

Special Report

A Progress Report for The Placename Survey of the United States

Since my last report in these pages (*Names* 38.4 [December 1990]: 392–94), the Commission of The Placename Survey of the United States (PLANSUS) has met three times, falling into a pattern that is approximately semiannual. For those readers who are unfamiliar with our Commission, our charge from the American Name Society is to promote and coordinate placename studies throughout the US.

PLANSUS was first established in 1963 and was reconstituted in 1988. Since then, we, the members of the Commission, have aimed our planning at the storage, sorting, and retrieval of information in computer data bases. As the result of discussing many approaches, our consensus is that we should use the data, methodology, and other resources of the federal government as much as possible – specifically, the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS), operated by the US Geological Survey. We recognize that GNIS is limited to one kind of information, i.e., information about *features* and their locations. However, the GNIS information is generally a useful base to which placename scholars can add other types of information, e.g., about the *namer*, the *language*, and/or the prior *reference* of the name.

Recent work of the Commission has come through its two subcommittees, *Terminology* and *Format and Attributes*, both chaired by Roger Payne. The Terminology Committee is compiling a glossary of terms and definitions used in toponymic study. It will piggyback on the work of a United Nations committee, which is preparing a similar list of terms. Sometime in the spring of 1992 the subcommittee will submit to PLANSUS a list which will include the terms and definitions agreed upon by the UN plus additions and elaborations specific to the US. At our December 1992 meeting in New York the Commission hopes to give its final approval and plan for publication. Such a glossary should enhance the coordination of research already underway as well as facilitate the training of people newly interested in toponymy.

The goal of the Format and Attributes Committee is to describe the types of information generally useful in placename study and to specify standard ways in which such information should be expressed. Because of the great range of information, the Commission has decided that a distinction needs to be made between *required* types of information and *desired* types, and that some desired types should be given priority rankings. At our most recent meeting in San Francisco (December 1991) the Commission voted to identify four types of information as *required* for placename studies to be recognized as a part of The Placename Survey: (1) the name, (2) type of feature, (3) location, (4) source of information. Furthermore, these types of information should be expressed in data fields *tentatively* described as follows:

1. **Name** – free form exactly as found in source.
2. **Type of Feature** – any designation is acceptable, but it is highly desirable to specify the most appropriate category set forth in GNIS. Designations not in GNIS could be converted to a GNIS category.

394 Special Report

3. **Location** — this is to be expressed in any of several data fields, listed here in order of preference:

- a. geographic coordinates
- b. civil divisions
- c. map reference
- d. county
- e. distance and direction from another well-known feature

4. **Source** — the indication of where the information was found, using the MLA guide for documentation or some other standard bibliographic citation of the text or map; or the name, age, gender, residence, and employment of a respondent.

Three other types of information have been discussed as highly desirable. First, a unique identity number might distinguish different states or counties as well as two nearby features with the same name (e.g., *Bear Creek*). Of course, a central agency would have to assign identity numbers to avoid overlap. Second, an indication of pronunciation would show linguistic variation important for the study of dialects. There has been considerable discussion, but the committee has not decided on a format for this data (IPA or other). Third, there is general agreement that every effort should be made to list all variant spellings and alternate names, but again the best format is not yet clear. Perhaps variant spellings and alternate names should be separate categories.

One other data field that has been adopted by the Commission is the classification system developed by Lewis L. McArthur. As reported in these pages a year ago, it is a classification of what the name refers to other than, in addition to, or prior to the feature. It includes seven categories: *biographic*, *physical*, *biologic*, *activity*, *coinage*, *miscellaneous*, and *unknown*.

Many more kinds of information need to be discussed by the Format and Attributes Committee. For example, no type of information or data discussed here pertains to the *namer*. Thus we expect the discussions and work of this subcommittee to continue for a long time to come.

In the meantime other action was initiated at our most recent meeting. Most importantly, Kelsie Harder asked to step down as Director of the Placename Survey, and Don Orth agreed to assume the responsibilities of the position. Don will have close ties with and considerable support from the federal agencies involved with name collecting. Thus we look forward to increased coordination with all government agencies (perhaps the state as well as the federal) in terms of both personnel and types of information. At the end of our San Francisco meeting there was some vague talk about how regional centers for PLANSUS might be linked to some of the GNIS contractors.

If you have comments or suggestions about these actions of the Commission or the general progress of the Survey, please send them along to me. We are just getting started, it is an endless task, and we will need some help. I hope to write reports for these pages in the future.

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