Duchesne and Uintah Counties now found themselves residents of the nation's second largest Indian reservation.

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