Spanish Place Name Patterns in the Southwest

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GEORGE R. STEWART, in his article, "A Classification of Place Names," points out that a line may be drawn between the psychological motives which stir individuals to bestow names on places and the framework of situations which provoke the actual naming.[1] Analyzing both motives and situations which contribute to the naming process, he lists nine categories into which the mechanisms of place identification naturally fall. These may be reported briefly as names which (1) describe the qualities of a place; (2) identify it with possession of a person or group; (3) associate an incident at a particular time; (4) commemorate a person, place, or event; (5) idealize a locality in terms of symbol or sentiment; (6) manufacture or coin from the sounds, letters, or fragments of other words; (7) shift or transfer a name from one landscape type to another; (8) confuse the form and meaning of one name in the form and meaning of a second; and (9) change the name entirely through a mistake in spelling, pronunciation, or some other accident. This classification, with one modification and one addition, has served well for my investigation of Spanish place name patterns in the American Southwest. I have modified the second category, identifying a place with the name of a person or group possessing it, to include identifying a place also with the names of animals or other wild life possessing it. The category I have added is (10) names which transfer terms of folk imagination, affection, and humor to localities and landmarks.

Category One, which identifies a place in terms of some impression it makes immediately upon the senses, has some of the most memorable Spanish place names to its credit. When Don Francisco Vázquez de Coronado was exploring New Mexico in 1540, he and his men arrived at a river which "because its water was muddy and red" they called *Rio Bermejo,* i.e., 'Red River."[2] In 1598, the colo-

nizers of New Mexico led by Don Cristobal de Oñate, sought a stream which had been reported to them as the *Rio del Norte,* or the *Rio Bravo,* i.e., the 'River of the North' or the 'Wild, Fierce River.'[3] They found it and paid tribute to the fidelity of its name, describing it as a 'mighty river.'[4] Physical characteristics of localities in the Southwest are responsible for such Spanish place names as *Álamo,* 'poplar,' which appears in eight California land grants or claims: "At this place there was a poplar tree . . . within our camp, and for this reason the place was called *Real del Álamo* [Camp of the Poplar]" (Costanso, Sept. 27, 1769).[5] Such names as *Cienega,* 'marsh,' found in Pima County Arizona, and Santa Fe County, New Mexico, or *Brazos,* 'arms, branches of a stream,' found in both New Mexico and Texas, identify a landmark or settlement by topographical characteristics. New Mexico has two place names, *Arriba* and *Abajo,* which perpetuate the custom of towns strung for a good distance along a road naming their extremities "Above" and "Below," i.e., *Bernalillo Arriba* and *Bernalillo Abajo.* This device is familiar in English land divisions identified as Up State and Down State, but it is not customary for a highway through a community to be designated Upper State Highway or Lower State Highway. The Descriptive Category is plainly illustrated by names like *Peña Blanca,* 'white rock' (New Mexico), *Rio Colorado* 'ruddy river' (Texas), *Sobrante,* 'surplus' (California), *Polvadera,* 'dusty place' (New Mexico) and others.[6] The most famous *Colorado,* 'ruddy river,' (the *Colorado* in Utah, Arizona, Nevada, and California) was not originally known by that name. *Rio Grande de Buena Esperanza,* 'big river of good hope,' was one early name for it, and *Rio de Buena Guía,* 'river of good guidance,' was another. When the Colorado territory became a part of the United States, the river was called the Grand River, being formed by a conjunction of the Green and Grand rivers in southeastern Utah. On March 24, 1921, the Colorado Legislature changed the name Grand to Colorado and on July 25, 1921, the change was approved by Congress, against the advice of the United States Board on Geographic Names. A widely reported Spanish name for the river was *Rio Tizón,* 'firebrand river,' because, as reported by Melchoir Diaz in 1540, "when they [Indians] travel about from place to place they carry, on account of the intense cold, a firebrand with which they

warm their hands and body by changing it from one hand to another."[7]

