

## From Indian to French to English – Some Wisconsin Place-Names

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Explorers of new territories, first-comers, men of action, cannot be expected to report accurately items from the new languages they meet. They record approximations as best they can – unfamiliar sounds heard by untrained listeners who cannot refer to the rules of a language they do not know for guidance in recording what they think they have heard. Later, when literate and trained observers come upon the scene, they may be able to correct these approximations. But in the meantime changes of various kinds may have taken place: a lingua franca may have developed, the local inhabitants may have moved or been displaced by other-language speakers, names may have been changed or translated. It is just such a series of happenings which have made it impossible, up to now, to explain with certainty the name *Wisconsin*. This is not the place to go into the complexities of that particular name, but since the present area of this state was the first part of the Lake Superior region to be explored by the white man, a brief study of Wisconsin place names will at least illustrate the problem: how some names were accepted in more or less their Indian forms, how others were translated into French or later into English, how still others were newly named in either French or English, and what happened to them along the way.

It was the extension of the Canadian fur trade into the Upper Great Lakes region, as well as the hope of finding a Northwest Passage to the Pacific that led the French into this territory. From their very important central post at Michillimackinac (now Mackinac Island) they explored lakes Huron, Michigan, and Superior, establishing regular routes, camps, depots. One of the most important of these was present Green Bay, Wisconsin, at the head of the large northern branch of Lake Michigan where the Fox River enters it. Around this bay and river mouth were settlements of Algonkian-speaking Indians – Menomini, Ojibwa (Chippewa), Ozaukee (Sauk), Outagami (Fox), Potawatomi, Shawano, and others – as well as the Sioux-speaking Winnebago – when Jean Nicolet came there in 1634, the first white man to do so. Nicolet had been specially

trained for this exploration by order of Samuel de Champlain, who hoped to find a northwest passage to the Pacific – a hope which entered into the place-naming of the region. What seemed to feed this hope was the presence of Winnebago Indians, since their name (actually Algonkian, for they called themselves *Hochungara*) meant “strong-smelling-water people.” The meaning of *winne-*, the common word for water, was perfectly clear; not clear was the sense of the second element, which was surmised to refer to the place of origin of the Winnebago, somewhere to the west, where there were strong-smelling sulphur springs or the like. Since the “strong-smelling” could also mean “salt,” it encouraged the hope of a salt-water passage, for the huge extent of the continent between the Great Lakes and the Pacific was not realized at the time. So the Winnebago were thought of as the “salt-water people,” which accounts for most of the early recorded French names for the Bay: *Le Lac des Gens de Mer*, which appears on a map of 1640; *Le Lac des Ouinipiguck*, 1659; *Le Lac de la Nation Maritime* and *Le Lac des Peuples Maritimes*, both 1659–60; and the erroneous *La Baie Salée* – for the lake was not salt.<sup>1</sup> Meantime, a less complimentary translation of *Winnebago* had also been made: *l'eau puante*, stinking water. This was soon abbreviated and transferred to the Indians themselves, so that they became generally known as *les Puants*, the stinkers, or stinkards. Some protests against this insulting error were made by the missionary fathers,<sup>2</sup> but it was too firmly established to be changed.

This nickname for the Winnebago Indians, already present by 1634, appeared in *La Baie des Puants*, which became the common name and continued so until the late eighteenth century, or throughout the French regime and even after the Winnebago had left the mouth of the Fox River and had moved to present Lake Winnebago. So we see a development from Algonkian (probably Ojibwa) to French, with a twist of the meaning, to the early English names partly or wholly translated: *Puans Bay* and *Stinking Bay* (both 1766). The name *Green Bay* (1766) appears to have been a new baptism when the English took the area over.<sup>3</sup> Once introduced, it rapidly replaced the French names. Even the French-speaking community which remained in the city of Green Bay accepted it and occasionally translated it as *La Baie Verte*,<sup>4</sup> completing the exchange.

