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Placenames in Paradise: Robert Marshall and the Naming of the Alaska Wilderness

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Abstract

Pioneer conservationist Robert Marshall was the first explorer to compile a detailed, accurate map of some 15,000 square miles in the central Brooks Range of northern Alaska. Altogether, during four expeditions to the Upper Koyukuk between 1929 and 1939, Marshall added a total of 169 placenames to the map of Alaska, one of the largest number of names given or recorded by an individual in the twentieth century.

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Robert Marshall loved the blank spaces on the map, the empty quarters on the globe. He was most at home in the wilderness, in Terra Incognita, the old cartographer's mysterious domain once inhabited only by dragons and sea serpents. Knowing the joy of exploration, he devoted his life to the preservation of wilderness.

Born in a wealthy New York family in 1901, Marshall often felt as if he had come on the scene a century too late for real exploring like that done by his heroes Meriwether Lewis and William Clark. "My ideology was definitely formed on a Lewis and Clark pattern," he wrote in 1933, "and for a time I really felt that while life might still be pleasant, it could never be the great adventure it might have been if I had only been born in time to join the Lewis and Clark Expedition. It was years before I came to reflect that had I been born at that time, I would probably have been bumped off by the Indians or have died of typhoid fever before I was twenty-five" (Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness* 1–2).

Despite his disappointment at being a child of the twentieth century, Marshall nevertheless discovered a vast region in 1929 in the central Brooks Range of Northern Alaska where he could emulate his boyhood heroes; he became the first explorer to compile a detailed, accurate map of some 15,000 square miles in the drainage of the Upper Koyukuk River (see Fig. 1). His sketch map and report on the northern Koyukuk Valley published by the Geological Survey in 1934 included dozens of names of geographic features never before included on any map (*Reconnaissance*) (see Fig.2). With his

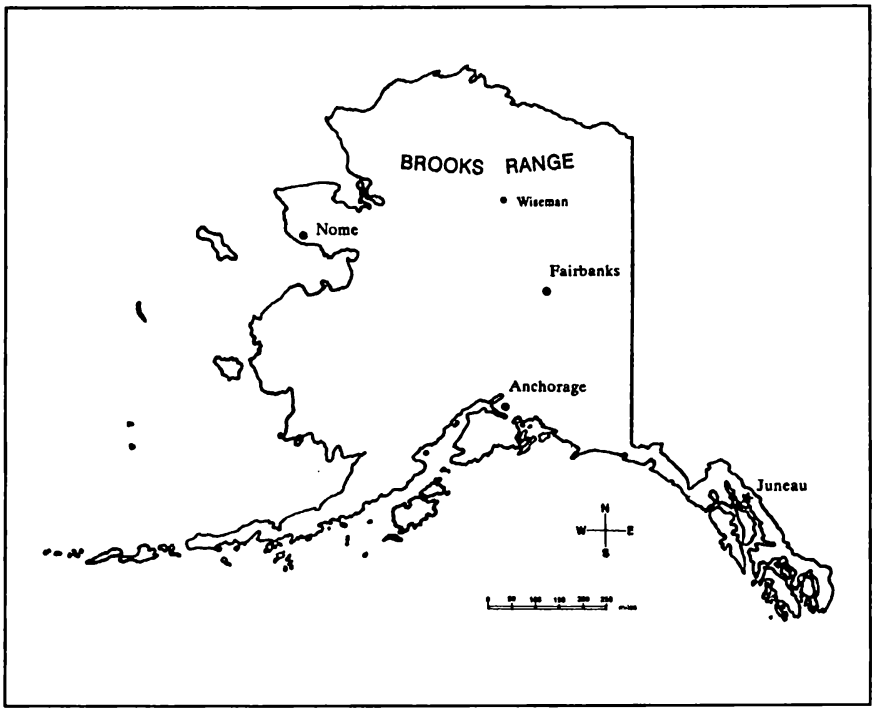

Fig. 1. Alaska, showing location of Brooks Range.

map, two books about the Koyukuk (one published posthumously), and other writings, Marshall made the previously blank spaces of the central Brooks Range one of the best known regions in Alaska.[1]

Bob Marshall first learned to love wilderness, in the Adirondack Mountains of New York State, from his father, Louis Marshall, a prominent New York City constitutional lawyer. While still a teenager the younger Marshall began his serious exploration of the Adirondacks, climbing his first mountain peak at age fifteen. By that time he had decided to become a forester, a career which he thought would enable him to enjoy, protect, and study nature. Forestry seemed to be the ideal profession. "I love the woods and I love solitude," he wrote while a junior in high school. "I like the various forms of scientific work a forester must do. I should hate to spend the greater part of my lifetime in a stuffy office or in a crowded city. If I can combine my greatest pleasure with a useful work, then I shall have a great advantage over most business and professional men" (qtd. in George Marshall, "Robert Marshall as Writer" 19).