The naming of the *Rio Tizón* seems to belong to the subclass which Professor Stewart calls Associative Description, in which a place is named by something associated with it, i.e., people carrying firebrands to keep themselves warm. The quality of firebrands in the background, however, could also be the result of an incident in which a newcomer to the region first encountered a brand-carrying native. The place-name would then belong in Category three, or Incident Names, of which there are many specific illustrations in the Spanish chronicles. For instance, as Alvar Nuñes Cabeza de Vaca and his companions were entering northern Mexico in the eighth year of their travels across the Gulf Coast, they entered a village where the Indians gave them "over six hundred hearts of deer, opened, of which they kept always a great store for eating." For this reason, The Spanish voyageurs called the settlement the 'village of the hearts,' i.e., *Los Corazones.* Castañeda, reporting this event, adds that Arellano, in establishing a town in the neighborhood, named it *San Hierónimo de los Corazones,* 'Saint Jerome of the Hearts,' illustrating a Spanish custom of duplicating names, even in some cases triplicating them. Here the duplication seems to be topographically pertinent, in that the general area was being called *Corazones* and the specific settlement was distinguished as *San Hieronimo.* It is interesting, however, that although the name *Corazones* resulted from an incident, or in accord with Category Three, the name *San Hieronimo* was in accord with Category Four, that is, in commemoration of a distinguished personage. The peculiarly Spanish custom of combining topographical details in name identification is also illustrated by the complete title of the city of Los Angeles. The Portola expedition camped on the bank of a river in Southern California, August 2, 1769; they named it *Nuestra Señora de los Angeles de Porciúncula,* thus commemorating the Virgin Mary in her special manifestation as queen of the Angels, and honoring a special feast day as well as the chapel of the Franciscan Order at Assisi. The name of Santa Fe, the capital city of New Mexico, also has this multiple commemorative character, as will be pointed out later in the article.

Further illustrations of Spanish place names in the Category of

Incident may be found in Cabeza de Vaca's account of the naming of the 'Island of Ill Fate' (*Mal Hado*) and in Oñate's report of the 'Spring of the Little Dog' (*El Ojo del Perillo*). Having built a barge, after they became separated from their ships, Cabeza de Vaca and some other members of the ill-fated Narváez expedition were cast upon an island in the Gulf of Mexico, (probably Galveston Island). There they were assisted by the Indians, but putting to sea again, their barge was overturned and all their possessions lost. The Indians who had helped them began to die from stomach ailment and the cold weather. These circumstances joined to lead De Vaca and his friends to name the spot the 'Island of Ill Fate.' The incident behind the naming of 'The Spring of the Little Dog' is of a happier nature. The colonizer of New Mexico reports that as his expedition travelled up the Rio Grande Valley in 1598, it entered the *Jornado del Muerto,* 'Journey of Death,' a waterless shortcut thirty miles east of the river. Having covered only about fourteen miles of the eighty, the party became desperate for water. Oñate writes, "On this day, because a dog came into camp with its feet coated with mud, we found waterholes." Some thirty years later, the presiding officer of the Franciscan missions in New Mexico wrote a report on his province, and he referred to one of the Apache Indian Tribes as the *Perillo Apaches,* 'little dog Apaches,' transferring the name *Perillo,* from the spring to the people living east of it.[10]

The Second or Possessive Category of place naming seems to be related to the linguistic process known as antonomasia, the transfer of a personal name or epithet to an object or activity associated with it.[11] Frederick Webb Hodge believes that one of the most famous Southwestern place names came through the transfer of an ethnic personal name to the region in which the people dwelt. The name is *Cíbola,* first used in the *Report of Fray Marcos de Niza* (1539), who understood from Indian tribes in northern Mexico that Zuñi pueblo, in New Mexico, was called *Cíbola* and therefore used the term for the region and its "seven very great cities." Dr. Hodge says that *Cíbola* was "the Spanish form of *Shiwina,* the Zuñi name for their tribal range."[12] Domingo del Castillo's map, made in Mexico in 1541, shows an area identified as "La Ciudad de Cíbola."[13] From the topographical name came the transfer to the most famous new

animal of the region, *cíbola,* Spanish for 'buffalo.' The name here, although belonging to the Possessive Category, also falls into the category of Shift or Transfer names, in that a generic name for a people or place was shifted to animals native to that place.

