

Shared Place Names Hide Different Meanings

There are 170 streams in Montana named Spring Creek, and three of them are in Jefferson County. One contributes to Little Whitetail Creek, just below where the McClusky Fire burned for two months last summer; another is a small tributary to Turnley Creek and its beaver dams just west of the town of Elkhorn; the third is the longest, running from the Montana Tunnels Mine to Jefferson City, where it pours into Prickly Pear Creek.

When a space on earth is given a name it becomes more than just the sum of its parts, and it becomes a place. Why a chunk of earth is named what it is can serve different purposes. It can be descriptive, like Rock Creek. Some names are attempts to etch on the map a permanent reminder of the namer or someone who first turned that space into a place, such as Wilson Creek. Others, and perhaps the most beautiful, are attempts to put to paper the way a place makes one feel, as with The Angels Bathing Pool in Montana's Mission Mountains. No matter the origin, it is important for geographic features to have standardized names.

It was just a function of how Anglo-Americans moved across the landscape that the names of modern features were not all configured at once, and so while one pioneer came across a creek in northeast Montana that had cottonwood trees on it and so proclaimed it Cottonwood Creek, a miner in southwest Montana came across a similar creek and did the same thing. So here we are, with 87 Cottonwood Creeks in Montana. If you believe like me that places matter and names give them power, this fact might drive you nuts.

Our neck of the woods is not exempt from duplicate toponyms. If someone told you they hiked to the headwaters of Moose Creek in Jefferson County, that person could've been in the northern Elkhorns, or west of Boulder on the slope of Mount Pisgah, or high on the divide near Homestake Pass. Someone telling you they were on Moose Creek in Jefferson County, you see, isn't telling you much. When I think of what's in a name, and how a name can steer the way a person feels about a place, I can't help but think we've squandered countless opportunities with all the duplicate names we've produced.

It's important to note that our names are younger than the features themselves, and are not those foundational place-names spoken by the languages of antiquity, by people whose names for places and for themselves will never be spoken again. Those names matter too, even if they are as out of reach as a bygone gust of wind.

In his book, *Forty Years a Forester*, Elers Koch writes about how many of the national forests and ranges of the west were given some of the names they still carry today:

“The final process was to outline the boundaries of the new reserve and give it a name. The romantic souls of young men in the boundary survey reveled in such resounding western names as Coconino, Sangre de Christo, Umpqua, Seven Devils, Uncompagre, and Hellgate.”

I like to imagine starting over our place-name decrees in a coordinated way, with no feature ever sharing the same name as another. There are 1,227 named features in Jefferson County alone, and our communities have no shortage of “romantic souls.”



