

Cerro Cigarro — A Toponymic Fantasy

Bob Julyan

With a modesty that hinted little of its future celebrity, the volcano was born as a mere wisp of steam issuing from a fissure near the base of Cebolleta Mesa south of Grants, New Mexico. Some claimed credit for its discovery. "It stunk," they said in an interview in the *International Journal of Volcanology*, noting its distinctive sulfurous odor. But except for the some off-color jokes circulating in San Fidel about the mesa becoming flatulent, no more attention was paid to the phenomenon until the following spring.

That was when seismologists with the N.M. Bureau of Mines and Mineral Resources in Socoraro noticed an inexplicable increase in seismic activity south of Grants. Although evidence of geologically recent volcanism was everywhere in the region—cinder cones, lava fields, and so forth—no activity had been noted in historic times. Still, as one scientist put it as he pointed to his instruments, "*Something's* going on out there."

So a team of investigators was dispatched to the area, where they discovered that the epicenter of the activity was the little fissure, which by this time had grown to a full-fledged jet of gas and soot eructating from an orifice that was assuming an ominous conical shape. An urgent series of tests revealed that a magma chamber had appeared beneath the mesa and was venting upward. "I'm proud to announce the birth of New Mexico's latest volcano," a geophysicist announced at a professional meeting. Needing to identify the new feature, geologists called it Site UTM 38,88,000 Meters North, 3,51,000 Meters West, after its Universal Transverse Mercator coordinates. It was a handy, if prosaic, label; it accurately identified the volcano's position, leaving no possibility that it could be confused with any other site. And if the label 38,88,000N/3,51,000W lacked romance, so what? After all, the world's second highest mountain bore a similar name—K2—derived from a surveyor's notation.

In the meantime, however, the infant volcano had not escaped the notice of the nearby local peoples. The Acoma Indians, whose reservation included most of Cebolleta Mesa, had been aware of the volcano from the beginning.

They called it a name that in their Keresan language meant “little smoking one.” No one at Acoma knew or cared who first gave the volcano that name — it just evolved — but it served the Acomans well; whenever the name was used, everyone knew exactly what it referred to. And it was a name the Indians felt comfortable with; it was akin to the names they had for similar features: their name for Mt. Taylor, a massive if extinct volcano, was *kaweeshtiwew*, a name referring specifically to that mountain, and they knew the nearby lava field — known to the Spanish as *El Malpais* ‘the bad land’ — as *tsimasha*, a name that could be translated simply as “the lava field.”

The Navajos, too, were aware of the new volcano; like their Acoma neighbors, they gave the little volcano a straightforward descriptive name — “little mountain that smells bad” — a name whose sole purpose was identification. Again, it was a name in keeping with those they had for other features in the area; their name for Mt. Taylor was *tso dzil* ‘big, tall mountain,’ though they also called it by the ceremonial name *dzil dotlizi*. Not all their names were prosaic, however; the Navajo name for the El Malpais lava field was *te’itsoh bidit ninyeezh*, ‘where the giant’s blood coagulated.’

In the nearby Hispanic villages, the earlier references to the volcano’s odor were not forgotten, and while a name such as “the farter” was too indelicate for general use, there was no objection when a few people began calling the volcano *El Cigarro* ‘the cigar,’ a not very complimentary reference to its smoke and smell. As with the Indian names, it was never formally bestowed; like a stray dog it just appeared in the villages, and without anyone really claiming ownership it eventually was accepted. *El Cigarro* wasn’t a fancy name but it had a certain color that appealed to the Hispanic folk imagination, which had created such names as *Los Organos*, the “pipe organ” mountains near Las Cruces; *Sierra Sandia* ‘watermelon mountains’; *Sierra Florida*, the “flowery mountains” near Deming; *Cerro Magdalena*, near the village of Magdalena, named for the supposed profile of Mary Magdalene on the mountain; and much closer, in the Puerco River valley, *Cerro Alesna*, a volcanic plug named for its resemblance to a “shoemaker’s awl.”

The local Indian and Hispanic names for the new volcano, however, were “unofficial,” and when the state’s news media discovered the volcano, they ducked the question of what to call it by simply calling it “the volcano” or using such circuitous phrases as “geologists say the unique geological feature....” Like an infant not yet baptized, the “unique geological feature” was too new to have a formal name.