True to his childhood ambition, Marshall earned a B.S. in forestry at Syracuse University in 1924, a Master of Forestry at Harvard in 1928, and

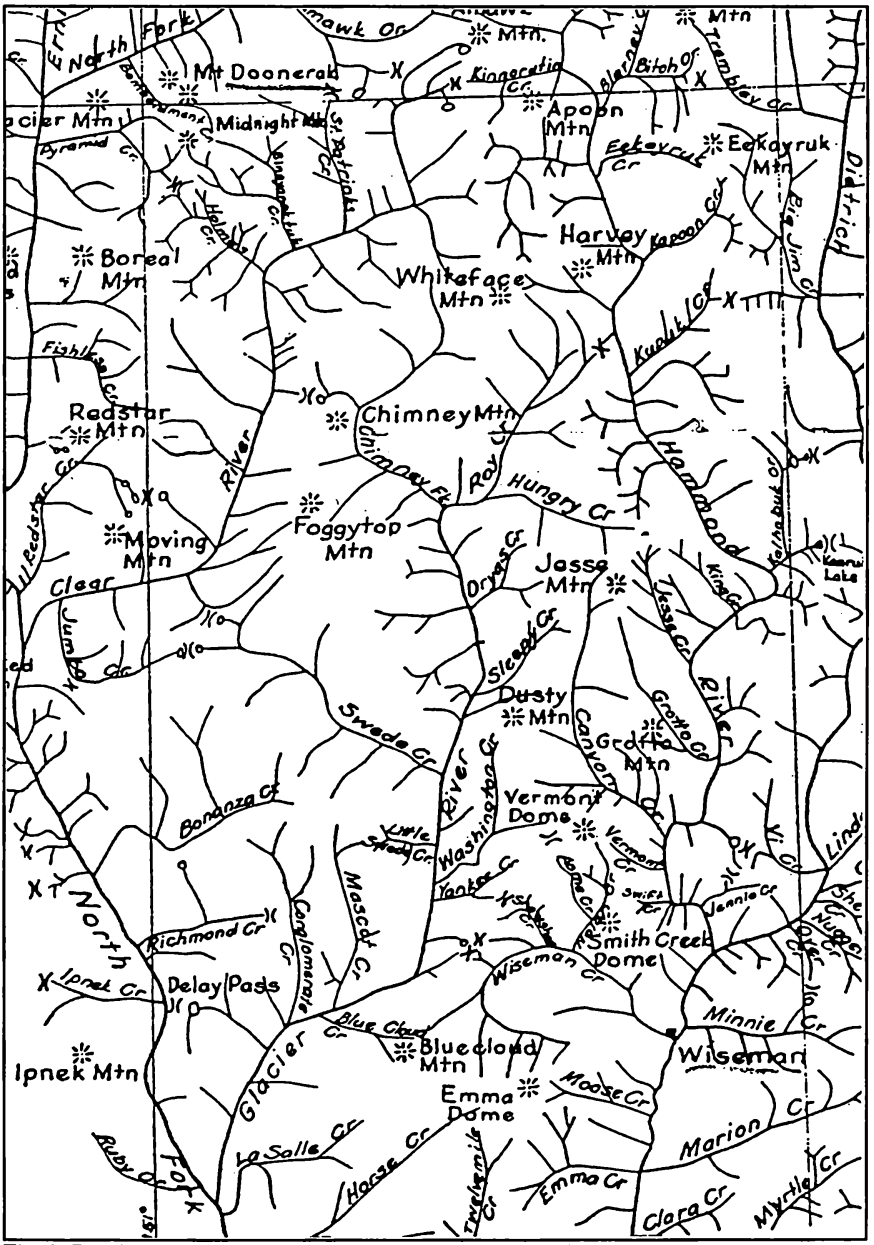

Fig. 2. Detail from a sketch map drawn by Marshall, showing some of the placenames he applied. The vertical lines are 151°W and 150°W and the horizontal line near the top is 68°N. The village of Wiseman, on the Middle Fork of the Koyukuk River, is in the lower right hand corner; the larger river indicated on the lower left is the North Fork. Scale: 1 inch = 8 miles.

a Ph.D. at Johns Hopkins Laboratory of Plant Physiology in 1930. His doctoral dissertation was entitled: "An Experimental Study of the Water Relations of Seedling Conifers with Special Reference to Wilting."

During his career as a professional forester Marshall worked for both the US Forest Service and the Office of Indian Affairs, and played a major role in the creation of the wilderness movement in the United States. He struggled to convince others of his belief that a portion of America's public domain should remain forever free from roads and all other development. He was the driving force behind the organization in 1935 of the Wilderness Society, the group which has rightfully been called Bob Marshall's lengthened shadow. Marshall urged those who cherished the "freedom of the wilderness" to unite in order to resist "the tyrannical ambition of civilization to conquer every niche on the whole earth." To Marshall, wilderness was not an abstract concept; it was life itself. "For me," he said, "and for thousands with similar inclinations, the most important passion of life is the overpowering desire to escape periodically from the strangling clutch of a mechanistic civilization. To us the enjoyment of solitude, complete independence, and the beauty of undefiled panoramas is absolutely essential to happiness" ("Impressions" 10).

