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## Names Forum

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### Names on the Wall: The Public Impact of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial

Editor's Note: The Vietnam Veterans Memorial was dedicated in November 1982. To commemorate the tenth anniversary of this name-dominant memorial, I asked ANS member Grady Clay, who chaired the jury to select the design in an open competition, to write down his recollections of the process.

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"Those names! My God! The names!"

"I can't take my eyes off those names."

"I couldn't read them, my eyes were all filled up."

These are among the hundreds of published reactions to the names of the more than 58,000 American veterans killed and missing in the Vietnam War.

The names are etched, not only in the memories of the veterans' survivors, but in one of the most public places in the United States: the wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial on The Mall in Washington, D.C. It is the number one tourist attraction of the national capital, visited annually by more people than The White House.

The popularity—if that is the correct word—is no accident, even though we hardly anticipated in 1981 that the names would carry such a large emotional content and produce such universal and intense reactions. That was the year a national competition was held to select a design for the memorial, even though many people thought it was still "too soon" after the Vietnam War for such a memorial. Others just wanted to forget the war.

There were 1,428 entries, and once the winning design—names and all—was published in May 1981, it became a litmus-paper test for millions of Americans' reactions to the Vietnam War itself.

In few American memorials do names play such a vital part. In scores of military cemeteries, a visitor can be moved to tears by the cumulative sight of a thousand gravestone reminders of war's carnage. And the practice of adding quotes from the Bible to gravestones is with us yet.



Fig. 1. Touching, feeling, tracing, and reacting to the names of dead and missing friends and relations, visitors press up against their reflections on the wall of the Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C., in myriad forms of touching remembrance. Photo courtesy the Louisville *Courier-Journal*.

But the array of those thousands of names in the Vietnam Veterans Memorial concentrates recollection and reverence. A visitor standing at arm's length from the wall confronts, up close, scores of names—*Rucker, Shiflett, Walters, Weese, Newman, Baldwin, Baxter*—from everyday life. The names can be overwhelming, compressed into two black marble walls outstretched from their apex toward the Lincoln Memorial and the Washington Monument in the form of an open chevron.

As noted above, this was no accident. The names were a requisite of the printed and widely-distributed Design Program, drafted by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund leaders and by their astute professional advisor Paul M. Spreiregen, of Washington, D.C. The program required of each entry that

A display of the names of the 57,892 Americans who died, including the names of the 2,457 who remain unaccounted from, must be a permanent part of the memorial design. The names must be readable by observers standing at normal ground-level positions. The full name only will be presented. There will be no information as to rank, dates, places, or service branch. Just the names.

Putting together the list of names was no simple task. The names were supplied by the armed forces, subject to continued revisions up to the last moment before the names were laser-etched into the black marble panels.

(One divorced and disgruntled widow tried, without success, to prevent her former husband's name from appearing on the memorial.)

The night before the public dedication of the finished wall, the jury attended in Washington a large reception held by the Vietnam Veterans Memorial Fund. Suddenly, a middle-aged woman presented herself to me with tears in her eyes and a paper in her hand. The words barely came out, but she was handing me a Polaroid photograph of her own hand touching the etched name of her dead husband on the wall. That touch, that emotional charge, has been repeated countless times. Each time I return to the Memorial, I see this again and again—as though the act of touching a beloved's name, and of seeing one's own face reflecting from the polished wall around that name, could somehow bring about a reunion or reconciliation, or even a resolution. Almost always, it brings a rush of emotion.

As all visitors to the wall know, May Ying Lin, the young architect whose winning design has made her world famous, displayed the names in horizontal and stacked chronological order of the death of those who bore them into battle.

None of the other competitors took similar ingenious routes. All, of course, displayed the names one way or another, as the program required. I recall one design which, in the early stages of judging, appealed strongly to me: a giant, shallow copper bowl, with the names inscribed on its surface. Visitors could walk around within the bowl, searching for "their" veteran's name. But we in the jury decided that most American families would object to the public trampling all over their beloved names, and over the years these names might be worn away.

Later, after describing this entry in a lecture at Iowa State University, I was castigated as an ignoramus by a white-haired European gentleman in the audience. Didn't we know, he demanded, that in Canterbury Cathedral and many other historic memorials over the centuries, the public "walks all over" the crypts of kings, queens, saints, and other notables? My answer reflected the jury's opinion. Most Americans object to walking on graves and—we assumed—on memorials, and would likely object to seeing their veterans' names underfoot. It may be pure superstition, but even so we assumed the objection to be nationwide.