In the Possessive Category, also, belongs the place name *Texas,* from the Indian word *Tejas,* used by the Spanish explorers and missionaries to describe a large group of Indians west of the New Mexico missions.[14] As previously mentioned, I would extend this category to include place names associated with the habitat of particular forms of wild life, i.e., *Caballo,* 'horse,' *Mountains, Gallinas,* 'chickens, wild turkeys,' *Peaks, Coyote,* 'prairie wolf,' *Springs, Pajarito,* 'little bird,' *Mesa,* found in the *Place Name Dictionary* of New Mexico. Professor Stewart writes that most *Animal Names* (Wolf Creek, Antelope Spring) fall into the Category of Incident Names.[15] He may be right, but documentation is usually lacking for specific occasions when individuals encountered the particular wolf, antelope, horses, turkeys, coyotes, etc., for which the places are named. Rather, it may be generally assumed that the animals are abundant in such localities. It therefore seems to me that the Possessive concept governs the place name and unless a particular incident can be cited to show the discovery of wild life, the place names for animals belong under Category Two, Possession. The list is too long to develop here, but such Spanish animal names as *Burro,* 'donkey'; *Borrego* 'sheep'; *Conejo,* 'Rabbit'; *Chuckawalla,* 'lizard'; *Gaviota,* 'sea gull'; *Gato,* 'cat' *Mosquero* 'swarm of flies'; *Ratón,* 'squirrel'; *Tecolote,* 'owl'; *Truchas,* 'trout' dot the landscape from seacoast to plain.

It is the list of Commemorative names which contributes the largest number of place names in Spanish, as it does in most other languages. This is the Fourth Category among our naming mechanisms, and it includes words celebrating famous individuals in Church and State; famous cities, provinces or landmarks whose names are transferred in their honor; famous events, warlike or peaceful; and famous institutions, such as universities or other cultural monuments. Cabeza de Vaca, one of the earliest chroniclers of the terirtorial United States, lists a number of commemorative names bestowed by the Narváez expedition. He writes of "a great river to which we had given the name of the *Rio de la Magdalena*"[16]

and "the Bay, to which we gave the name of The Cross."[17] When Coronado's men reached The Indian Pueblo of Taos, New Mexico, they named it *Valladolid,* in honor of that city in Spain.[18] There are at least sixty-five place names in New Mexico derived from the Calendar of the Saints in the Roman Catholic Church: *San Agustín, San Antonio, San Diego, San Fernando, San Francisco, San Gabriel, San José, San Juan, San Pedro, Santa Ana, Santa Clara* among them. Many of these place names are also familiar in other southwestern areas. It is not always safe, however, to assume that the place naming for saints is purely commemorative. Calendar names may record the fact that someone was at a particular place on a particular day, as George R. Stewart points out. In this case piety combines with the attempt to date the occasion. Such a mixture of motives is found in the naming of the state of Florida. Ponce de León first saw the coast of North America on the Spanish religious feast called *Pascua Florida,* 'flowery Pasch,' or Easter. He landed six days later on April 2, 1513, and noting that the land was green and blossoming, named it *Florida.*[19]

A psychological twist to the naming process may be evident in some of the Spanish commemorative procedures. The first capital of New Mexico was an Indian pueblo where Oñate arrived in 1598 and was courteously received by the natives, who shared their accommodations with the Spaniards. "We gave it the name of *'San Juan'* writes Villagrá, chronicler of the expedition, "adding *'de los Caballeros* in memory of those noble sons who first raised in these barbarous regions the bloody tree upon which Christ perished for the redemption of mankind."[20] *San Juan de los Caballeros* thus commemorated their predecessors, and to an extent themselves, for they, too, were pioneering in settlement and missionary work. This enlightened self-praise is carried out by the numerous place names in New Mexico for families. A name like *Los Lunas,* New Mexico, is really 'The Luna Folks,' as are such other names as *Los Abeytas, Los Garcias, Los Montoyas, Los Pinos* and others. Without the "Los" identifying all the members of the family group, the names ring just like English family names attached to a particular home-site or community. *Casa Salazar,* 'The House of Salazar,' the name of a settlement in Sandoval county, New Mexico, has the same informal dignity as *Los Salazares,* 'The Salazar Folks.'