Marshall's quest for happiness led him in 1929 to the central Brooks Range of Northern Alaska and the isolated mining camp of Wiseman, "200 miles beyond the edge of the Twentieth Century." He chose to explore the central Brooks Range, as he later explained, because it (along with the region southwest of Mount McKinley) was one of only two "really large sections" in Alaska that had not yet been charted by the US Geological Survey (*Alaska Wilderness* 3).

"At that time I had the notion that exploration should have a social justification," Marshall wrote. "So I pretended to myself that the real reason for this expedition was to add to the scientific knowledge of tree growth at northern timber line" (Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness* 3). He enjoyed his two months in the Brooks Range immensely, saying the best part was the freshness of the country, "the feeling that at last one was getting away from the contamination of other human beings" (letter to "Lincoln," 3 April 1930, box 1, file 3).

"I cannot say that I learned very much either about tree growth or timberline," he said. "But I did come away with a vivid impression that the few white and Eskimo people who were scattered throughout this remote region were on the whole the happiest folk I had ever encountered" (Marshall, *Arctic Village* 3). In a world tormented by the Great Depression and the rise of Fascism, many sensitive souls yearned for a better way of life. Marshall believed that on the Middle Fork of the Koyukuk River in

the heart of the wilderness of the central Brooks Range – ninety miles from the nearest church, 150 miles from the nearest doctor, and two hundred airline miles to the nearest railroad, automobile, or electric light in Fairbanks – he had found the happiest civilization on earth.

In September 1930 Marshall returned to Wiseman and lived there for the next 13 months, conducting a year-long economic and sociological study of civilization on the Koyukuk. In 1933 he published *Arctic Village*, his acclaimed "biography" of a wilderness civilization. In his book he recorded a wealth of intimate information about the lives of the people in Wiseman, including their gossip, finances, sex lives, political philosophies, religious beliefs, conversations, quarrels, feuds, and much more. This intimate portrait of the community of Wiseman in the early 1930s is one of the most revealing and inspiring books ever written about the American frontier. Like Henry David Thoreau's *Walden*, Marshall's *Arctic Village* is one man's account of the beauty and richness of life in the wilderness, the story of his search for happiness.

Marshall's map and reconnaissance report on the Northern Koyukuk Valley published the year after *Arctic Village* by the United States Geological Survey is also a classic in its field. No explorer in the history of Alaska ever attempted to develop a more thorough and systematic approach to the naming of geographical features. His published USGS report and map and his unpublished notes and correspondence reveal a great deal about his method of placenaming, an art to which he applied the same rigorous standards of precision that he applied to nearly everything (*Reconnaissance*).

At a young age Marshall had developed an insatiable thirst for precision and a love for compiling statistics that would serve him well as a scientist, a cartographer, and an observer of human nature. As a man who would spend much of his professional life counting tree rings, statistics were both his vocation and his avocation. Never satisfied with unsubstantiated generalizations or vague theories, Marshall was constantly measuring, listing and compiling, and dreaming up imaginative ways to correlate the data he had discovered. He found the mental diversion of counting to be endlessly rewarding. "Indeed," Marshall's biographer says, "his lifelong penchant for compiling statistics was so strong as to seem compulsive" (Glover 22).

He was a baseball fan and loved to read boxscores. Drawn to the study of history, he acquired an encyclopedic knowledge of dates and anniversaries, especially relating to the Civil War. If anyone was likely to remember the birthday of General Grant, it was Bob Marshall.

Marshall devised a "composite view rating" to numerically evaluate the scenery on his mountain hikes; he tabulated the best days, months and

years of his life; he listed the best books he had read; he ranked his best friends and his top ten girl friends; he listed the top two hundred military leaders of the Civil War; he rated his friendship with the seventy-six whites who lived in the Koyukuk; he ranked the top thirty-six foresters in the United States; he counted the number of pancakes his companions ate for breakfast and how fast they ate them. He added up the number of swear words lumberjacks uttered at mealtime.

Marshall's love of precision and his interests in hiking and mountain climbing made him a natural collector and giver of placenames. His first map of the Koyukuk compiled during his 1929 expedition was a rather crudely drawn sketch of the North Fork of the Koyukuk and the Hammond River drainages. In April 1930 he mailed a dozen copies of the completed map to his friend and hiking companion Jesse Allen. "I hope you will pardon the names that were put in the map," Marshall wrote Allen. "I did not mean to come in as an outsider and christen your own country, but merely had to put something down so that I could describe where my pictures were taken" (Marshall, letter to Jesse Allen, 3 April 1930, box 1, file 3). As a person who insisted on precision, Marshall found that officially naming unnamed geographical features was simply another system of recording previously unrecorded data. On his winter trip up the Clear River in 1931, undertaken to determine whether it headed on the Arctic Divide, Marshall said he and his hiking companion Ernie Johnson (whom Marshall called the Daniel Boone of the Koyukuk) gave names to some of the valleys simply "to enable us to discuss the geography without pointing ..." (Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness* 72).

