

# The Devil's Tower: What's in a Name?

Look, if anything in the vast Powder River neighborhood—out there just beyond the Black Hills—if anything merits the word "monumental," it's this thumb-like, mile-high monolith called Devils Tower. It rises out of nowhere, a dinosaur-sized whatchamacallit that long ago shook off the apostrophe meant to indicate the Devil's ownership. With or without punctuation, this heavyweight protuberance deserves the title it's been given. When you come up on it early, when the thing is perfectly dark, even in a background of glowing morning sky, that this thing belongs somehow to the Devil seems wholly legit.

But for the record, there is no apostrophe—officially, no. That little symbol of possession got itself erased long ago for good spiritual reasons, or so one might infer. Historians say that white men misinterpreted the Native folks who told them the place was called "Bad God's Tower," which got translated as Devils Tower, a tower of the Devil, which isn't exactly a name that's comfy.

When I was a kid, my good, pious family tented across America. I had no clue what Devils Tower was, but when we stopped, all that piety made the name of the place strike fear. Even my parents had trouble saying, "the *Devil's* Tower" because the Devil was real gent. That this thing was the property of Satan increased the inky evil all around.

Devils Tower hasn't changed, but I'm a good deal less pious. So after coming up close in semi-darkness, down the road I went, all that massive magma in my rear view mirror. The icy road demanded my attention, but when I finally glanced back for a moment, voila!—caught in the sunrise, it didn't seem in the least demonic.

In the last few decades, the name of this marvelous beast has been the subject of a devil of a fight between Native folks and others who are, to say

the least, not particularly fond of change, the kind of people who deplored the indecency of indoor plumbing maybe. Since some white guy had done a weak translation originally, Native folks searched out origins and made a strong case for an official name change.

But before we start naming, remember that Devils Tower is America's very first National Monument, designated as such by Teddy Roosevelt, a president who was just as stumpy as the Tower, the patron saint of America's Western heritage. That T. R. himself called it the Devils Tower is reason enough to stick with the old ways.

And then there's this: no matter how you get there, Devils Tower is not to be trifled with. It's gargantuan, a huge protuberance you simply can't dabble with.

Still, long, long before T. R. baptized it into the fellowship he was creating out west, it already had a name. The earliest sources—all Native--are more than a little vague and lingually ambiguous: "Bear's House" or "Bear's Lodge," "Bear's Tipi," "Home of the Bear," "Bear's Lair," or, like Soldier's Field, "Home of Bears." The Kiowas called it "Aloft on a Rock," others called it "Tree Rock" or "Great Gray Horn." Lakotas called it "Brown Buffalo Horn." The list is endless.

For the record, both Kiowa and Sioux once believed that when a couple of girls, out and about, were spotted by a bear, they climbed a big rock and fell into prayer for deliverance. In a moment, they were aboard a monster that kept growing and growing until they were safe from being supper.

In 2008, the tribes got together and settled on *Bear Lodge National Historic Landmark*, but the locals and their political buddies were just too strong so it's still Devils Tower (no apostrophe). Stay tuned. Things do change, even out here.

But then, that its name remains a little elusive is a good thing, because no geologist can say for sure how or why it's even here. Theories abound, and you can study perfectly reasonable explanations. But no one knows for certain.

From miles away that huge thing looms up like a scary giant fist. Really scary. Let me unleash a cliché on you: if you get out into northeastern Wyoming, *don't miss it*.

Well, you can't really. If it gets terribly scary, just pray. Trust me, you won't be the first.