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EFFORT IS AFOOT FOR NO MORE GORE Push for Shining Mountains is gaining steam

By Kevin Fixler, Summit Daily News

FRISCO » The rugged mountain underbite in Summit and Eagle counties known as the Gore Range has drawn people to the area for generations, but soon the distinctive 60-mile run of peaks could have a different moniker.

Like Gore Pass, Gore Creek and many other regional spinoffs, the craggy reach — which also touches parts of Grand and Routt counties — is named for a 19th century Irish aristocrat named Lord St. George Gore. Of course, the peaks existed for millennia ahead of the baronet's first steps on American soil for a hunting expedition in the 1850s.

For roughly 10,000 years and before formal government removal to a Utah reservation in 1879, the Ute tribe, who called themselves the Nuntzi, resided in the valley they referred to as Naa Ohn Kara. Loosely translated, the term means “where blue water meets the sky,” and may have even been the origin of the Blue River's name.

The native Ute spoke of the Rockies as the Shining Mountains, and if a local group gets its way, that's what they intend to relabel the local range. Summit's Board of County Commissioners formally supported the change through a recent resolution, and the campaign is gaining steam.

“I am amazed how few people know anything about Lord Gore,” said Commissioner Karn Stiegelmeier. “It's universal in any writing that he was despised by the time he left. He was disdained by all parties, including the natives, the U.S. Cavalry and the mountain men.”

Gore's three-year stopover in the American West had him traversing what is today the Dakotas, Montana, Wyoming and Colorado. The figures are difficult to substantiate, but Gore himself claimed to have killed more than 2,000 buffalo, 1,600 elk and deer and 100 bears for mere sport. The carcasses were left to rot. Although he was recorded crossing Gore Pass west of Kremmling, he is not believed to have ever set foot in the peaks. Instead, it was American explorers and

cartographers who simply affixed Gore's name to the range on early maps, and the colloquial eventually became convention.

“In those days, there were fast and furious names being placed on things,” Stiegelmeier said of the state's pre-Gold Rush era. “It was just haphazard. Then those were passed around, and it was just word of mouth and hand-drawn maps that said Gore's Range.”

The U.S. Geological Survey was eventually established in 1879, with federal naming criteria instituted about a decade later.

Today, if a person isn't deceased, did not live in an area for a considerable period of time and is not recognized for having contributed positively and significantly to that community, their name cannot permanently grace a federally recognized feature such as a mountain range.

As reviews of historic handles have spread in recent years, so too has the desire to place additional value on the contributions of the nation's earliest ancestors. The movement to label what has traditionally been known as Columbus Day as Indigenous Peoples' Day has gained steam, for example, and Summit jumped on board with the revision first made in Denver in 2016.

“I humorously say that was the day the Native Americans discovered Columbus lost at sea,” said Leon Joseph Littlebird. “He thought he was in India, so we're just glad he didn't think he was in Turkey.”

Littlebird, a longtime Silverthorne resident of Navajo descent, helped inspire the county to take up the charge of changing the Gore tag. It's his hope his native brethren, the Ute, can reclaim the title of this defining Western Slope aspect. “It's one of the most beautiful and spectacular areas we have,” said Littlebird. “Considering Lord Gore was a pretty bad dude — the stories are really horrible, really scary — it would be great to see it recognized as what it really is, instead of for a guy like that.”

The official resolution is an initial step in the process, and, in conjunction with the Friends of the Eagles Nest Wilderness and support from the Colorado Mountain Club, the county hosted a public meeting in Frisco as a formal kickoff on Oct. 9. The goal is to gain further momentum, hear other pitches for an alternative name — though preference remains giving the Utes a chance to heavily weigh in — and then take it to the USGS' Board of Geographic Names to decide.

From there, the state and federal exercise would take at least a year before the unique range could lose its Gore-related title for good.

“I think there’s just a lot of good reasons why they would want to do it, because it just doesn’t meet the criteria that they have for naming,” said Stiegelmeier. “And especially just to honor the natives who were marched out by gunpoint soon after Lord Gore left. Then it would just be a matter of all the GIS-type people having to change the name on maps.”