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The Confounding Case of Sir St. George Gore

An effort to rename a Colorado mountain range takes historical revisionism into uncharted territory.

BY MARTIN J. SMITH

AUG 2, 2021

The peaks of north-central Colorado's Gore Range rise like a predator's teeth, sharp and jagged as if arrayed along a jawbone. The range covers 1,420 square miles, touches four counties, and includes at least 19 summits of 13,000 feet or more. Residents of the Rocky Mountain West consider the Gore Range a treasure.

It's also, at the moment, the source of prickly public debate. The problem? Its name.

The United States is speckled with cities, landmarks, and geographic features named for people who did contemptible things (hello, Custer, South Dakota!). The Gore Range is a notable case in point, one complicated by the fact that no one really understands *why* the range carries the name of Sir St. George Gore, an Irish aristocrat whose infamous "gentleman's safari" through Colorado, Montana, Wyoming, and the Dakotas in the mid-1850s was a cross between a Kardashian glamping vacation and General William Tecumseh Sherman's Civil War march to the sea.

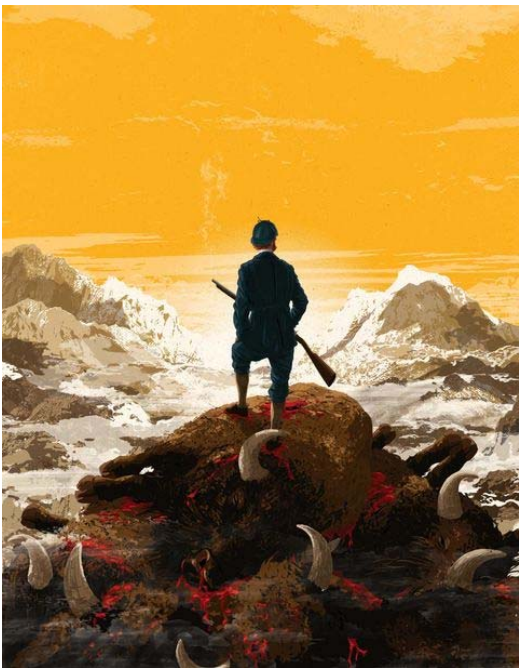
Estimates vary, but during a three-year killing spree, Gore and his entourage littered the West with the rotting carcasses of as many as 4,000 bison, 1,500 elk, 2,000 deer, 1,500 antelope, 500 bears, and hundreds of smaller animals and birds—creatures that sustained the region's Indigenous people. A

U.S. Army captain who met Gore at the end of his adventure described the trip as “exhilarating and healthful amusement.”

This article appears in the Summer 2021 issue of Alta Journal.

But one man’s amusement is, by today’s standards, an unholy ethical abomination, especially in a state that prides itself on a leave-no-trace conservation ethos. Such is Colorado’s fervor for publicly shaming careless outdoor louts that in 2015 park rangers at Aspen’s Smuggler Mountain began adorning every pile of uncollected dog poop at the mountain’s trailhead with a festive pink flag. And yet, there stands the Gore Range, an enduring monument to personal privilege, entitlement, and laziness on the part of federal mapmakers.

As Americans reconsider their often untidy past, toppling statues, changing military base designations, and renaming schools, maybe it’s not surprising that Colorado set its sights on the Gore Range. A proposal to change its name now rests with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names, the agency within the U.S. Geological Survey that’s the final arbiter in these matters.



But this debate is different from most. It’s taking place not because Sir Gore was a Confederate slaveholder, or responsible for the genocide of people who occupied those mountains for thousands of years, or guilty of any other past sins that today would be disqualifying. It’s taking place because Gore was, by general consensus, kind of a scumbag.

UNGENTLEMANLY BEHAVIOR

Well, OK, that’s not entirely accurate. There’s really no place in the sober federal paperwork for such a succinct and wholly appropriate description of Gore. A renaming resolution passed last year by Summit County and forwarded to the federal board says the change is needed to “(1) appropriately reflect our Country’s history and values of environmental stewardship, and (2) comply with current naming policies of the United States Board on Geographic Names.”

If you venture beyond the sanitized bureaucratese and talk to the people pushing to erase Gore’s name, though, you hear a more honest version. “With Gore it’s just all bad,” says Bill Betz, a retired neuroscientist who is championing the renaming effort on behalf of the Eagle Summit Wilderness Alliance, a group dedicated to protecting and maintaining local wilderness areas. “Talk about an asshole. Geez... The most positive thing I can find is that he apparently paid his servants well—but then he burned it all!”

About that. Not only is the man whom historian Clark C. Spence later labeled “a Celtic nimrod in the Old West” considered an egregiously bad sportsman, but between 1854 and 1857 he also left behind ruined relationships with pretty much everyone he met. Along with his traveling party of about 40 hired frontiersmen, cooks, servants, tradesmen, a fly-tying specialist, and a pack of 50 hunting dogs, Gore alienated trading partners; desecrated the sacred lands of the Ute, the Crow, and other Indigenous tribes; and spurred endless complaints to U.S. Cavalry leaders that he was a “slob hunter.”