Yet it is also clear from reading Marshall's journals that he took enormous pleasure in giving names to unnamed features. It was all part of the thrill of exploring areas "unknown to human gaze," or finding regions as he said that were "uncontaminated" by human touch, with "no musty signs of human occupation" (*Doonerak* 21; *Alaska Wilderness* 49). When he came upon Loon Lake (which he named for the loons he saw nearby on Loon Creek), Marshall felt as if he had been transported back to the beginning of time. "No sight or sound or smell or feeling even remotely hinted of men or their creations," he wrote. "It seemed as if time had dropped away a million years and we were back in a primordial world. It was like discovering an unpeopled universe where only the laws of nature held sway" (*Alaska Wilderness* 103–04).

For Marshall one of the joys of exploring unnamed wilderness was the sublime pleasure of feeling as if he was the first man on earth. Archaeological evidence would indicate, however, that there are probably few places in North America, no matter how remote, where human beings

have not ventured sometime during the last 10,000 years, even if signs of previous human occupation are not clearly evident. Modern anthropologists and students of native place names would also argue that most supposedly unnamed geographical features in Alaska and elsewhere actually have old and well-established names dating back hundreds or even thousands of years. Because of language difficulties and lack of information, only a tiny percentage of native placenames have ever been recorded and fewer still have made their way onto official maps. Marshall, like his heroes Lewis and Clark, was actually exploring creeks and valleys which native Americans had traveled for hundreds of years.[2]

In *Make Prayers to the Raven*, anthropologist Richard Nelson's evocative study of the Koyukuk people, Nelson traces this confusion over the supposed namelessness of "virgin wilderness" to the western concept of wilderness itself. "The fact that Westerners identify this remote country as wilderness," Nelson wrote, "reflects their inability to conceive of occupying and utilizing an environment without fundamentally altering its natural state. But the Koyukon people and their ancestors have done precisely this over a protracted span of time" (246).

Though Robert Marshall may not have completely realized all the rhythms of native life and land use, he admired and utilized as best he could native knowledge of the geography of the Koyukuk. Ekok, one of his Eskimo friends in Wiseman, drew Marshall a map of the lower forty miles of the Alatna River "bend by bend" from memory (*Alaska Wilderness* 87). Marshall also respected the precedence of native names. Generally, if he could determine the native name for a feature, and pronounce it, he placed it on the map.[3] Otherwise he tried to give what he thought were "appropriate euphonious Eskimo words" to prominent features (see Table 1), such as *Pinnyanaktuk Creek*, meaning "absolute perfection of beauty," *Karillyukpuk Creek*, meaning "very rugged," *Alapah Mountain*, meaning "cold," *Binnyanaktuk Creek*, meaning "superlatively rugged," and *Nakshakluk*, for "bum pass." (Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness* 72, 20; *North Doonerak* 6, 15). He named the Tinayguk River after the Eskimo word for moose, preferring it to the over-worked name of "West Fork" (Orth 968).

Marshall was honest enough to admit that his system of applying Native American place names was not scientific. His name for one rugged valley across the Arctic Divide, which he called the "most impressive view of my life," was one such example. "I named this remarkable valley and the river which drained it Kenunga, which is Eskimo for knife edge," Marshall wrote, "thus presumably putting myself in the same shady class of nomenclators as the poet Charles Fenno Hoffman who, nearly a century

Table 1. Examples of place names derived from Inupiaq given or recorded by Robert Marshall in the central Brooks Range. Compiled with the assistance of James Nageak, Alaska Native Language Center.

Name of Feature	Meaning of Word in Inupiaq
Alapah Mountain	cold
Amawk Mountain	wolf
Apoon Mountain	snow
Arrigetch Peaks	fingers extended
Binnyanaktuk Creek	superlatively rugged
Ipnek Creek	sheep
Karillyukpuk Creek	very rugged
Katiktak Mountain	white
Kenunga Creek	knife edge
Kinnorutin Creek	you are crazy
Kollutuk Mountain	sheep horn dipper
Mashooshalluk Creek	from word for "wild potato plant"
Mount Doonerak	spirit mountain
Nahtuk Mountain	owl
Oolah Mountain	ulu (scraping tool)
Pamichtuk Lake	other
Pegeeluk Creek	not very good
Publituk Creek	from word "denoting the hollow, drumlike sound one hears while walking on shell ice"
Shukok Creek	from word referring to "kind of rock found on the creek"
Sukakpak Mountain	marten deadfall

before, had taken the Seneca word Tahawus and placed it on a mountain [in the Adirondacks] the Senecas had never seen" (Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness* 46).