Other early names from the French period relating to the Indians are the tribal ones: *Otchipwè* is Bishop Baraga's spelling of *Ojibwa*, aphetized and Englished as *Chippeway*, now commonly *Chippewa*, used for a river, falls, lake, county, and several minor features.<sup>5</sup> But *Ojibwa* is not forgotten, or has made a comeback, for a township and park in Sawyer county.

*Ozaukee* was similarly beheaded and reduced, by the French to *Sac*,

and by the English to *Sauk*. They come into contrast in the side-by-side cities of *Prairie du Sac* and *Sauk City* in *Sauk County*. The full and reduced forms are found together in the township and village of *Saukville* in *Ozaukee county*.

*Outagamie* meant fox and the Indians' name was at once translated as *les Renards* by the French and later *Fox* by the English. *Renard* did not survive in a Wisconsin place-name, but *Outagamie* has done so in the present county, and *Fox*, first given to the river flowing into the head of the Green Bay, and forming part of the waterway almost connecting the Great Lakes and St. Lawrence system to the Wisconsin-Mississippi system, has spread. Only initially did it have reference to the Indians; it was the river that took it inland along its course. Several other local *Fox* names are directly connected with the animal, not with the Indians or the river.

The Menomini Indians are remembered in Wisconsin with three distinct spellings: *Menominee* for a river, county, township, creek and park; *Menomonee* for a different river, falls, and city; and *Menomonie* for a township, city and nearby features. In this case, the accidents of spelling by local people have become established by usage, and since they sound the same and are orthographically about equal, no official attempt has been made to raise one above the others.

A similar establishment by usage is seen in *Winnebago* and Canadian *Winnipeg*. The latter would seem to preserve the old French form noted earlier: *Ouinipiguek*. The former appears on the inland *Lake Winnebago*, *Winnebago county*, and several features in three other counties associated with the lake. The Winnebago Indians, transported west, would not stay there but drifted back to Wisconsin and live on marginal lands in the Black River Falls and other areas. The Potawatomi are remembered only in *Potawatomi Indian Reservation* and *Potawatomi State Park*, the name surviving in an English form. The French had called them *Poutaoutamik*. The voyageurs reduced this, in their daily usage, to a descriptive nickname, *les Poux* – which means lice, but which the Indians would not take as referring to them.

The *Courtes-Oreilles* Indians, or short-ears, a sub-group of the Ottawa so named from their practice of cutting off the rims of their ears,<sup>6</sup> have left no name of their own behind, the French having given them this descriptive name. Thanks to inadequate knowledge of French by almost everybody concerned, along with the understandable tendency to “rationalize” spellings to suit English orthography and pronunciation, this name has furnished special problems. In full French form, the lake should be *le lac des Courtes Oreilles*, but to English speakers the plural *-s* on both adjective and noun seem superfluous. Consequently *court* has prevailed in *Lac*

*Court Oreilles* (*Atlas of Wisconsin*, 1974). The Wisconsin Geographic Names Council, in 1973, had decided to keep partial French spelling in *Lac Courte Oreilles* (Decisions on Names, 1979 edition), but later returned to *Court* (Decisions, 1981 ed.).<sup>7</sup> Meantime, both pronunciation and spelling became entirely English and phonetic in *Couderay*, Sawyer County, for a township, village, and river, while the final step has been taken in Barron county with *Coudray Lake*, which even changes *Lake* to come after, in English fashion, whereas *Lac* comes before. This final step in anglicization has not been taken in the names of the Great Lakes, which retain the original French word order, *Lac Supérieur* becoming *Lake Superior*, and the others keeping the French sequence similarly.

Since the French explored Wisconsin for a century before the English challenge developed, it is no surprise to find geographical terms, especially waterway terms, surviving in many Wisconsin place-names. At the northwest, in Lake Superior, are *Chequamegon Bay* and *Chequamegon Point*, in which the *Ch-* spelling won out over the later *Sh-* of English-speakers (Kelton, Warren, Schoolcraft, and others). This, even so, is a simplified form, since it was *Chagaouamigong* in the Jesuit Relations.<sup>8</sup> Baraga recorded the Ojibwa word as *Shâgawâmikâng*, meaning “where there is a long shallow place in the lake where the waves break.”<sup>9</sup> One of the most ancient Ojibwa villages was on the Point and peninsula; there also the Jesuit mission of La Pointe du St. Esprit was established in 1665. This long-term establishment is no doubt responsible for the continuation of the name in a basically (though simplified) French form. *La Pointe* also survives on nearby Madeline Island, formerly *Ile de la Madeleine*. In *Shawano* county and village, however, *Sh-* won out, since the early French spelling was *Chaouanong* (with many variants). (*Shawano* is the Wisconsin form of *Shawnee*.)

