

Boulder Mountains unnamed until 1988

Some 70 million years ago the magma of the Boulder Batholith rapidly cooled underground. The rapid cooling in conjunction with high water content resulted in fractures which formed pathways for water to carry metals in a solution throughout chunks of a block of igneous rock 70 by 40 miles in size. Veins of riches and precious metals produced by this process were early catalysts of prosperity for Butte and Helena. In essence, the Boulder Mountains gave birth to modern-day Montana.

But until very recently, this mountain range had no name.

Since 1890, The U.S. Board of Geographic Names (USBGN), a federal body under the Department of Interior, has established and maintained the official place-names of the geographic features of our country. In his superb book, "This is Montana," Rick Graetz, the great Montana geographer, refers to the mountains between Lincoln and Butte as the "The Unnamed Mountains." This is only half correct.

The spine of the continental divide that runs from Macdonald Pass to Lincoln is a nameless range. Sometimes referred to as the "Nevada Range" and other times as the "Robert E Lees," the fact is that no name is registered with the USBGN for that chunk of Montana. Mountain ranges need names, so as concerning as it should be to Montanans that this has been overlooked, the same cannot be said for that pile of granite south of those hills.

In 1986, Edward Ruppel of the Montana Bureau of Mines and Geology, submitted a form to the USBGN to name Boulder Mountain Range. It was approved in 1988. It's surprising that up until then, 1,300 square miles of Montana mountains were officially nameless as far as the United States Board of Geographic Names was concerned – though on maps of yesteryear you'll see them referred to as the Deer Lodge Range or The Boulder Range.

Edward Ruppel, a member of the small group of mortals who have named a mountain range, was a son of Montana. He grew up in Twin Bridges and died there in 2014. He was a renowned geologist, and for a piece of time was Montana's State Geologist. The summer after he married his wife of 58 years, they lived in Boulder, and it's not hard to believe that that, and growing up in the morning shadows of the geologically varied and ancient Tobacco Root Mountains, influenced his career path and drew his attention to the great batholith west of town.

Every mountain range deserves a name, and thanks to the passion of Edward Ruppel, the Boulder Mountains are no longer a nameless pile of granite.