If a native place name seemed to be too harsh on the ears or too difficult to pronounce, Marshall felt compelled to replace it. As he stated in his USGS reconnaissance report, "A few Indian names, such as Sackit-lannahoyoza ... seemed a trifle too cumbersome for preservation and have been replaced by others" (Marshall, *Reconaissance* 253). Such concerns did not stop him from proposing the longest native word he knew, a thirty-six-letter word for the number *nine*, for an unnamed creek in the Henshaw River drainage. As Marshall explained later, he had very little data on the Henshaw drainage and believe that part of his map "looked abnormally blank so I thought it would be swell to call a nameless creek there 'Nine Creek' only using the word spelled out to fill in space and

balance the blanks of the map. Unfortunately the Geological Survey would not approve it so there is no *Geeshlowdaytawtawndennakeeshakollyay Creek*" (Marshall, letter to editor of *Alaska Miner*, 19 May 1939, box 2, file 41). Another name derived from the native tongue which he failed to get anyone to take seriously was *Shinningnellichshunga* ("I am Sleepy") *Creek*. During his 1939 exploration Marshall explained that he had named Shinningnellichshunga Creek on a tiring hike eight years earlier, but his hiking partners stubbornly refused to accept it. "[Ken] Harvey was still jocularly rolling the name on his tongue," Marshall wrote. "Jesse [Allen] boycotted it and refused to say anything lengthier than Sleepy Creek" (Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness* 162). Ultimately the US Geological Survey agreed with Jesse Allen and adopted the name *Sleepy* for the creek instead of *Shinningnellichshunga* (Orth 888).

Another whimsical name that Marshall applied was more permanent. After learning that a stream which he and Ernie Johnson had believed flowed across the Arctic Divide was instead a tributary of the Hammond River, Marshall named it in commemoration of their mistake; he dubbed it *Kinnorutin Creek*, Inupiaq for "you are crazy" (Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness* 75). *Alhamblar Mountain*, a name which sounds as if it might be from another language, was actually Marshall's own word, coined from the first letters of the names of the three streams flowing from the mountain: *Alinement Creek, Hammond River*, and *Blarney Creek* (Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness*, 162).

Whether he chose the Eskimo language or English, Marshall often preferred descriptive names, such as *Valley of Precipices, Hanging Glacier Mountain, Fishless Creek*, and *Moving Mountain* (see Table 2). He named Cladonia Creek after the genus of lichens *Cladonia*, commonly known as Reindeer Moss, and Dryas Creek after a white flower of the genus *Dryus* which grew near the stream (Orth 220, 285). One of Marshall's most evocative and famous names—*Gates of the Arctic*—which is now the name for the National Park created in the central Brooks Range in 1980, was Marshall's term for the pass between two rugged peaks astride the North Fork of the Koyukuk River. Boreal Mountain on the east and Frigid Crags on the west seemed to guard the Arctic wilderness, serving as a "monumental entrance to a land of mystery" (Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness* 12; "Doonerak" 10).

If not descriptive, Marshall almost always favored names with some local connection, though he did name Chimney Mountain because it "bore a striking resemblance to Chimney Rock in the Kaniksu National Forest in Idaho," and named Whiteface Mountain "because of its resemblance to a peak of the same name in the Adirondacks" (Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness* 68; Orth 1043). In general, however, most of Marshall's placenames were rooted in the local environment. He did not approve of naming features

Table 2. Examples of descriptive mountain names given or recorded by Robert Marshall in the central Brooks Range.

Blackface Mountain	Grotto Mountain
Bluecloud Mountain	Hanging Glacier Mountain
Boreal Mountain	Inclined Mountain
Chimney Mountain	Marshmallow Mountain
Cockedhat Mountain	Moving Mountain
Dusty Mountain	Redstar Mountain
Eroded Mountain	Rumbling Mountain
Fan Mountain	Slatepile Mountain
Frigid Crags	Three River Mountain
Gates of the Arctic	Twoprong Mountain

after famous people with no ties to the region. "It is a question," Marshall wrote, "whether glorious, cold, unrelated fame, or vital lifetime association with a region is more fittingly honored in naming geographic features. Personally, in cases of conflict, I am all for the little person, whose life had a genuine connection with the object to be named" (letter to Dr. Flick, 22 September 1928, Box 1, file 2).

Marshall faithfully followed his preference for local names in the Koyukuk (see Table 3). He explained his system in a letter to Florence Tobin, daughter of August Tobin, a well-known Koyukuk miner:

> Wherever possible, I took the old and well established names of the region, many of which although they had been in use for over 30 years had never been recorded. There were, however, dozens and dozens of mountains, creeks and lakes which have never been named. Among the names in use for a long time but never put on a map were Tobin Creek and Tobin Mountain in the Wild River country. I am very proud to have been able to add these to the American geographical nomenclature. (27 July 1933, box 1, file 16)

Unlike many explorers, Marshall named nothing for himself, his friends from home, or his family members. In fact he said the only name he gave to a "stranger" was *Holmes Creek*, which he explored on the ninetieth birthday of Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes. (Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness* 72) He also paid tribute to a prominent Alaskan historical figure with the *Allen River*, in honor of Lieutenant Henry T. Allen, who had explored the Copper, Tanana, and Koyukuk Rivers in 1885. During Allen's expedition the young lieutenant had apparently named a stream the *Allenkaket River* in honor of himself, but local usage of the native name *Alatna* was so well established that Allen's name was neglected. Marshall

Table 3. Examples of personal place names given or recorded by Robert Marshall in the central Brooks Range.

