

ARISTOCRAT WENT ON A HUNTING EXPEDITION ACROSS THE WEST

Does the Gore Range need a different name?

By Scott Miller

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This is not the first time communities have questioned naming the range after Lord St. George Gore. The new Colorado Geographic Naming Advisory Board may allow them to select a new name.



The spires above Willow Lakes in the Eagles Nest Wilderness, which is part of the southern extent of the Gore Range, is shown near Silverthorne in 2017. Photos by Hugh Carey, Summit Daily News

Lord St. George Gore never set foot in Eagle County, as far as anyone knows. He was also a jerk. Those and other factors may lead to renaming the Gore Range.

The Colorado Geographic Naming Advisory Board, a new group created this year by Gov. Jared Polis, is looking into a number of place names around the state, and may offer recommendations to rename some. The Gore Range is on that list.

The idea to rename the Gore Range originated a few years ago in Summit County. Vail Town Councilmember Kim Langmaid thinks a name change is appropriate and overdue.

Langmaid called Gore's three-year hunting expedition across the American West a "massacre trek." History seems to support that description.

Gore in his journals acknowledged killing thousands of bison, elk, bears and other animals. He left the carcasses of those animals to rot, taking neither meat nor hides.

Gore probably made it to the Blue River, and perhaps traversed Gore Pass, Langmaid said. But that's as close to Eagle County as he got.

How the range

was named

The mountains were named as many features were in those days, with someone giving an idea to a mapmaker.

Langmaid said in this case it was William Byers talking to John Wesley Powell. Powell mapped much of the American West, including charting the Grand Canyon.

Byers reportedly waved at a portion of a nascent map and called the mountains west of the Blue River "Gore's Range." The name stuck.

Instead of "Gore Range," the Ute Indian tribe has recommended calling those mountains the "Nuchu" range, a slight modification of the word the Utes use to refer to themselves.

Langmaid said Gore's name stands in stark contrast to the "stewardship values" of today's inhabitants of this area. Gore's misadventures are "not what we want to be known for," she added.

Langmaid founded the Gore Range Natural Science School, now the Walking Mountains Science Center.

Having grown up in Vail, Langmaid has long known about Gore's bloodthirsty voyage through the West. She said using "Gore" in the original name never did sit well with her. In fact, she said, she had thought of using "Sawatch" in the name. New York Mountain is at the northern edge of that range. But, Langmaid said, the Sawatch Range is vast, while the Gore Range is more localized.

Is there value in names?

But is renaming places always a good idea?

Kathy Heicher of the Eagle County Historical Society isn't so sure.

Heicher acknowledged Gore's antics were probably offensive even by the standards of the 1850s. But, she added, the mass killing of animals wasn't unusual.

The local historical society is now transcribing the journals of Alfred Borah, an early Eagle County resident. Heicher noted that Borah wrote daily in a journal, and wrote about commercial hunting to provision mining companies. That hunting killed untold numbers of deer and elk.

"It was a slaughter," she said. But at least that hunting was done in the name of providing food.

"We have to remember the context of the times," Heicher said, adding that "people need to be very cautious about changing historic names."

Heicher noted that if the Gore Range is renamed, "Is Squaw Creek next?" Langmaid believes it should be.

Still, Heicher said, renaming places in accordance with current thinking dilutes history.

And, Heicher added, it should be at least as hard to change a place name as it is to get something named in the first place.

Heicher noted that it took the Benton family years to get the U.S. Geological Survey to name a lake in the Flat Tops Wilderness Area for an Eagle County pioneer.

Heicher wondered what happens to Borah Gulch below Sylvan Lake if Alfred Borah's journals reveal something unsavory in his personal history.

On the other hand, renaming places and things does happen.

The Colorado squawfish was renamed the Colorado pikeminnow in 1999.

And the Squaw Valley ski resort this year announced it would change its name to something more palatable to modern sensitivities.

Still, Heicher said, we need to acknowledge history, not bury it.

In an email subsequent to a phone conversation, Heicher wrote that "there was probably some judgment" in using terms such as "squaw," even at the time. "But it was part of local history. We have to own it," she wrote, adding, "I'm grateful that we are better than that now."