My notes—as jury chairman I recorded the jury's comments and my own in thirty-seven pages of my journal—testify to our reactions. One candidate was "a maze of names," another "an axis through walls of names," another a sundial "with radii of names," another with names on stone markers standing in a grove of trees. One had all names under water, another had names on steel risers from a lawn. There was a field of 3,900 metal sheaves of wheat, each with fourteen names inscribed. There was a

giant tree sculpture, with names on tablets arrayed around it. Another entry was composed of one single wall of names 524 feet long. Jury member Hideo Sasaki, the distinguished landscape architect, said of this entry that “the extent of these names is overwhelming. [But] when they split up the names, it loses strength.” At that point, my notes record the observation that we might, in the end, set our own criterion by choosing an entry with all names concentrated – which, in fact, we did.

Harry Weese, the Chicago architect, saw the names accurately as “an attraction” – and this has surely come to pass. Millions of veterans’ families and friends have come to weep, to mourn, to make tracings of their beloveds’ names, to see their own reflection superimposed over the etched names in the wall’s black polished granite – and to be emotionally overwhelmed by that juxtaposition.

This was, of course, a “no-name” competition. The program required all submissions to be totally anonymous. During our fourth and final day of judging, the eight-man jury assembled as a small judgmental posse in front of each set-up: drawings, photos of models, etc. Suddenly Ted Rosati, the noted sculptor, standing behind me, thrust his finger over my shoulder at a drawing and demanded “What’s that?” And “that” turned out to be a name, disguised but obvious, inscribed in the paving stones of the drawing. Perhaps it was the name of the designer, or only that of an ambitious draftsman. But the inclusion of a name was a clear violation of the rule of anonymity, and this entry was at once discarded from our list.

In the end, after we had made our final unanimous choice, we gathered around Maya Lin’s design to voice, for the record, our reasons. We knew it was so utterly simple, so different from traditional memorials (below ground level and not reaching for the sky; black marble, not white), that it might be difficult for the public to accept.

Harry Weese commented that “I don’t know of any other place in the world like this.” Sasaki presciently added that such a work of art “is like an empty vessel” into which one can pour his or her own meanings and hopes. Out of these concerns, a special scale model was built and photographed before the design went public.

Later, we agreed that the Maya Lin design is not so much “a thing of joy, but [it] allows space for hope.” Juryman Pietro Belluschi said for us all: “We have avoided superficiality and chosen a profound understatement.” And so it turned out to be – names and all.

Louisville, Kentucky

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## Easy Zs (In Homage to Wilbur Zelinsky)

Geographical curiosity uncovers some strange things, such as multiple Zs—or *zeds*, in Canada.

Sometimes, in strange cities, I come back to an empty, neutral hotel room, tired of inspecting the streets, and try to watch the TV. But homogenization bores me, and I turn instead to that wondrous artifact, the telephone book: churches, clubs and associations, bookstores, consulates, groceries, and similar cultural clues. Lately I've learned to peruse the last page of the listings by residence. What a zsurprise!

A few samplings convinced me there was something curious there. So on a hot Texas Zsaturday I dropped in gratefully to the massive air-conditioned Perry-Castaneda Library in Austin and whiled away my cooling-off period by looking through their remarkable collection of current telephone directories. In all, I scanned 182 of them. As I did so, I began to zsee a map emerging.

The final residential listings (in the South and Ohio, especially, they're always separated from the business entries: why?) inevitably start with Z. The majority are obviously good Slavic names, with *Zywicki* and variants of it most frequent, or only slightly respelled Germanic ones. However, 41 (22.5%) of the directories listed names, 44 in total, that begin with multiple z's; they yielded 108 clustered initial z's altogether, an average of about 2 1/2 z's to begin a name.

But the range was considerable, from a usual two, such as the surname *Zz* somewhere in Ohio, and *Zzyp*, and *Zzylch*, to a ten-z'd whopper in Los Angeles (so where else?). They sometimes zsport given names to match, such as *Zzeek*, *Zulu W.*, *Ziggy*, *Zebo*, *Zxi*, or just *Z*.

Allocated by states, these multi-z'd names form a definite pattern. Californians claim 21 of them, Texans 14, Ohioans 9, New Yorkers and Floridians 8 each, Missourians and Nevadans each 5, and both Illinoisans and Louisianans 4. Vancouver, with one double, stands out (naturally!) as the sole Canadian contender. The geographical distribution thus conforms roughly to the population-ranking of the states (but not the provinces), and also mirrors large cities. The Sunbelt factor—with 47 (43.5%) of the z's resident in California, Nevada, Arizona, Texas, Louisiana, and Florida—looms large.