Feature Name	Person Named For
Allen River	Alaskan Army explorer Lieut. Henry T. Allen
Al's Mountain	Al Retzlaf, resident of Wiseman
Big Jim Creek	Big Jim, an Eskimo elder in Wiseman
Ernie Creek and Ernie Pass	Ernie Johnson, resident of Wiseman
Harvey Mountain	Ken Harvey, resident of Wisema
Holmes Creek	Justice Oliver Wendell Holmes
Jesse Mountain	Jesse Allen, resident of Wiseman
Kapoon Creek	Eskimo resident of Wiseman
King Creek	Roy King, local prospector
Kupuk Creek	Eskimo resident of Wiseman
Nutirwik Creek	Nutirwik, the Eskimo name of Harry Snowden
Oxadak Mountain	Oxadak, an Eskimo elder
Poss Mountain	Poss Postlethwaite, an old prospector
Roy Creek	Roy King, the first prospector on the creek
Snowden Mountain	Harry Snowden, Marshall's Eskimo hunting partner
Tobin Creek	August Tobin, former miner in area
Tobuk Creek	"Old Tobuk," a Kobuk Eskimo from Alatna
Wien Mountain	Noel Wien, first bush pilot to land in Koyukuk and fly over the mountain

said that when the Episcopal Church established a mission at the mouth of the Alatna, "the name of Allen was revised sufficiently to call the settlement ... Allenkaket, which late became Allakaket." Marshall complained that this was not a "worthy way of commemorating the first white explorer of the upper Koyukuk," so he gave Allen's name to "the largest river of the many in the region without a title" ("Use of the Name").

Marshall memorialized about a dozen living residents of the Koyukuk, especially his closest friends in Wiseman who assisted him on his hikes and helped with mapping and exploration. For example, he remembered Ernie Johnson with *Ernie Creek* and *Ernie Pass*, Jesse Allen with *Jesse Mountain*, Ken Harvey with *Harvey Mountain*, and Al Retzlaf with *Al's Mountain* (Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness* 15, 16, 122).

Though Marshall eventually came to believe that it was generally poor practice to name mountains after people, he insisted that when peaks were

named after people, "they should be named after men who have actually been on or in sight of them." Marshall did not share the common view—and the US Board on Geographic Names standard policy—that only dead people should be honored with placenames (letters to Mr. and Mrs. Irving Reed, 28 January 1933, box 1, file 11, and to Charles C. Adams, 19 November 1935, box 1, file 27). He admitted that it was often a bad principle to name "a geographic feature after a young person who has most of his life ahead of him," but he protested against the logic which held that this should be an inflexible rule. If an individual's accomplishments were either outstanding or "far enough in in the past to be judged on the same basis as those of the dead," there was no justification to deny them the honor of a placename. As Marshall logically explained, "Otherwise the implication would be that if two people had performed equally meritorious service, but one dissipated and died at forty, while the other took care of his health and lived to be a nonagenarian, the former would deserve to receive geographical honor, while the healthy, well developed life of the latter would ruin his chances of similar commemoration" (letter to Dr. Flick, 22 September 1928, box 1, file 2).

He argued that it was sometimes more hazardous to commemorate a recently deceased person than a living one. "The danger of naming a geographic feature after a man immediately following his death," Marshall wrote, "seems even more dangerous than during his lifetime. Because then the spirit of 'de mortuis nil nisi bonum' frequently gives rise to ridiculous sentimentalities, so that men of virtually no importance in their lives and completely forgotten half a century after their death become for a moment heroes due to the sentiment always accompanying mortality." (letter to Dr. Flick, 22 September 1928, box 1, file 2)

A telling example from history proved why being dead did not necessarily make a person a better candidate for a place name. "If a range of mountains were to have been named in 1800 after the signers of the Declaration of Independence, the peaks could have borne the names Gwinnett, Ross and Hart, but not Jefferson, Adams and Rutledge. Again, under the 'no name after living person' policy, Washington, D.C. would have had to be called 'Franklin,' or 'Sam Adams, D.C.,' simply because the 'Father of the Country' delayed dying a few years too long" (letter to Dr. Flick, 22 September 1928, box 1, file 2).

Marshall's sensitivity to naming geographical features after living people arose in part from the disagreeable controversy in New York in 1928 when Russell Carson, a friend of the Marshalls and author of *Peaks and People of the Adirondacks*, suggested that a nameless peak first climbed by Bob and his brother George be dubbed "Mt. Marshall."

