



What's Happening in Jefferson County

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Heaven and Hell across the county

By Bret Lian - Courtesy of the Boulder Monitor

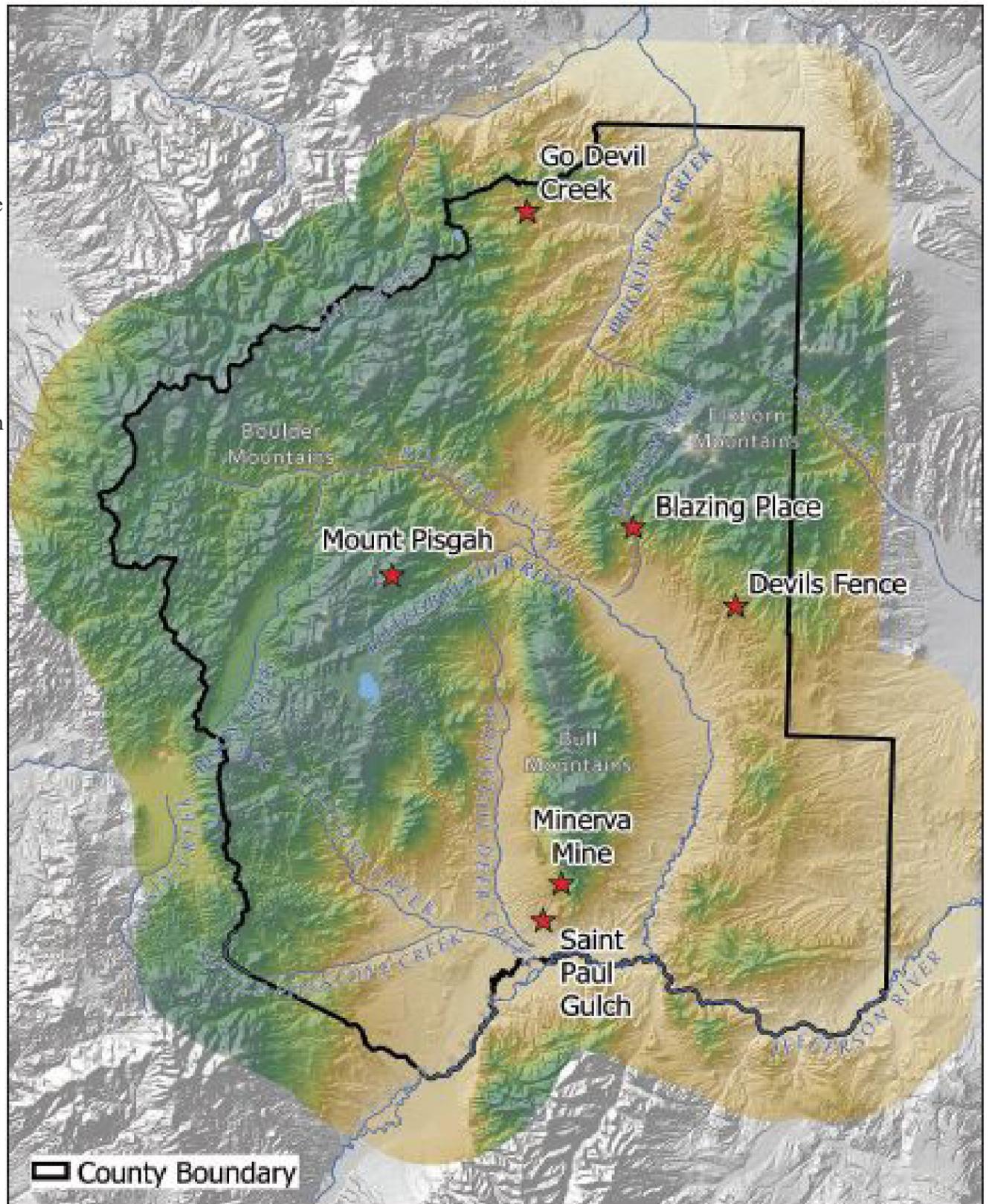
The toponyms on the map can tell you more than just what to call a chunk of earth. Some describe or memorialize, and others maybe even tell a little about the hopes and feelings of those who named those places. An accessible remnant of powerful sentiment is there for the daydreaming when it comes to those place-names referencing the cosmically absolute destination of the soul and the supernatural gatekeepers of those places. These are the names tied to religion and those things human beings regard as holy or sacred. It should come as no surprise that the dominant religion that swayed in this neck of the woods when these spaces became the places we refer to them as now is reflected as text on the map. Though always on my mind is the fact that for over 10,000 years human beings with their own spiritual practices and creeds had voices of their own to refer to place, and I can't help but wonder where the nexus between their religions and the words they used for the landmarks of Jefferson County existed.