Two commemorative names of larger communities in the state are *Albuquerque,* named as a triple commemorative in 1706, and *Santa Fe,* a quintuple commemorative in 1610. Albuquerque was the third royal villa to be established in the province, and it was named by a provincial governor Don Francisco Cuervo y Valdez, in honor of the thirty-fourth Viceroy of Mexico, Don Francisco Fernández de la Cueva Enríquez, Eighth Duke of Alburquerque. The full title of the new villa was *San Francisco de Alburquerque,* commemorating the family of the Viceroy in his title; the seraphic personage of San Francisco; and indirectly the governor, whose baptismal name was Francisco, like the Viceroy's. All would have been well had not the council in Mexico discovered that a royal decree had authorized a villa honoring the King, Philip V. A way out was found by changing the name of the new villa to *San Felipe de Alburquerque,* thus honoring both the King, his patron saint, and the Viceroy. Since the baptismal name of the governor was dropped, he alone lost out in this process of commemoration.[21]

Santa Fe, New Mexico, was named by governor Peralta in 1610, with the title *La Villa Real de Santa Fe,* "The Royal Town of Santa Fe." The name commemorated not only the Catholic Faith, but the city near Granada founded by Ferdinand and Isabella to celebrate their victory over the Moors in 1492. After a patronal church was built in 1714, and dedicated to St. Francis of Assisi, the name of the city was informally lengthened to *La Villa Real de Santa Fe de San Francisco de Assisi,* thus commemorating the Crown, the Church, a Spanish City, St. Francis, and his birthplace in Italy, which was also the headquarters of the first missionary order to enter the province.[22]

The category which I have added to Professor Stewart's list, calling it Category 10, Folk Imagination, Affection, and Humor, is illustrated by a place name in New Mexico which means just 'bogey man,' i.e., *Aguelo.* Folk tales and folk dances bring in this old man (whose name is a dialectical prevarication of Spanish *abuelo,* 'grandfather') to scare children and put the fear of supernatural punishment in their hearts. *Gigantes,* 'giants,' is a name of like origin. It describes a large, black mesa, around which centered both Indian and Spanish tales of the supernatural. Place names like *Chico,* 'little,' *Antonchico* 'little Tony,' *Chaperito,* 'little hat,'

Tienditas 'little stores,' seem to strike a vein of humorous affection not provided for in the standard classifications. Perhaps they are only psychological adaptations of Category Four, Commemoration, or Category Three, Incident, but they seem to me to deserve attention as a separate group.

Of the remaining classifications, place names which are Euphemisms, Manufactured, Folk Etymologies, or Mistakes, only a few instances can be found. For Euphemisms, the numerous instances of *Buena Vista,* 'beautiful view,' throughout the region will supply some evidence, for at times the name leaves more to expectation than to fact. *California,* as a name, seems to have been created by the fertile imaginations of sixteenth century fiction writers, one of whom about the year 1500 described a land inhabited by black Amazons, whose queen was named Calafía.[23] Along with *El Dorado* 'Golden Man,' the *Seven Cities of Cíbola* and *Quivira,* the name *California* satisfied the demand of men for names which excited the imagination, as well as defined the specific.

There are illustrations of transliterated names from Indian tongues to Spanish, such as the name for *Chaco Canyon,* New Mexico. The Navaho name is *tse ya chahatquel,* for 'wash, river,' but the regional Spanish word *chaco* means 'desert, isolated place.' Did the sound of the Navaho word suggest a Spanish approximation, with quite a different meaning? Such may have been the case with the *Nacimento Mountains,* which in Spanish means 'Christ's Nativity,' but the Navaho name given a creek in the region was *nazisetgo,* 'gopher water.'[24]

The most famous of all place name transformation was that of the *Rio de las Animas* in southern Colorado. According to legend, a large force of Spanish soldiers was massacred by Indians here and the place was called *Rio de las Perdidas en Purgatorio,* 'River of Lost Souls in Purgatory.' In the early nineteenth century, when French trappers worked for furs in its waters, they shortened and translated the name simply to *Purgatoire,* 'Purgatory.' Later on the Missourians, Texans, and other Anglo-Americans, unfamiliar with the French tongue reduced the name to "Picketwire."[25] This seems to confuse all the categories, but since it was chiefly a linguistic demonstration of American place name imagination, rather than of Spanish, perhaps it is just as well left unanalyzed.

NOTES

[1] *Names,* II (March, 1954), 1–13.

[2] *Narratives of the Coronado Expedition,* G. P. Hammond and Agapito Rey (Albuquerque, 1940), p. 208.

