

Our County and Its Mountains

What separates one mountain range from another is a fuzzy thing, and revolves around attributes like geology, separative waterbodies, and basin and range relief. Here in Jefferson County, there are 3 different mountain ranges, and perhaps more if one decides to delineate those larger chunks of earth thrust to the sky into subranges, themselves even harder to define.

In our country, the U.S. Board of Geographic names is the keeper of the toponyms you see on the map. For many of those features, boundaries are documented and defined. In a past column we learned that the Boulder Mountains, which fill in the western half of our county, were not named until 1986 by Edward Ruppel, and when he did so he submitted a distinct boundary for that place-name.

Topographically, Jefferson County is largely mountain ranges, their gulches, and the valleys between. Three mountain ranges occupy Jefferson County. They are all distinct. The Elkhorns, with their volcanic skyline and gradual ascending gulches, they contain both the lowest and highest points in Jefferson County. The former being where Prickly Pear Creek leaves the county on its way to Lake Helena, and the latter being the summit of Crow Peak. The Bull Mountains are another range of ours, surging off the valley floors that bound them with no warning, forming a great ridge more than 20 miles long. Lastly there are the Boulder Mountains, like a pile of rusty anvils strewn on bedrock, where 70 million years ago they melted onto the earth, their summits now covered in lodgepole. All of them are beautiful.

One could say that Doherty Mountain and the relief around it in the southeastern corner of our county is its own subrange, or maybe a part of the Elkhorns. Unlike other mountain ranges in our county, no exact definition or attribution exists for those hills, and all we are left knowing is that while certain mountains are most definitely in the Elkhorns, others, like a “Man Without A Country”, are Mountains Without A Mountain Range.

Physiographic Map of Jefferson County