The aforementioned geographical curiosity hustles on beyond mere appearances, of courses, and delightedly wallows in analysis or, more commonly, rank speculation. I wish I had the fortitude to put all this on my computer and elicit some regressions (would factor analysis help?), but I

won't; I'll speculate. I think regressions here, as often, would be uninformative, if not actually misleading. So here are some questions for the audience.

Is the propensity for initial z's a big-town phenomenon? If so, why does Austin boast a total of 7, apportioned between two entries? Why does even Bryan/College Station, its traditional rival, have 2? And Dover, Delaware, and Nashville, and Fresno? To be sure, one wouldn't expect much double-z'ing in the boondocks, but the urban connection is still equivocal. The rank order, in terms of total z's is as follows: Los Angeles 13, New York area 8, Austin 7, San Francisco Bay area 6, Las Vegas 5, Miami 4. ... Trendy life-style?

If the phenomenon is not attributable to urban magnitudes, the implied life-style influence merits further notice. Does the z-propensity attest an associated spirit of originality and inventiveness (i.e., "independent invention")? Or, on the other hand, does it signify that the perpetrators are in fact plugged in to some sophisticated, mischievous network of innovators — is it simply a diffusion that will (God forbid!) go everywhere? I listed all the phone numbers given, but I haven't had the nerve to call and ask these requisite questions.

Another puzzle arises: are these z-surnames real? How would grandfather react to such a z-spelling? Do their bearers z-sign their checks and pay their bills and fill out their damned tax forms with such nomenclature? I think we are looking here at one of the uncomfortable tensions in North American life, between the public and the private self, between show and substance. And that very fact constrains further research into this curious phenomenon; in these democracies, one is reluctant to invade the most flamboyant pretensions of others.

I am left to brood, most speculatively, on the ways in which both ego-promotion and conformity, both bold publicity and sacred privacy, the exploitation of improbabilities and the firm grasp on the ordinary, configure our lives. One learns a lot about geography and culture from the phone books!

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### A Farewell

With this issue, I end my five-year term as editor of *Names* and hand over the blue pencil to Professor Edward Callary of Northern Illinois University, who is well known to members of ANS and to the world of onomastics.

These five years have been, for me, an exciting learning experience and a wonderful opportunity to meet, in person or through the mails, those vibrant, patient, sometimes eccentric folks who call themselves name scholars. Everything has not gone as smoothly as I would have wished. My year in Germany as an exchange professor shortly after taking over this position established a pattern of delay from which I never really recovered, and it has been one of my greatest regrets that I have not been able to put this journal back on schedule and keep it that way. Although it has been, in many ways, a lonely job with long hours and late nights, I have had incredible support from many people, and it seems appropriate at this time to mention a few of them.

Much of the effort has been at the local level. The administration of the University of South Dakota has backed me fully. President Betty Turner Asher, Dean John Carlson of the College of Arts and Sciences, Professor Howard Coker of the Office of Research, and Chairwoman Susan Wolfe of the English Department have supported me in ways too numerous to mention. Pat Peterson, typesetter, has encouraged and endured and together we have wrestled these issues into shape. Glenn Gering, Joe Mierau, and DeWayne Graber of Pine Hill Press have somehow managed to meet unreasonable deadlines and produce books of excellent quality time after time. Two graduate students in English, at different times, Elizabeth Goering and Cosette Fidler, have been extremely helpful, as have several work-study students in the USD English department who have typed to disk some very complex manuscripts.

I have been fortunate over these five years to have had a group of scholars willing—even eager—to read and evaluate manuscripts and to advise me on matters of policy and procedure: Len Ashley (for the first three years), Bill Francis (for the last two), Ed Lawson, Bill Loy, Celia Millward, Susan Wolfe, and Wilbur Zelinsky. The work they do may go unnoticed, but it is crucial to maintaining the standards of a journal like *Names*. I have also been fortunate in having found some very good guest editors for three special issues: Grant Smith (June 1989), Don Orth (September 1990), and Jim Skipper and Paul Leslie (December 1990).

Support has been constant from the officers of the American Name Society, including from the members of the Board of Managers, and

especially from the presidents over this five-year period: Mary Rita Miller, Roger Payne, Edward Callary, André Lapierre, and Gerald Cohen. Of course, I could not have succeeded even partially without the constant help of my predecessor, also Book Review Editor, Kelsie Harder and of ANS Executive Secretary and Managing Editor Wayne Finke.

Finally, I wish to mention two other groups, not always exclusive of each other: the many scholars who have sent articles and book reviews to *Names* over these last few years and the readers of this journal. Without these groups, all our endeavor would be in vain, and I would like to express my thanks to them for their contributions and their patience.

To Ed Callary, who has already taken a firm grip on that pencil, I wish the best of success, and I look forward to being able to read future issues of *Names* with an eye that is more appreciative than critical.

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