Physical Generic Toponyms in Oklahoma

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Generic toponyms of natural features in Oklahoma are distributed unevenly. Physical generics are numerous in the more rugged parts of the state and relatively scarce in the more level sections. Southern toponym generics are more common than either Western or Southwestern generics, although most of Oklahoma's natural toponyms do not correlate with culture or speech regions.

Diverse themes have been investigated by North American toponymists. Studies include the utilization of placenames to express political ideology (Cohen and Kliot 1992), the analysis of the mutability of culture areas (Detro 1984), examinations of individual generic placenames (West 1954), and the association of generic placenames with dialect boundaries (Bastian 1977). Oklahoma has not been ignored by students of placenames, with studies such as those of Carney (1976), Gould (1933), Shirk (1987), and Wright (1929). However, no toponymic analysis has dealt directly with the state's regional identity.

Oklahoma is a land of contrast, both physically (map 1), and culturally (map 2). The dissected Ozark Plateau and the prominent ridges of the Ouachita Mountains in the east give way to the flattish horizons of the central and western parts of the state. Culturally, eastern Oklahoma is generally considered to be a part of the South, largely the Upland South. The strip of Oklahoma that borders on Kansas has been regarded as Midwestern (Gastil 1975; Zelinsky 1992), and the western section of the state is part of the cultural West (Zelinsky 1992). Much of Oklahoma, however, has no clear regional affiliations.

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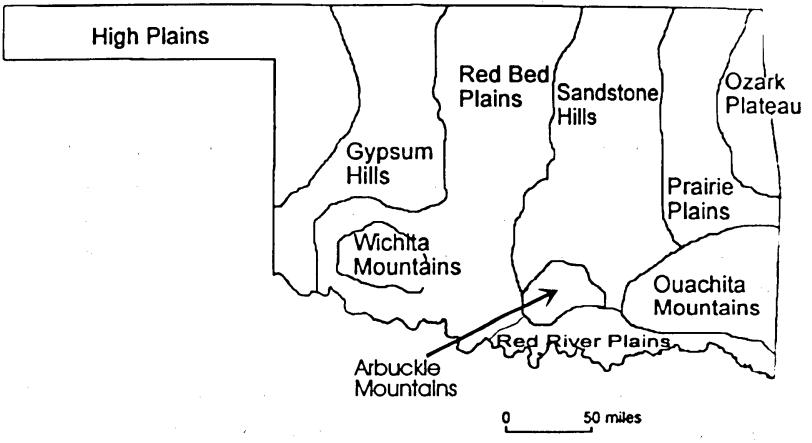
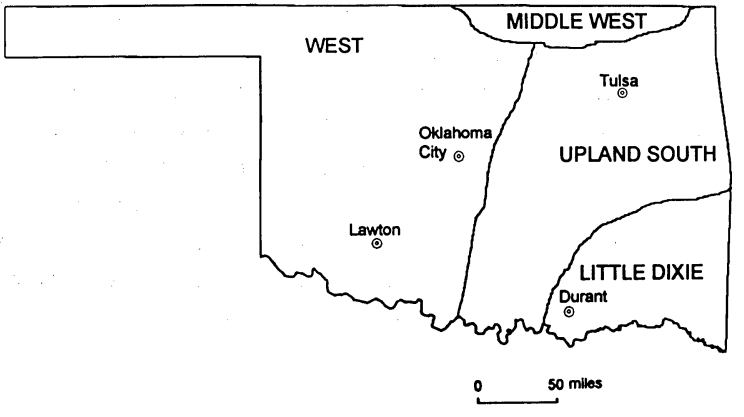
Map 1. Physical Regions of Oklahoma. Adapted from Harris et al. (1976).



Map 2. Cultural Regions of Oklahoma. Adapted from Zdorkowski and Carney (1985) and Zelinsky (1992).



Dialectally, areas of Oklahoma have been classified as South Midland, Mid-Southern, Plains Southern, Highland Southern (Guralnik 1970), and Southwestern (Atwood 1962).[1] Van Riper (1986, 184) described Oklahoma's speech as "predominantly South Midland and Midland, with a dash of Southern and a spot of Northern mixed in."[2] The objective of this study was to learn to what extent, if any, Oklahoma's terrain generic placenames reflected physical, cultural, or speech patterns.

Initially, toponyms were taken from large scale (7.5 minute) topographic maps.[3] Later I consulted the extensive corpus compiled by the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) of the US Geological Survey. GNIS has produced computer files of names gathered from topographic maps, mostly 7.5 minute. Arranged by state, each file contains a classification of names and a list of specific toponyms (OGN 1981). Each toponym is classified as to type (e.g., "summit," "stream") and is located by state, county, latitude and longitude, and the maps(s) on which it appears. In addition, I examined topographic maps to learn something of the nature of the features to which various toponym generics were applied. The maps showed that, as a rule, entities labeled in the plural were only slightly larger than those labeled in the singular. For example, the Boktuklo Mountains and Winding Stair Mountain, both in the Ouachita region, are shown on topographic maps to be of comparable areal extent. Therefore, no distinction was made between the two in this study.