Before heading back to Ireland, Gore tried to sell his surplus supplies and equipment to a top officer at North Dakota’s Fort Union. Negotiations broke down, so in a fit of whiskey-fueled pique, Gore ordered his men to assemble the trappings of his wretched excess in front of the fort. Then he set fire

to it all, including 20 Red River carts, at least three Conestoga wagons, and a large amount of supplies—a particularly spiteful gesture in a remote area where such stockpiles were precious. (Accounts differ as to whether the conflagration also consumed his cushy, bright yellow personal carriage, his 16-by-20-foot canvas sleeping tent, his brass bedstead and feather bed, his French carpets, or the oval bathtub embossed with the Gore family crest.)

The next day, Gore sent his men to sift the ashes for any scrap metal that the Fort Union folks might salvage. He made sure those scraps were tossed into the muddy Missouri River.

His piggery continued into August 1856, when, against the advice of experienced traders, Gore convinced legendary guide Jim Bridger to take him into the Little Missouri River valley for still more mindless critter killing. With a slimmed-down entourage of about 11 men, 65 pack- and saddle horses, and his hunting dogs, he slaughtered his way into the Black Hills—violating not only the terms of his passport but also lands considered sacred by the Lakota.

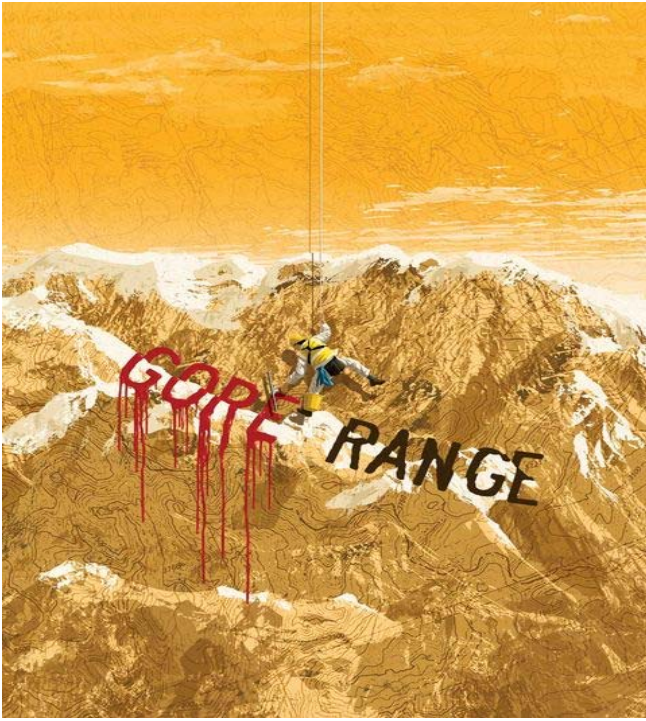
Gore was soon surrounded by a war party of 135 Lakota warriors, who typically killed any white people who trespassed on their land. This time they simply relieved Gore and his men of their weapons, equipment, horses, food, and clothing, then released his band of mostly naked men to scavenge food during their 300-mile trek back to the mouth of the Little Missouri.

EXCESSIVE GORE

At first glance, the Summit County renaming proposal falls squarely into today's raging left-right cancel culture debate, which has swept up figures as diverse as Robert E. Lee, Mr. Potato Head, and Dr. Seuss. Even revered Sierra Club cofounder John Muir has come under fire, and last year the club's executive director was forced to acknowledge Muir's "derogatory comments about Black people and Indigenous peoples that drew on deeply harmful racist stereotypes."

But Muir was a founding father of American conservation, so it made sense back then to name a stand of old-growth redwoods north of San Francisco in his honor. There were no such reasons with Gore. The Summit County proposal cites the first apparent association of Gore's name with the mountain range as a casual mention in an 1868 article in the *Rocky Mountain News*. The newspaper's founder and editor, William Byers, had ascended Longs Peak with famed western explorer John Wesley Powell and others, and he reported that they had been able to see "Gore's Range" in the distance. Not long after, the name Gore Range began appearing on official maps.

Byers's innocent utterance soon compounded itself. Today, Colorado is home to Gore Pass, Gore Canyon, Gore Lake, Gore Creek Spring, Gore Range Trail, three Gore creeks, and two Gore campgrounds. The Celtic nimrod's name also turns up on local businesses, including Gore Range Brewery in Edwards, Gore Range Outfitters in Breckenridge, and Gore Range Pizza in Vail. None of those enterprises could likely be compelled to change their names, meaning that the residue of Gore's shameful legacy would probably remain even if the Gore Range is redesignated.



“I don’t think it’ll affect us either way,” says the Reverend Allen Pulliam, the 63-year-old pastor of the Gore Range Baptist Church in Kremmling, of the proposal emanating from what he calls “left-leaning Summit County.” Pulliam has lived in Grand County, at the northern end of the range, since he was five. “We’d have to redo our whole incorporation as a church. We’re small, and to try to come up with the wherewithal to legally go through all of that would be burdensome.”

He adds: “Those of us who have lived here forever know it as the Gore Range, and it’s still going to be Gore Range to us. It may not be the prettiest history in our state, but it doesn’t concern us a whole lot.”

