

Naming of Fairdealing, Missouri

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Missouri is probably the premier storehouse of interesting place names, surpassing even such repositories of placename oddities as California, Texas, and Arkansas. As a sample, Missouri has (or once had) *Barely Do*, *Devil's Elbow*, *Enough*, *HenPeck Creek*, *Jerktail*, *Loose Creek*, *Old Dishrag* (school and community), *Peculiar*, *Rocky Comfort*, *Tightwad*, *Useful*, *Veto*, *Whoopup*, and also *Fairdealing*.

Systematic work on Missouri's place names began in the mid-1920s with the efforts of Robert Ramsay, Professor of English at the University of Missouri, then just the Columbia campus. Ramsay decided to make this subject his life's work, and at Allen Walker Read's suggestion divided the state into sections; whenever an M.A. student came along looking for a thesis topic, a section of the state was waiting to be assigned.

The student then went from town to town in the assigned area, stopping usually at the local general store and asking the origin of the town's name. Inquiries were also made about any other place names in the vicinity, e.g., those of creeks.

At some point, of course, the student also checked whatever written records were locatable, and at the end of ten months or so it was time to write up the thesis.

Between 1928 and 1945 there were 18 such theses written. Ramsay then arranged to have all the placename material in the theses — some 35,000 names — typed onto 3x5 cards as a preliminary step to preparing the extensive Missouri Place Name Survey. The Ramsay file cards are now in the Western Historical Manuscript Collection at the University of Missouri-Columbia.

272 Names 41.4 (December 1993)

But publication of the Missouri Place Name Survey never materialized. The strength and weakness of Ramsay's material have been its extensiveness; the collection is, as one scholar put it, "the greatest placename study never to be published." Proper checking of the material would take a large number of researchers, the University of Missouri Press gasps at the very thought of the publication costs, and no one since Ramsay has had his total dedication to the project.

Ramsay died in 1953. Determined to put at least a general sketch of the subject into print, he published *Storehouse of Missouri Place Names* in 1952. This 160-page book is now generally regarded as the bible of Missouri placename study, but it is better viewed as a mini-bible. And to the extent that it is based on the sometimes erroneous information of his students, it cannot always be quoted with certitude.

The students had to work quickly, covering 7-8 counties each in just 3-6 months in order to proceed with the practical task of completing their M.A. theses. Since even professors working slowly and steadily make mistakes more than occasionally, it is not surprising that students working quickly made some mistakes, too. The students simply lacked the time to delve into the cases marked by complexity or to identify all the incorrect information they sometimes received by the queried local residents.

My overall judgment of Ramsay's placename work is that it is a monument, an enormous achievement, a lasting legacy. But it is by no means a perfect monument, and those of us who follow in Ramsay's footsteps must be careful not to regard his work as definitive.

My own roles in Missouri placename research are to work for the eventual publication of Ramsay's Missouri Place Name Survey, to point out the great wealth of interesting placename material in Missouri, and to prepare some of that material for publication. With all three roles in mind I prepared my 1982 and 1987 monographs *Interesting Missouri Place Names*.

My treatment of *Fairdealing* in the 1987 monograph requires revision. Here now is an overall treatment of that name.

I. ORIGIN #1: MAN STOLE A HORSE BUT LEFT THE SADDLE (THAT WAS "FAIR DEALING" ON HIS PART)

Pottenger's 1945 M.A. thesis says of Fairdealing:

A village and p.o. in Washington T.... Before the Civil War, William Rife owned a farm here, and put in a small store where the p.o. now stands. The town was laid out January 20, 1871, by the owner; but later the citizens appealed to the County Court, and the town organization was nullified; hence there are no legal numbers to the lots. In 1886, through the efforts of Gus Rife, son of William, the p.o. was established. The name of the village Fair Dealing was changed to Fairdealing by the postal authorities. *The exact origin of the name seems lost and exists only in legend.* There are two prevailing stories: In the early days, a stranger passing by, traded for a saddle here; feeling that he had got his money's worth, he remarked that that was a pretty fair dealing place. The idea of dealing fairly came to be sort of a joke, and thus the name Fair Dealing grew up long before the p.o. was established. Another story told it that during the Civil War, a rough character, going through the vicinity, stole a fine horse but left the saddle. *The expression that he had dealt fairly suggested the name for the place* [emphases added].

Confirmation of the stolen-horse story comes from a minister¹ with the Evangelical Synod who passed through Fairdealing in 1937 (Aug. 9); he made the following comments in his memoirs:

Took time for a brief stop at Fairdealing. Talk[ed] to p.m. [postmaster] Shelton.... Three churches here. Name is said to have originated thus: in early times a traveler stopped overnight. His horse was stolen, but his saddle left. He said, "Well, now, that is fair dealing to leave my saddle."

This account seems to flesh out the comment passed along by Pottenger that "the expression that he [the thief] had dealt fairly suggested the name for the place." We do not deal with "the expression" of just anybody but of the man robbed.

As for the opposing account mentioned by Pottenger (a man buys a saddle and remarks that he was dealt with fairly), it is hard to imagine this trivial incident leading to the naming of the town.

274 Names 41.4 (December 1993)

- II. ORIGIN #2: TOWN OF FAIRDEALING WAS NAMED FOR THE LOCAL 'FAIR DEALING' STORE, I.E. ANYONE (REGARDLESS OF NORTH-VS.-SOUTH LEANINGS) WOULD BE DEALT WITH FAIRLY THERE

In Cohen (*Interesting Names II*) I erred badly in following the traditional account that Fairdealing was named for a horse-stealing episode. With embarrassment I now acknowledge the unlikelihood of such a reaction to a theft. And I acknowledge the unlikelihood of a thief wasting precious time removing a valuable saddle; there seems to be no call for gallantry here. Mea culpa.

A much likelier explanation is given by Ponder² (154-155):

Fairdealing/Little Black: Little Black was founded along the Military Road (Natchitoches Trail) in the early 1850's. It was named for the Little Black River.... By 1875 the families living in Little Black, which was by then usually called Fairdealing, included....

Gustavas Rife operated the store there by 1878. When the post office was reopened in October, 1883, as Fairdealing, Rife was postmaster. There are so many stories circulating as to why the town was called Fairdealing that it is doubtful the correct explanation will ever be known. The most realistic story is that the motto for the Rife store was, "the Store of Fair Dealing."³ Most stores of that time had a motto such as the Racket Store, Cheap Cash Store, Spot Cash Store, etc. *The "Fair Dealing" motto was used to inform veterans from both the North and South that they could deal fairly in the store.*⁴ Whether that story is true or not remains conjecture. There are several other stories, many of which involve horse traders or the stealing of a horse' [emphasis added].

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Notes

¹ The minister was Paul A. Wobus of Manchester, St. Louis County. The comments pertain to his "Trip 299" and are available in the Western Historical Manuscripts Collection (Columbia, MO). My thanks go to Mark Stauter (director, Rolla Branch of WHMC) for bringing them to my attention.

²Brought to my attention by the author's brother, Paul Ponder.

³Why not simply "The Fair Dealing Store"?

⁴The point seems to be not so much that they would deal fairly as that they would be dealt with fairly, i.e., commerce took precedence over politics.

Works Cited

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