But this situation clearly could not continue for long, particularly as the infant was loud, boisterous – and growing rapidly. By summer a recognizable cinder cone ten meters high had formed. By fall, the cone was a hundred meters high and still pushing upward. A towering plume of smoke and ash could be seen as far away as Albuquerque; at night orange and yellow flares shot into the desert darkness; like an artillery barrage constant detonations shattered the desert silence.

Soon national – indeed, international – attention was focused on the volcano. Teams of scientists jostled each other as they sought priority in studying the mountain. Representatives of every major newspaper and magazine, including *National Geographic*, had reporters and photographers on the scene. Tourists altered their vacation routes so as to pass near the volcano. The “unique geological feature” had become more than just another roadside attraction; it was New Mexico’s most famous personality.

It needed a name.

“In view of the longstanding and unselfish service of the people of New Mexico by Rep. H.A. Montoya,” read the bill introduced into the New Mexico Legislature that fall, “this act officially establishes that the volcano newly formed in Cibola County henceforth shall bear the official designation of Rep. H.A. Montoya Peak and thus shall be known in all official publications, maps, and documents.” Rep. H.A. Montoya was a legislator from Santa Fe who had retired that year after representing his district for thirty-four years. The bill was introduced by his successor. When some people objected that perhaps the volcano should not bear a politician’s name, the legislator pointed to the list of counties named for New Mexico political figures – Catron, Otero, Chaves, De Baca, Luna, and Curry.

A short letter to the editor in the *Albuquerque Journal* epitomized the public’s reaction to the proposal: “All a politician and a volcano have in common is that they both give off lots of hot air. Let’s find a better name.” Except in Rep. Montoya’s former district, the proposal had little support. Other legislators wondered why one of their acquaintances should not be honored instead. Especially vehement were protests from Cibola County politicians; after all, they argued, the volcano was in their district.

Soon a host of other bills, proposing other names, were introduced. Nor did they all advocate naming the volcano for government figures. For example, several bills were introduced on behalf of various tourism and development groups, who felt the name should reinforce the volcano’s already considerable

tourist appeal. The State Tourism and Travel Bureau favored naming the volcano *Mt. Vesuvius*, after the famous Italian volcano — “high name recognition,” they said. The Albuquerque Chamber of Commerce proposed the name *Vulcan’s Oven* — “catchy, easy to remember.” The Grants Chamber of Commerce wanted *Fire Pits of Hell* — “very colorful.”

“We see the name as an important component of an overall, marketing strategy,” said a spokesperson of one of these groups as she presented legislators with ad-agency mock-ups of brochures in which the name was incorporated into a logo featuring the mountain. “Think of the impact names have had upon the marketing of ski resorts in New Mexico, places like *Angel Fire* and *Powderpuff Mountain*.”

In the meantime, still another development was unfolding. The host of the popular television game show *Wheel of Fortune* had heard of the volcano; he thought it would be a creative promotional idea to have the volcano named for the show in a ceremony telecast from the volcano itself. “Just think,” he said, “while the volcano rumbles ominously in the background, we can spin the wheel. Will it bring fortune — or calamity?” When someone pointed out that Ralph Edwards had already used this gimmick with his 1950s show *Truth or Consequences*, the host simply beamed, “All the more reason!”

Still other proposals were being pushed by various interest groups in the state. A historical society in Grants wanted the volcano named *Mount Bud*, for H.L. “Bud” Rice, an early businessman in the area for whom the settlement of Budville was named. A Mormon group wanted it named *Mount Moroni*, for a figure in the *Book of Mormon*, just as was the nearby town of Ramah. The N.M. Cattleman’s Association wanted to name it *Mount King*, for the former governor whose family ranch was nearby, by analogy with the southeastern New Mexico town of Loving, also name for a prominent rancher. The Sierra Club wanted the volcano declared a wilderness area, which would mean it would not be named at all, in accordance with current federal policies regarding new names in wilderness areas.

When the legislature could not agree upon a name, many groups submitted their proposals directly to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names in Washington, the agency that must approve any new name before it appears on a federal map. This group put the various name proposals on their meeting docket — where they stayed. Although proponents of the various names regularly appeared at the USBGN’s monthly meetings, no action ever was taken, and the proposals always were “deferred,” pending further study and information.

