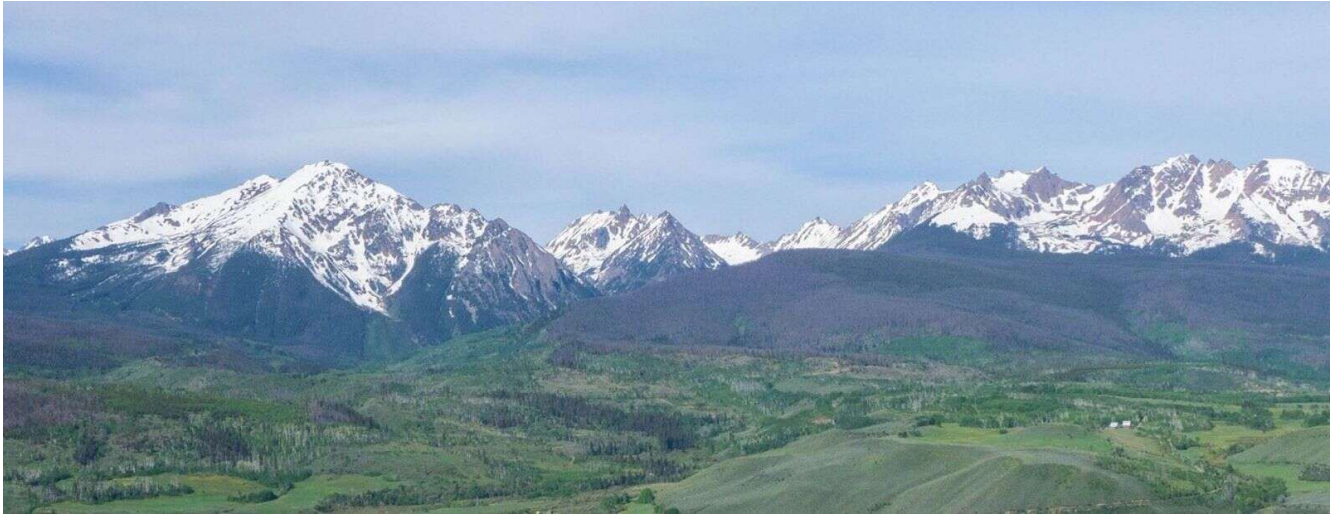


# Get Wild: A journey over Ute Pass in 1866

Columns [FOLLOW COLUMNS](#) | November 18, 2021

**Bill Betz**  
**Get Wild**



The view from Ute Pass is pictured in 2015.

*Bill Betz/Courtesy photo*

As Summit County experiences rising numbers of recreational visitors, it is worth taking a moment to remember that this majestic place has been attracting visitors for a very long time. The Ute Indians summered here for about 10,000 years and were good stewards of these lands, prospering thanks to an abundance of game, fish and edible plants.

The mining boom of 1859, however, brought swift and wrenching changes for these natives, whom William Byers described in the May 30, 1860, edition of the Rocky Mountain News as “very friendly ... cleanly and noble in appearance. There are about twelve hundred Utes camped at the mouth of Swan River and Tenmile Creek. We have no fear of them whatever, as they are positively friendly.”

It is astounding to think that, just 20 years after the start of the mining boom, the entire Ute tribe would be forcibly removed from these homelands and marched out to distant reservations.

Tourists of a different sort began arriving at about that time, and no trip is better documented than an excursion made 155 years ago by a half-dozen fellows who rode, camped, feasted, nearly died and celebrated as they traveled almost the full length of today's Summit County. They ventured upstream along the Blue River from Ute Pass to Breckenridge and then up and over Hoosier Pass as part of their loop trip out of nascent Denver. Led by Byers, their exploits were wonderfully captured by writer Bayard Taylor (more famous than Mark Twain at the time) in his little book called “Colorado: A Summer Trip” (1867).

Visitors today cannot experience many of their adventures, such as streams choked with native trout, Byers' near-drowning in the Blue River (near the confluence of the Snake River) or the dusty mining town that Breckenridge was (having been almost completely deserted just a few years after its initial boom and awaiting a revival around 1900).

In early July 1866, Byers' group struggled over Berthoud Pass in hip-deep snow, then rode down to Hot Sulfur Springs, where the raging Colorado River could not be forded. They followed ancient Ute trails up the Williams Fork valley, crossing to the Blue River valley via Ute Pass.

It was the breathtaking view about which Taylor waxed eloquent, looking west into the heart of today's Eagles Nest Wilderness Area: “Beyond these were wilder ridges, all forest; then bare masses of rock, streaked with snow, and, highest of all, bleak snow-pyramids, piercing the sky. From south to north stretched the sublime wall — the western boundary of the Middle Park; and where it fell away to the canyon by which the Grand (Colorado) River goes forth ... there was a vision of dim, rosy peaks, a hundred miles distant. In breadth of effect — in airy depth and expansion — in simple but most majestic outline, and in originality yet exquisite harmony of color, this landscape is unlike any I have ever seen.”

Ironically, two years later, Byers suggested that those mountains be named for George Gore, a disreputable figure who never even partook of this view or set foot in the range.

Today, you can experience the same view from Ute Pass, nearly unchanged, as you look west out over the pastoral ranches of the lower Blue River valley straight into the heart of Eagles Nest Wilderness, with Ptarmigan Peak Wilderness Area at your side. Thus you can commune with the two crown jewels of Summit County, our wilderness areas, representatives of the most protected public land in North America.



**Bill Betz**

“Get Wild” publishes on Fridays in the Summit Daily News. Bill Betz is the former chair of Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, an all-volunteer nonprofit that helps the U.S. Forest Service protect and preserve the wilderness areas in Eagle and Summit counties. For more information, visit [EagleSummitWilderness.org](http://EagleSummitWilderness.org).

## Support Local Journalism

As a Summit Daily News reader, you make our work possible.

Now more than ever, your financial support is critical to help us keep our communities informed about the evolving coronavirus pandemic and the impact it is having on our residents and businesses. Every contribution, no matter the size, will make a difference.

Your donation will be used exclusively to support quality, local journalism.

**DONATE**