Though the brothers both opposed the name, Carson insisted on including it in his book. Upon publication another member of the Adirondack Mountain Club, Theodore Van Wyck Anthony, bitterly campaigned against the proposed name on the grounds that it was wrong to honor living people, though in reality his primary motive was apparently his hatred for Jews. Marshall said that as much as he detested Anthony's anti-Semitism, he and his brother agreed with the principle that they were too young and inexperienced to be honored with the name of a mountain. Anthony not only blocked the name Mt. Marshall, but also succeeded in having a state law passed in 1929 that forbid the naming of geographical features in New York after living people. Only in 1972, after a long effort by friends and admirers of Bob Marshall, was an Adirondack Peak named *Mount Marshall* in his honor (Glover 88–92; Terrie 73–83).

In Marshall's view the tallest mountain in a region deserved a special name in recognition of its impact on the surrounding area, and that such peaks were not suitable for personal or commemorative names. At first Marshall had named the highest and most distinctive mountain in the Koyukuk drainage, which he believed to be the tallest mountain in the entire Brooks Range, (but is actually the fifth highest) the "Matterhorn of the Koyukuk." When Marshall came to publish his map, he realized that if his Alaskan Matterhorn was the highest peak in Northern Alaska, it deserved a more distinctive and unique name.

This was especially important since the highest peak in each of the major mountain systems in the United States—the Appalachians, the Rockies, the Sierras, the Cascades and the Alaska Range—had all unfortunately been given trite names commemorating individuals who did not deserve the honor. In Marshall's opinion the worst transgression may have been Mount McKinley in the Alaska Range. He said it was shameful that the tallest peak on the North American continent had been officially named "after one of our poorest presidents whose chief claim to fame was that he was shot by an insane anarchist with an unpronounceable name." (letter to Mr. and Mrs. Irving Reed, 28 January 1933, box 1, file 11).

In light of this poor track record of naming America's tallest mountains, Marshall concluded that "it seemed to me proper that the highest peak in the Arctic Range should be named—not after a person, but after the biggest thing in the lives of the people who lived in the region. Now, of course, the biggest thing in the lives of the Eskimos is their Doonerak or spirit, or devil, as they translate it, which seems to preside over their entire lives. So, I called the highest peak in the Arctic Range 'Mount Doonerak' ..." (letter to Mr. and Mrs. Irving Reed, 28 January 1933, box 1, file 11).

Besides local significance, Marshall also judged placenames on interest and uniqueness. He echoed the feelings of the editor of the *Iditarod Pioneer*, who in 1913 had bristled at the naming of *Extra Dry Creek*: "Whatever may be his other virtues," the editor complained, "the Alaskan miner is not addicted to originality in naming creeks."

In fact, miners were notorious plagiarists when it came to naming places on the map. Consider the often-cited statistic that more than one hundred valleys, mountains and streams in Alaska are officially named *Bear*. Marshall himself added to this roster of bear placenames with *Grizzly Creek* (Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness* 19). There are forty-seven *Moose Creeks* in Alaska, not including two streams near Fairbanks named *Moose Creek Number One* and *Moose Creek Number Two*. Twenty-nine creeks in Alaska are named *Flat*, not counting an area called *Flat Creek Flats*. There are fifty-four creeks named *Willow*, twenty-eight *Sheep Creeks*, and thirty-eight places with the name *Dead*, such as *Dead Branch, Dead Tree, Deadwood, Dead Creek, Deadfall, Deadlock, Deadman, Dead Pine* and *Deadview* (See Orth, throughout).

When Marshall first came to the Koyukuk he was astounded to learn that the river named on a 1901 US Geological Survey map as the *Seattle River* was known locally by everyone as *Glacier Creek*. Though he hesitated to add yet another *Glacier Creek* to the map – as he admitted it seemed as if there were already about one million *Glacier Creeks* in Alaska – he argued that in this case local usage should prevail. In a memo to the Geological Survey on why the name *Seattle River* should be changed to *Glacier*, he explained that "almost no one ever referred to it by the name which was shown on the map, probably because none of them had ever seen the map." Keeping the thirty-year-old obsolete name on the map, Marshall wrote, was pointless. "When I first came into the country," Marshall continued,

> "it seemed to me that the name Seattle River ... would be much better than the trite one of Glacier Creek. I discussed changing the name with several of the old timers who were most sympathetic to developing an original nomenclature for the region. However, in the place of Glacier Creek they were unanimous in the opinion that it was so close to the mining center around Wiseman and was just as familiar in the every day vocabulary of the region as Connecticut Avenue would be to a Washingtonian, that it would be entirely out of the question to change the name, and get nobody to use the new title." ("Changing the Name")

The question of whether *Glacier Creek* should actually be *Glacier River* was another problem. Marshall found the haphazard local system of what constituted a river versus what constituted a creek to be very irritating. Whether the first explorers called something a creek or a river depended

on if they happened to see it during high water or low water. The result was that some of the smallest watercourses in the region were called rivers, while some of the largest, named during an abnormal stage of low water, were mere creeks. This "hit or miss manner" troubled Marshall's sense of order. He came up with a plan whereby he said the US Board on Geographic Names and the Geological Survey could "put some consistency into this unreasoned confusion." In a memo entitled "On Naming Regions in Some Consistent Manner," Marshall argued that these government agencies had a responsibility "to devise a nomenclature which is at least rational." Marshall's solution was to recommend that any waterbody with a drainage area of less than 250 square miles be called a creek, while all those with larger drainages could be known as rivers. "The accidental water conditions which existed when some prospector may have hauled his boat up the Alatna over thirty years ago," Marshall wrote, "should not be weighed too seriously in determining whether a stream should be called a river or a creek" ("Naming Regions").

