BELIEVE it

Are you a lefthanded? If so, you've been maligned in many languages all over the world. The French word for "left-handed" is "gauche," which means "awkward" or "clumsy" (as it does in English today). In Norwegian it's "kjevhendt," which means "crooked-handed"; in Greek it's "skelos," which means "ill-formed"; in German it's "linkisch," which means "awkward"; and in Italian it's "mancini," which means "crooked" or "maimed."

Photos by Nick King

Food memories & THREATS run deep

From Black Friday in 1896 to major floods in 1938 and 1965, Bear Creek has its fair share of destructive history. Today, some officials warn the danger is still real as ever.

The first hint of trouble came late in the afternoon. Black clouds tinged with an eerie green blew over what is now metro Denver. They were heavy with rain and hail.

The downpour was especially bad in the mountains and foothills above Denver. In Morrison, the rain sent people scurrying indoors and into tents. Some of them retreated to stores and shops, where they loitered in doorways watching the rain.

At about 8 p.m. the people in downtown Morrison and nearby campgrounds heard the rumbling – something like a continuous burst of thunder – echoing down from Bear Creek Canyon. Old-timers knew what it meant.

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According to a Rocky Mountain News account, one of them dispatched a younger man to warn the families in two cottages. Those houses were right in the path of the flood.

The man didn’t make it; a wall of water—10 feet or higher—swept through the canyon and crashed into Morrison. It wouldn’t be stopped; not by bridges and certainly not by the two cottages.

The young man went to warn the families, which was to the water rushed toward the homes. He saw Elizabeth Miller sitting on one of the porches in the clifftop approach. Miller jumped inside when she saw the water, perhaps in a failed attempt to save her three children. The water pushed Miller’s cottage into the Wulf cottage, where 17 people were staying—alas but one of them, women and children.

The Miller cottage was destroyed almost instantly. But the Wulf cottage “sailed majestically down between the rock walls of the canyon, the lights still burning and the windows and porch crowded with women and children, screaming and frantic as they moved down to their doom,” according to the News account.

Downstream from Morrison, a farmer climbed a tree to escape the surge. He saw the Wulf cottage float by, women and children shrieking. The cottage was finally pushed into a grove of trees where it broke apart. Only one little girl, Irene Procter, survived out of the 17.

That day, July 24, 1896, would be remembered in Jefferson County as Black Friday. Remembered, at least, among that generation. About 38 people died in the Bear Creek watershed, most in Morrison. Many others barely escaped death along Bear Creek and tributaries like Cub and Mount Vernon Creeks.

In Golden, three more died in flooding there.

At the time, Morrison and other communities along Bear Creek were fashionable camping grounds where Denver residents vacationed in the summer. The Rocky Mountain News summed up the damage in Morrison two days later:

"Less than two days ago Morrison was considered the most delightful, quiet and peaceful summer resort in Colorado.

"Today it is a mass of wreckage and ruin, the people panic-stricken and a number of those who were inhabiting or were buried under an enormous mass of debris somewhere between Denver and Morrison, perhaps never to be found until Gabriel and the last trump on the day of judgment.""

The flood of 1896 was the most catastrophic flood to hit Bear Creek Canyon. Farms along Cub Creek were obliterated. The water descended about Evergreen like a huge, moving wall carrying houses, sheds, barns and livestock with it, according to the News account. At Trousdale, one man was swept away to his death in Maxwell’s Gulch. Four women died along Mount Vernon Creek when a wall of water smashed into their wagon. One of their horses was found dead, tangled in a tree.

However, the flood is only one among many and experts say there will be more. Flooding in the Bear Creek watershed has killed about 46 people and caused extensive property damage since the area was settled. Flash floods are an open overlanded danger in the state. The Bear Creek flood hit nearly 80 years to the day before the Big Thompson flood killed 145 people in Northern Colorado.

Just as in 1896, the efflorescent Bear Creek watershed is a favorite for tourists and recreation seekers.

Beginning at Mount Evans to the west, the watershed drains 361 square miles starting at an elevation of 14,264 feet and ending at 5,780 feet. About 164 square miles drain into Bear Creek upstream of Morrison. The watershed is leaf-shaped, giving it plenty of access to storms.

Under the right conditions, Bear Creek Canyon and its tributaries are death traps.

Roger Pielke Sr., a professor of atmospheric sciences at Colorado State University and the state’s climatologist, said it doesn’t take much rain to create a devastating flash flood.

"Flooding happens occasionally in the spring, when rainstorms combine with winter runoff. In the summer, thunderstorms typically punish an area and move on. But in some cases, winds keep a storm "locked" over one area for a long period of time.

"The storm basically continues to regenerate over the same location," Pielke said.

And if that location is over a drainage basin like Bear Creek, look out.

Few people are as acquainted with flooding in Jefferson County as Dennis Potter, a captain in the Jeffco Sheriff’s Office and the department’s historian. Potter has written narratives of the various calamities to occur in the county.

Potter has documented 15 major floods in the county that took place between 1864 and 1938.

Out of those 15, two occurred in May, one in June, eight in July, two in August and two in September.

"To me it’s kind of surprising," Potter said.

"I do think maybe other concerns have eclipsed it," he said.

Judy Peratt, director of Jeffco’s Emergency Management Department, said wildfires are her department’s major concern followed by flash floods. Emergency personnel meet twice a month in a flood/fire task force to assess dangers.

In recent years it’s been more fire than flood at those meetings.

"The calls are sent out immediately," Peratt said.

Bear Creek has been relatively quiet in the past couple of decades. Potter wonders when that will change.

"It’s still the same canyon it’s always been.

“In my opinion it’s kind of surpris-
The equipment automatically sends real-time information. When there is a problem, authorities are notified by e-mail, pager and cell phone. The early detection network gives them a heads-up on dangerous conditions and an opportunity to issue warnings. Eventually, the network might include digital cameras that are plugged into the Internet.

Bear Creek watershed as "very violent" and says there are accounts of 20-foot high walls of water coming out of the canyons. The Evergreen Dam was built for water storage, Stewart said, not as a flood control device. One major flood control measure on Bear Creek does nothing to protect communities in the canyon. Bear Creek Dam on the southwest edge of Lakewood was authorized in 1968 after the event, Delaria said. The losses, Delaria said, are the people who live downstream from increased development.

Kevin Stewart, information systems and flood warning program manager for the Urban Drainage and Flood Control District, describes the Bear Creek watershed as "very violent." There are historic accounts of 20-foot walls of water coming out of the canyons. The Evergreen Dam was built for water storage, Stewart said, not as a flood control device.

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