To *Lac Courte Oreilles* one can add *Lac du Flambeau* (Vilas county, also translated in nearby *Torch Lake*), and five others with full French forms: *Lac de Beaumont*, *Lac Des Fleurs*, *Lac la Belle*, *Lac Sault Doré*, and *Lac Vieux Désert*. *Lac du Lune*, however, blunders with wrong gender: it should be *Lac de la Lune*.

Other French terms with which English-speakers have had trouble include *marais*, swamp. *Au Grande Maret*, a marsh in Door County, blunders twice: *marais*, being masculine, should take the adjective *grand*, and though *-et* and *-ais* sound the same in French, *-et* is quite wrong. *Montagne Creek* in Florence County is perfectly good, but in the same county, the name of another creek which had been variously called *Montague*, *LaMontague*, *La Montagne*, *Lamon-Tangue*, was finally settled by decision of 1954 as *Lamon Tangue Creek*. This is a miserable

decision: the result is neither French nor English but an arbitrary splitting of *La Montagne* the mountain. Evidently it was done as a “phonetic” spelling of the local pronunciation, except for the final *-ue*, which should be *-ne*.

The rural settlement of *Shopiere* (Rock County) has long been an unsolved onomastic puzzle. The best guess is that it is an English spelling of *chaux pierre(s)*, which looks like a clumsy attempt to translate limestone since *chaux* is lime and *pierre* is stone. The correct word for limestone in French is *calcaire*, and if one wanted to combine *chaux* with *pierre(s)* it would have to be *pierre(s) de chaux*. If this is the correct explanation of *Shopiere*, a pseudo-French phrase has been “phonetically” respelled in an English-like way.

Other examples of English “phonetic” respellings of French names include *Baraboo*, for a township, city, and river (Sauk County). This is from the name of Jean Baribault, who had an early fur-trading post on the river. From this the name spread to the other features. Since in the Canadian French of the seventeenth century, *-ault* was actually pronounced *-oo* (witness Sault Ste. Marie as “the Soo”), so in this instance the “phonetic” respelling was not bad. Another such respelling is *Tomah*, an English phonetic spelling of French *Thomas*, the name of an Indian chief. In French *Thomas* neither *h* nor *s* is pronounced, so “Tomah” is a pretty good representation of how the French name would sound to English ears. *Marinette* county and city keep intact in English a French telescoping of Marie-Antoinette, the name given to an Indian “princess,” some of whose descendants are still in the area.

One change for which the Post Office was responsible is *Poynette*. In 1837 a village in Columbia County was platted and was to be named in honor of the well known French-Indian fur trader and interpreter Pierre Paquette or Pauquette. A post office was soon applied for under the form *Pauquette*, but either the writing of *-qu-* was indistinct or it was not carefully read; in any case, it was taken to be *-yn-*, thus producing *Poynette*. Rather than protest the error, the petitioners accepted it. *Pau-* was pronounced *po*, which probably accounts for the *o* of *Poynette*. The intended honor to Pauquette was, however, totally disguised.

As a final example we may mention *Wisconsin Dells* (Columbia County), an area surrounding the *Dalles* of the Wisconsin River. *Dalles* is of course French and refers to flat stones or paving stones – in this case, the stratified pillars of rock at a narrow place in the river, as also to the rapids where the water flows over these flat stones. Because of the similarity of sound, *Dalles* was Englished as *Dells*, though a dell, properly speaking, is not at all the same physiographic feature. This is a case in which an

adopted French word was displaced by an inappropriate English one. *The Dalles* in Shawano County retains the correct French form.