The push to rename the range began with Leon Joseph Littlebird, who describes himself as “the most native Coloradan you’ll ever talk to” because his Navajo and Ute relatives “had already been here for 10,000 years.”

About five years ago, Littlebird persuaded then–Summit County commissioner Karn Stiegelmeier to lobby her fellow commissioners to officially recognize Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples’ Day. The county did.

Emboldened, the 70-year-old Silverthorne musician says he later spotted Stiegelmeier at one of his concerts, where he plays ancient Native American instruments. He argued that the Gore Range should be renamed the Nuchu Range in honor of the Ute tribes (Utes call themselves Nuchu) that had been successful stewards of the mountains and surrounding lands for millennia. The tribes were known as the People of the Shining Mountains, but in 1881 they were forcefully removed to reservations in Utah and southwest Colorado.

Stiegelmeier picked up the cause. She learned that the U.S. Board on Geographic Names considers several criteria when commemorating an individual. Those requirements state: “The person being honored should have had either some direct or long-term association with the feature, or have made a significant contribution to the area, community, or state in which it is located.” Typically, a geographic feature is named after an early or longtime resident; a person who developed, restored, or maintained the feature; someone who donated the land; or someone who played a major role in protecting the land for public benefit.

“I knew enough in terms of naming criteria that [the Gore name] didn’t make any sense,” Stiegelmeier says. “Gore had come through Colorado, had a life of luxury, and had guns and drinks handed to him in silver chalices. It was kind of just a joke that it was named after him, but the more you read about it, the more disgusting it was. It was not a joke; this is just really wrong.”

By most accounts, Gore never ventured past what today is known as Gore Pass, in Grand County, about 35 miles from the peaks for which the range is best known. If Gore never set foot among those peaks, Stiegelmeier asks, shouldn’t that alone justify a renaming? “Did he live in the area and contribute to the community? Obviously not,” she says. “None of that is remotely met. Then you can get into his character. That’s not really taken into account with the [U.S. Geological Survey], but it’s the biggest affront to all of us.”

ADDRESSING AN INJUSTICE

The push to rename the range is taking place at a time when many Americans finally seem willing to acknowledge that our continent's history did not begin in 1776. By executive order, President Barack Obama in 2015 renamed Alaska's Mount McKinley, the tallest mountain in North America, as Denali to replace that remnant of cultural imperialism with something meaningful to the nation's Native American tribes. Similar efforts are unfolding around the country wherever potentially offensive names exist; California's Squaw Valley has been a contentious designation for years.

The Gore debate picked up steam last year when Governor Jared Polis established the Colorado Geographic Naming Advisory Board to evaluate proposals to rename the state's honorifically challenged geographic features. The board is already evaluating 21 proposals to de-commemorate those whose past misdeeds were overlooked and grate on modern sensibilities.

The conversation between Littlebird and Stiegelmeier led, in September 2020, to the county commission unanimously deciding to throw its weight behind the effort to change the Gore Range's name. The U.S. Board on Geographic Names is now gathering input from the four affected counties, the U.S. Forest Service, Indigenous tribes, and the public, and board researcher Jennifer Runyon says it will take those points of view into consideration before it makes a decision: "We want to do it once and do it right, because the people who live there will have to live with the decision."

A Gore-Nuchu transition is hardly inevitable, or imminent, because the federal agency has a lot of names to reconsider. Among Colorado's pending requests is a proposal to rename 14,130-foot Mount Evans, near Denver. It honors John Evans, the area's second territorial governor, who was at least passively involved in eastern Colorado's notorious 1864 Sand Creek Massacre, in which at least 150 Cheyenne and Arapaho people, including children and elders, were slaughtered. Mount Evans has borne his name since 1895, even though he was forced to resign his post in 1865 because he'd stoked the public hostility that led to the attack.

"Evans also did do some good things, and it's unclear if he was really guilty of any part of the Sand Creek Massacre," says Stiegelmeier. "But the Gore issue shouldn't be controversial."

While there's no organized opposition to stripping the range of Gore's name, there's been grumbling. One Summit County resident wrote a letter to the *Summit Daily News* that called the renaming effort "misguided" and the result of "some politically correct people [getting] their feelings hurt."

In adjacent Grand County, the commissioners seemed reluctant to recommend the change to the federal board when they discussed it in January. Commissioner Merrit Linke, who lives on the same land that his great-grandfather homesteaded 140 years ago, said he understood that Gore "wasn't maybe by today's standards somebody that we would look up to in terms of what he did." But, he added, "I don't think changing the name of the Gore Range today to Nunchuck, or Nuchuck, or whatever it is, is really going to fix all those things."

And so the world awaits the fate of Sir St. George Gore's strange legacy. Leon Littlebird hopes that someday his federal government will recognize an injustice that seems terribly obvious to him. Look around, he says. Even the miners who were active in those mountains for less than half a century are memorialized in local museums. But his ancestors were there for thousands of years before that. What evidence remains of them?

As for Gore, Littlebird has a preferred solution: Leave. No. Trace. •

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