

Imagine

a missing link in Western property lines. An absent benchmark in a line that anchors property for hundreds of miles to the north and south. A line that shaped how America grew. While the lines defining modern-day property are still precise and accurate in a legal context, the whole system is just a wee loose without that crucial link. And surveyors, those intrepid searchers of straight lines in a world born round, don't tolerate looseness. Which explains why a team of

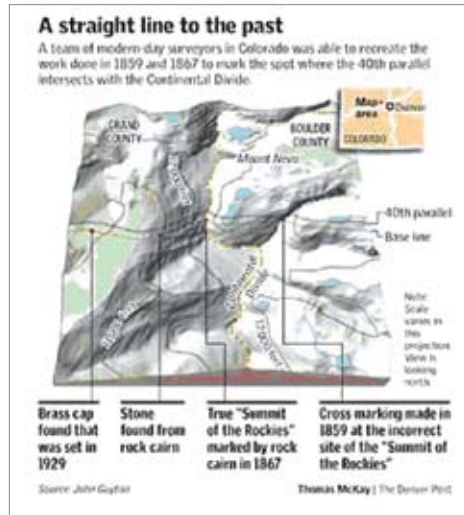
Colorado surveyors laden with tripods, hammers and wire-bristle brushes spent hundreds of hours last summer searching for buried signs of an invisible line across the precipitous Continental Divide near Mount Neva in Boulder and Grand counties.

"Even with all of today's technology, you can be very precise and still be very wrong," said John "J.B." Guyton, president of the Professional Land Surveyors of Colorado. "We have a responsibility to find both the evidence on the ground and what's on the record. And the ground trumps the record."

In 1859, a pair of hardened surveyors forged a 554-mile straight line from the Missouri River to the Continental Divide. U.S. Deputy Surveyors Jarrett Todd and James Withrow earned \$30 a mile setting the 40th parallel, leaving carefully noted landmarks every quarter-mile and building the reference line that anchored the land survey system used throughout the original platting of the West. That line, which runs along Boulder's Baseline Road, separates Nebraska from Kansas.

Eight years later, U.S. Deputy Surveyor George Hill found the original team had mistakenly noted the so-called "Summit of the Rockies" a ridge line east of the Continental Divide. So in 1867, Hill politely noted the "proper summit of the Rockies" and built a rock cairn as a monument to the summit atop a steep cliff near Grand County's Devil's Thumb.

That cairn was missing when modern surveyors went looking. To find it again, they needed to find the original monuments built half a mile to the east and west. To find those monuments, they needed to find monuments farther down the line.



Historic search points surveyors to finish line: Colorado team completes 40th parallel

— By Jason Blevins

So it came that last Father's Day, surveyor Doyle Abrahamson and his son went in search of the missing links. Using the original notes penned by Hill in 1867, Abrahamson located a lichen-covered rock spaced between trees Hill had marked.

"It was barely sticking out of the snow. You talk about having a little help from above," said Abrahamson, a former president of the Professional Land Surveyors of Colorado. "I told my son that was the best Father's Day present a surveyor could ask for."

That was the first of three missing monuments that would lead Abrahamson and Guyton to establish a permanent memorial to the proper summit of the Rockies and finish an imaginary line of latitude everyone needs but only surveyors see.

On a following trip last spring, Abrahamson and his surveyors found their mother lode—a cross etched by Todd and Withrow in 1859 denoting what they then considered the "Summit of the Rockies" and the end of their long push from the Missouri River to the Utah Territory.

That cross led the team to where Hill's "proper summit" must have been, but the monument he built was missing, probably tossed off the cliff by hikers aiming for the high-altitude lake below. So the team had to find the monument on the west side of the Continental Divide, and only then could they accurately replace Hill's missing marker.

The notes from Hill described giant trees surrounding the marker on the west side of the Continental Divide. But all Abrahamson and Guyton saw last summer was treeless talus. They found a spot they thought was close, but the entire mission to set the proper summit and close the missing link was about to fall apart without those trees. Then they scraped through the moss and found two rotting stumps, right where the notes described. With those crumbling remnants, the 40th parallel was complete. "That was a handshake with the past," Guyton said. "I knew I was talking to the original surveyor right then."

[Editor's note: Jason Blevins is Denver Post Staff Writer.]