If this were a study of the phonetics or the orthography of Wisconsin place-names, it would have to go much more deeply into the multitudinous forms found in early maps and documents, gather and compare all variants, and follow the processes by which the variants were reduced or one was made official by legislative action – as was the case with *Wisconsin* itself, when the form *Wiskonsan*, supported by Governor James D. Doty, was quashed in 1845.<sup>10</sup> But our purpose here is only to call attention to the more striking examples of competition and change: the presence of Algonkian in many dialects, of Siouan in Winnebago, the arrival of the French from Canada into a territory at the time unexplored by other whites, their establishment of the fur trade and of missions, their supersession by the English and afterwards by the Americans, so that we have examples of

- (1) Indian names surviving pretty nearly intact, though adapted to French and English spelling, mostly as county names: *Menominee*, *Outagamie*, *Ozaukee*, *Winnebago*;
- (2) French translations from Indian (later Englished): *Racine*, *Calumet*;
- (3) Original French names preserved in French spellings, though pronounced in the English way: *Courte Oreilles* and *Couderay*, *Fond du Lac* (pronounced fondle-lack) *Embarrass River*, *Prairie du Chien* (pronounced prairie d'sheen), *Trempealeau* (pronounced trempa-lo), *Butte des Morts* (pronounced beauty-more);
- (4) French names blundered into their present form: *Shopiere*, *Lamon Tanguie*, *De Pere*,<sup>11</sup> *Poynette*, *Wisconsin Dells*;
- (5) French names reasonably well spelled and pronounced in English: *Baraboo*, *Tomah*, *Prairie du Sac*, *Flambeau*.

English-speakers have difficulties with French nasals, especially in final position, where they tend to drop them off; on the other hand, *eau* seems to be easily adopted and properly pronounced *o* in many names: *Eau Claire*, *Eau Pleine*, *Flambeau*, *Little Bateau Lake*. Final consonants spelled but ‘‘silent’’ in French tend to be pronounced in English: *Calumet*, *Courte Oreilles*, *Perrot*, *Embarras(s)*, *Des Plaines* (both *s*'s). Had the transfer gone the other way, from English to French, very much the same kinds of adaptations – some of them blunders – would certainly have taken place. At present the process is in reasonable control, the forms of old or uncertain names being considered and somewhat rationalized by the Wisconsin Geographic Names Council, final acceptance being up to the Board on Geographic Names, in Washington, whose policy is to favor historic names over more recent ones – especially those proposed for commercial reasons – and to choose among competing forms according to established spelling rules. Local pronunciations are recognized, too, but do not often lead to respellings. So the majority of present names are

likely to remain unchanged, reflecting, as many do, their mixed Indian-French-English ancestry.

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## Notes

<sup>1</sup>See my article "The Names of Green Bay, Wisconsin", *Names* 21.3 (1973), 168–178.

<sup>2</sup>Father Paul le Jeune, *Jesuit Relations* 18.230 (1640); Father Hierosme Lalement, *Ibid.* 33.148, 150, (1648–9).

<sup>3</sup>*Names* 21.3, 175–178.

<sup>4</sup>*Ibid.* 175.

<sup>5</sup>For current forms of names see *The Atlas of Wisconsin* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1974).

<sup>6</sup>Alfred Brunson in *Collections of the State Historical Society of Wisconsin*, IV.228 (1859): a "band of Ottawas [who] cut the rims of their ears in such a way as to make them appear short."

<sup>7</sup>Typescript editions published by the Department of Natural Resources, Madison, WI.

<sup>8</sup>Paul le Jeune, 50 ff., passim.

<sup>9</sup>Friedrich Baraga, *A Dictionary of the Otchipwe Language* (Cincinnati: Hemann, 1853).

<sup>10</sup>The present form had been approved by the Congress on April 20, 1836; the edition by the Wisconsin territorial legislature confirmed this.

<sup>11</sup>This is reduced from *La Mission des Pères*, with the clumsy deletion of plural *s*'s and the article. The correct singular would be *du Père*, but it would still falsify the fact, since there were many Fathers at the mission.