These were the ancestors of the Ute and Navajo tribes whose history is traced to 5,000 years ago. According to lore, many became ill from a strange disease. A council of chiefs was held around a campfire to pray for a cure. The next morning, in place of the campfire, the chiefs found a pool of boiling water. They thanked their gods for answering their prayers because when they drank from and bathed in the water they were cured of their illness.

The natives named the hot spring Pah gosah, which literally means stinking water. This was due to the sulfur and mineral content of the water. Eventually, this became the name of the town, Pagosa Springs. Anglo discovery of the hot springs was reputedly achieved by a United States expedition in 1859. Originating in Independence, Missouri the expedition was led by Captain J. N. Macomb of the Corps of Topographical Engineers accompanied by Dr. J. S. Newberry as geologist.

Since the Ute and Navajo both frequented the area of the spring, they skirmished disputing the primary right to the exclusive use of the spring. They decided that rather than continue battling and shedding blood, they would conduct a duel. The Navajo selected a large warrior while the Ute chose a small Indian Agent, the honorably discharged and very friendly Colonel Albert Pfeiffer who willingly volunteered. The choice of weapon was a knife wielded with one hand tied behind the back. Being small and agile, the agent out-maneuvered the big warrior and won the duel. Thus, the Utes gained primary right to use the spring and the Navajo retreated.

The concept of ownership was strange to the Utes who believed that their god owned the land and gave use of it to humans. Also, they wanted to make the spring available to all who needed healing.

Earlier, Pfeiffer had been involved in skirmishes with the Jicarilla Apache in New Mexico territory. Later, he became a close friend of Christopher “Kit” Carson who, with Pfeiffer, became known for fair and honest dealings with the Native Americans. An example of his fairness was a warning Pfeiffer placed in newspapers to prospectors to stop trespassing on Indian land.

After reenlisting, Pfeiffer served under Kit Carson in fighting the aggressive Apaches at which time he was wounded twice. He passed away in 1881. He was buried on the hill overlooking his ranch near Del Norte, Colorado, as he had requested. He was one of the most respected and honored personages in the early history of the territory.

The “ownership” of the spring by the Utes was short-lived as control passed to the white man by the Brunot Agreement, and, in 1883, the spring became the property of Major Henry Foote.

After 1848, Colorado became independent of Mexico resulting from the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo and the defeat of the Mexican Army by United States Troops.