Exploring our own connections between theology and geography, we'll start at Go Devil Creek. A stream that drains off the south face of the Brooklyn Bridge Divide, for years I thought it was a verb followed by a noun. A demanding proclamation akin to, "Demons be gone!" It turns out though, that a go-devil is a one horse sled for hauling logs.. A go-devil is also a shallow-water outboard boat designed for the swamps of the southeastern US, but the fact that one can find Go Devil Creek on maps over 70 years old and that that gulch is lacking any swamps makes me think it references the former.

In the southern Elkhorns we find two references that link to the infernal regions of the supernatural and the fires of the damned. The Blazing Place is a historic populated place registered with the U.S. Bureau of Geographic Names, and can be found on Forest Service maps of old. It is located near the mouth of Tacoma Gulch, where Elkhorn Creek and its canyon opens up to the sage of the upper Boulder Valley. Maybe the name refers to the last name of the folks who first settled there, and has nothing to do with Hell. To blaze is to burn fiercely, and having spent time on the banks of Elkhorn Creek with a fishing rod, I've always found it to feel like the opposite of the underworld.

Seven miles southeast of there, a banded backbone of earth called The Devils Fence swells out of the landscape. The Devils Fence is an anticline, which is a ridge-shaped fold of stratified rock - a stark 600 feet of relief on either side of its eastern and western flanks. It's not hard to imagine why those who named it felt those ribbons of rock and the wall they form were imposing enough to either belong to or contain the Prince of Darkness.

In the southern Bull Mountains the Minerva Mine overlooks the Whitetail Valley. Only a mile from the Golden Sunlight Mine, the Minerva was a historic source of silver and other precious metals. Named after Minerva, one of the rulers of the Roman heavens of yesteryear - the Goddess of Wisdom and Inspiration. It wouldn't surprise me one bit that at some point in history at this claim a miner awoke one morning and gazed south, and



found their own inspiration looking at the morning shadows of the Tobacco Roots in the distance, and below them, St. Paul Gulch.

St. Paul Gulch drains toward the Jefferson River just to the east of Whitehall and is filled with its fair share of historic mines. St. Paul was an apostle who wandered the country sides of the first-century world preaching the word of his religion. That may be the absolute origin of the term St. Paul, but the name for that gulch probably didn't directly reference that author of much of the biblical New Testament, but was likely tied to the Chicago, Milwaukee, St. Paul and Pacific Railroad, which went through Whitehall.

In the heart of the Boulder Mountains above the Little Boulder River is 8,066 ft Mount Pisgah. Some mountains resemble sharp and gleaming knives pointed to the heavens. Others are more like a pile of rusty anvils strewn on bedrock, where tens of millions of years ago they melted onto the earth, and they are just as beautiful. Pisgah is one of those anvils, but it's covered in dead lodgepole. Pisgah is a biblical name, and I like to think the folks who named it fittingly had chapter 34 of the Christian book of Deuteronomy in mind: "Then Moses climbed to the top of Pisgah, across from Jericho. There the Lord showed him the whole land... This is the land I promised on oath to Abraham, Isaac and Jacob when I said, 'I will give it to your descendants.'" Being American public land, may Mount Pisgah go to our descendants. Heaven, Hell, or something else. When I step outside and look around Jefferson County, I can't help but think the whole dang place is the Promised Land.