The New Mexico names authority, the Geographic Names Subcommittee of the N.M. Geographic Information Council, also submitted their recommendation — they didn't like any of the proposed names — but because no one in New Mexico had ever heard of this group, their voices went unheard. By this time, some people observed, the controversies surrounding the volcano's names were generating more heat than the volcano itself.

At this point the volcano died.

Over a period of weeks the eruptions began to occur less frequently, then shrank to a sputter, then ceased altogether. The smoke plume became a steam wisp again. Geologists performed what amounted to an autopsy and pronounced that the volcano had released all the pressure from the magma chamber and that the volcano's vents now were plugged with solidified lava. In other words, the volcano had died of arteriosclerosis.

With the death of the volcano the clamor for a name also died. Tourists had no interest in visiting a geological phenomenon that did nothing but sit there, so the tourist and development groups turned their attentions elsewhere; the fancy brochures were forgotten. So was the television game show proposal. To reporters, writers, and photographers, the volcano had become like last year's rock star. Scientific reputations were not to be made studying extinct volcanoes, which are commonplace, so scientific expeditions dwindled.

A profound disappointment set in; one newspaper columnist referred to the volcano as "Halley's Volcano."

Geologists continued to monitor Site 38,88,000/3,51,000W, but they reported the new volcano was now resting in peace with the area's other extinct volcanoes. Soon the first sprigs of vegetation appeared on the cinder cone, like grass growing on a grave mound.

But if the public at large had forgotten the late volcano, the local people had not. The Navajos and the Indians of Acoma did not forget that something new had been added to the physical universe; its names survived in their languages. And in San Fidel and nearby villages, when children were admonished to take baths, their parents would say, "You smell as bad as El Cigarro."

Albuquerque, New Mexico

MEETINGS IN 1988 AND 1989

1988

September 7-10: Twelfth Annual Western States Geographic Names Conference, Holiday Inn Crowne Plaza, Seattle, WA. Contact Bonnie Bunning, Dept. of Natural Resources, John A. Cherberg Bldg., Mail Stop QW-21, Olympia, WA 98504

September 11-16: ACSM-ASPRS Fall Convention, Virginia Beach, VA. Section "Place Names on Maps." Contact William G. Loy, 2683 Elinor St., Eugene, OR 97403

October 1: Fourteenth Annual Connecticut Onomastic Symposium, Eastern Connecticut State University, Willimantic, CT. Contact Dean A. Reilein, 50 Mountain Road, Mansfield Center, CT 06250

October 14-16: Annual Meeting of the *American Name Society*, jointly with the Eighth Annual Meeting of the North Central Name Society, Newberry Library and McCormick Center Hotel, Chicago, IL. Contact Laurence Seits, English Dept., Waubensee Community College, Sugar Grove, IL 60554

November 3-5: Midwest Modern Language Association, *American Name Society* Section, Marriott Pavilion Hotel, St. Louis, MO. Contact Rhoda Orme-Johnson, Dept. of Literature and Languages, Maharishi International University, Fairfield, IA 52556.

November 18-23: National Council of Teachers of English, *American Name Society* Section, St. Louis, MO. Contact Donald Lance, Dept. of English, 231 Arts and Sciences Bldg., University of Missouri, Columbia, MO 65201

November 28-29: Mid-Hudson Modern Language Association Conference, Literary Onomastics Section, Marist College, Poughkeepsie, NY. Contact Wayne H. Finke, Romance Languages, Baruch College, New York, NY 10010

December 27-30: *American Name Society* Meeting, in conjunction with the Modern Language Association Annual Convention, New Orleans, LA. Contact Roger L. Payne, PO Box 3356, Reston, VA 22090 (Note deadline for receiving non-MLA abstracts: Sept. 1, 1988)

1989

March 30-April 1: Northeast Modern Language Association, Literary Onomastics Section, Wilmington, DE. Contact William A. Francis, 922 Zeletta Dr., Akron, OH 44319

November 10-11: *American Name Society* Annual Meeting at the University of Kentucky, Lexington, KY. Contact Edward Callary, English Dept., Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115 or Robert Rennick, 312 Riverside Dr., Prestonsburg, KY 41653

December 27-30: *American Name Society* Meeting, in conjunction with the Modern Language Association Annual Convention, Washington, DC. Contact Edward Callary, English Dept., Northern Illinois University, DeKalb, IL 60115 (Note extremely early deadline for reception of abstracts: March 1, 1989!)

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