[3] Gaspar Perez de Villagrá, *History of New Mexico,* 1610, tr. by Gilberto Espinosa (Los Angeles, 1933), p. 108. Shown as *Rio Bravo* on *General Map of North America* (1796), Collot, Paris, 1826.

[4] *Loc. cit.*

[5] *California Place Names,* by Erwin G. Gudde (Berkeley and Los Angeles, 1949), p. 6.

[6] *Agua Caliente,* 'warm water,' *Creek, Arena* 'sand bar,' *Point, Arroyo Grande,* 'big gulch,' *Piedra Blanca,* 'white stone,' *Creek,* etc., from the *A's* and *B's* in *California Place Names.*

[7] *Arizona Place Names,* by Will C. Barnes (Tucson, 1935), p. 104. See also the account in Gudde, *California Place Names,* p. 75, with reference to a map by Fr. Kino, showing it as *Rio Colorado del Norte;* appears as "Great River of the Apostles" on the *General Map of North America* (1796), Collot, Paris, 1826.

[8] *The Coronado Narratives,* p. 211. Melchoir Diaz, 1540, was a source for Castañeda, the author of Coronado's history.

[9] *The Journey of Alvar Nuñes Cabeza de Vaca, 1528–36,* by Fanny Bandelier (New York, 1922), p. 160.

[10] *The Benavides 'Memorial' of 1634,* tr. and ed. by F. W. Hodge, G. P. Hammond, and Agapito Rey (Albuquerque, 1945), p. 307. Benavides' transfer of the name seems to make use of Catagory Seven or Shift Naming.

[11] *Ibid.,* p. 84.

[12] Antonomasia (L.; Gr. *Antonomazein,* to call by another name: *anti,* instead of, plus *anomazein,* to name) "Pasteurize" from Louis Pasteur; "Your Honour" for a Judge; "bowie knife" from its inventor Colonel James Bowie; "palace" from The Palatine Hill in Rome; "Wales" from Anglo-Saxon *wealh,* "foreign"; "worsted" from Worstead (Norfolk) woolens.

[13] *New Mexico History and Civics* by Bloom and Donnelly (Albuquerque) 1933, p. 18. Cleve Hallenbeck, in *Land of the Conquistadores* (1950), p. 21, says that *cibola* is an Aztec word meaning 'buffalo.'

[14] Benavides, pp. 317–18.

[15] "A Classification of Place Names," *Names,* II. (March, 1954), 4.

[16] *Journey of Alvar Nuñes Cabeza de Vacea;* p. 33.

[17] *Ibid.,* p. 39.

[18] *Narratives of The Coronado Expedition,* p. 244.

[19] Reported after the chronicler Herrera, by George R. Stewart in *Names on the Land* (New York, 1945), pp. 11–12.

[20] Villagrá, p. 147.

[21] T. M. Pearce, "Two Dukes of Alburquerque," *El Palacio,* 61 (June, 1954), 180–81.

[22] Fray Angélico Chavez, "New Mexico Religious Place Names other than Saints," *El Palacio,* 57 (January, 1950), 25–26. The practice of commemorative dates in naming streets, common throughout the Republic of Mexico, i.e., *Avenido Cinco de Mayo* (5th of May) or *Dieciseis de Septiembre* (Seventeenth of September) did not develop in the Southwest. Most of these dates commemorate events in the struggle for Mexican independence and the effects of that experience had scarcely taken root in the northmost areas of Mexico before they became attached to the United States.

[23] *California Place Names,* pp. 50–51; also "The Name California," by Erwin G. Gudde in *Names,* II (June, 1945), 121–133.

[24] "Third Collection," *New Mexico Place Name Dictionary"* (Mimeograph), University of New Mexico, May 12, 1950. Cf., also, *"Chicarica, Chico Rico, Sugarite:* A Puzzle in Place Naming," *Western Folklore,* XIV (April, 1955), 124–125.

[25] T. M. Pearce, "New Mexico Folk Etymologies," *El Palacio* (October, 1943), 229–231. Rufus B. Sage, in *Scenes in the Rocky Mountains* (1847), p. 249, writes that the French also spoke of the stream as *Picquer l'eau* of Water of Suffering, which gives another phonetic background for Picketwire.