Despite rejecting Marshall's plan to distinguish between creeks and rivers, the Board on Geographic Names did adopt most of his suggestions. Altogether from his four trips to the Koyukuk during the ten years between 1929 and 1939, Marshall added a total of 169 official place names to the map of Alaska (Marshall, *Alaska Wilderness* xi, xxix). It is ironic that this achievement, one of the largest groups of place names added to the map by a single private individual in the twentieth century, has caused some modern environmentalists to criticize Marshall, as if he had somehow violated the wilderness by naming it. One author who hiked the central Brooks Range complained in 1988, "Let there remain land where the fantasy of discovery isn't burlesqued by designations such as 'Al's Mountain' or 'Harvey Mountain' or 'Jesse Peak,' such as Marshall felt compelled to stick on maps for all posterity to ponder ..." (Leo 11).

It may be true, as a writer in *Audubon* said a few years ago, that as names have filled the blank spaces of the map, they have crowded out the romance, and that there are now "too many names and not enough places" (Steinhart 11). Apparently the US government agrees. Based on the theory that "a fundamental characteristic of elemental wilderness is that features are nameless," the current policy of the US Board on Geographic Names is that new names are no longer given within officially designated wilderness areas "unless an overriding need exists, such as for purposes of safety, education, or area administration" (US Board 13–14). The board's policy goes so far as to state that even existing local and administrative names which have not been published will not be considered unless some "overriding need" for them can be demonstrated.

Perhaps it is good policy that placenames in or out of wilderness areas bear the burden of proof, ensuring that they are carefully selected. But the idea that somehow wilderness can be preserved by refusing to name it, or by pretending that it isn't named, is a curious fantasy. Stopping the naming of places is like stopping history. To deliberately erase names in local usage, whether they are ancient native place names or more recent names from white settlers, in order to pretend that wilderness has no human history, is further evidence that the idea of what constitutes wilderness needs to be more closely examined.

Bob Marshall's tragic death at age 38 in 1939, presumably of heart failure, cut short the career of one of America's most forceful advocates for wilderness preservation. Secretary of Interior Harold Ickes eulogized Marshall, claiming, "The wilderness areas he worked so hard to perpetuate remain as his monuments" (49). In 1940 the Bob Marshall Wilderness Area in Montana of nearly one million acres was named in his honor (Wolff 5).

If Robert Marshall were alive today, he would surely be engaged in the debate over the naming of natural features in wilderness areas. He might very well agree that modern maps have too many names and not enough open spaces. Even sixty years ago, however, he admitted that by mapping and naming a feature, he deprived someone else of that pleasure. He realized that such a process was inevitable with the passage of time. Nevertheless, faced with the supposedly overcrowded maps of the present, his love of precision might force him to adopt a more modern solution. Rather than give a place a name, he might be just as happy to give it a number instead.

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Notes

1. Robert Marshall's *Arctic Village*, originally published in 1933 and released in a new edition by the University of Alaska Press in 1991, is a highly praised study of the old gold mining community of Wiseman, Alaska. Marshall's Alaskan exploration narratives were collected and edited by his brother George Marshall in a volume first published in 1956 and entitled (in the second edition) *Alaska Wilderness*. Bob Marshall's map of the Koyukuk and US Geological Survey report, *Reconnaissance of the Northern Koyukuk Valley, Alaska*, was published in 1934 as part of US Geological Survey Bulletin No. 844-E (245–56).

George Marshall compiled an excellent bibliography of his brother's writings, published (in two parts) in 1951 and 1954 in *The Living Wilderness*, and he wrote a biographical sketch of his brother in the introduction to *Alaska Wilderness*. The only full length biography of Robert Marshall is the one by James Glover.

2. The leading expert on Alaska Native placenames is James Kari of the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks, who has written extensively about

the difficulties of collecting and preserving native place names. Only a tiny percentage of Alaska Native names, most of which have been collected by linguists in recent years, appear on US Geological Survey base maps. For example, see Kari's recent book *Shem Pete's Alaska*. The lack of sufficient knowledge about indigenous names is also a major problem in Canada, Australia, and many other nations. (See Tunbridge 2–13.)

3. Marshall's orthography of the Inupiaq (Eskimo) language is not the standard system generally accepted today; however, for consistency, his spellings and translations have been maintained throughout this paper. For information on Alaska Native place names the author would especially like to thank James M. Nageak and Dr. James Kari of the Alaska Native Language Center at the University of Alaska Fairbanks and Grant Spearman of the Simon Paneak Memorial Museum at Anaktuvuk Pass, Alaska, for their generous advice and assistance.

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