Hydrographic Features

Streams are the most likely physical features to be named (Detro 1982). In accordance with most of North America (Bastian 1977; Campbell 1991; Detro 1982; Kurath 1949; Zelinsky 1955), *creek* (map 3) is the most frequent stream generic in Oklahoma with a total of 2763 occurrences (table 1). *Creeks* in Oklahoma are most abundant in the humid southeast and they gradually decrease toward the northwest as precipitation diminishes. There are 244 *branches* (map 4) in the state, most of which are smaller than *creeks*. *Branch*, a South and South Midland generic (Atwood 1962; Detro 1982; Kurath 1949; Wilson 1900; Zelinsky 1955), is concentrated primarily in eastern and southeastern Oklahoma.

Table 1. Hydrographic Generic Toponyms of Oklahoma.

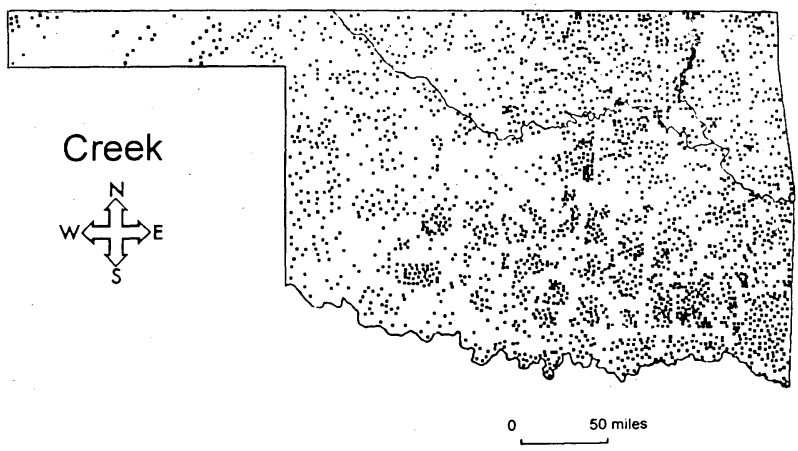
Toponym	N	Toponym	N
Creek	2763	Bayou	7
Branch (S/SM)	244	Cut-off	4
Lake	151	Hole	4
Spring	98	Run	3
River	34	Fourche Maline	2
Bend	26	Channel	1
Falls	24	Chute	1
Slough	15	Pond	1
Fork (S/M)	12	Prong	1
Bayou	7	Slash	1

S = Southern M = Midland SM = South Midland

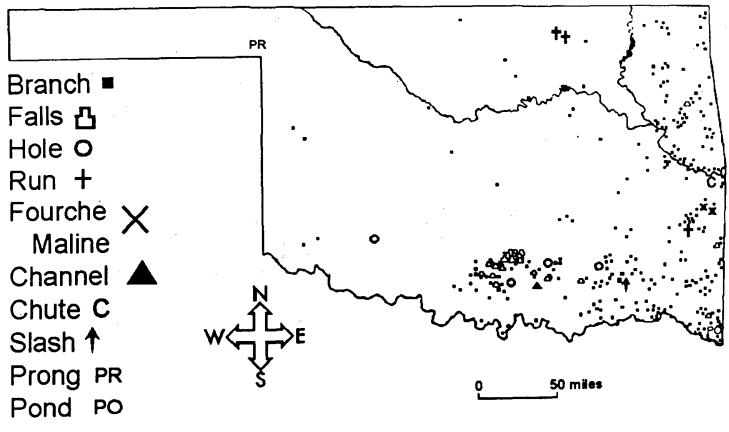
Sources: US Geological Survey topographic maps and OGN (1981).

There are also 34 *rivers* (map 5). *Fork* (map 6), common in the South and especially the Upland south (Campbell 1991; Detro 1982; Raup 1957; Zelinsky 1955), appears 12 times as a generic in Oklahoma, mostly in the east. The seven *bayous* (map 5) are all in the eastern part of the state. Oklahoma's *bayous* are generally medium-sized, meandering bottom-land streams. Of Choctaw origin, the word *bayou* was adopted by the Louisiana French and diffused throughout much of the United States (West 1954), although the name is most common in the Lower Mississippi—Gulf of Mexico area (Campbell 1991). The North Midland generic *run* (Kurath 1949) was applied to three small streams in the eastern half of Oklahoma (map 4). The French *Fourche Maline* 'Treacherous Fork' (Wright 1929) is located in eastern Oklahoma along with its tributary *Little Fourche Maline* (map 4). The relatively scarce Southern generic *prong* (Detro 1982) appears only once—as a small intermittent waterway in the western part of the state (map 4). A minor stream in the southeast is Oklahoma's sole occurrence of the term *slash* (map 4).

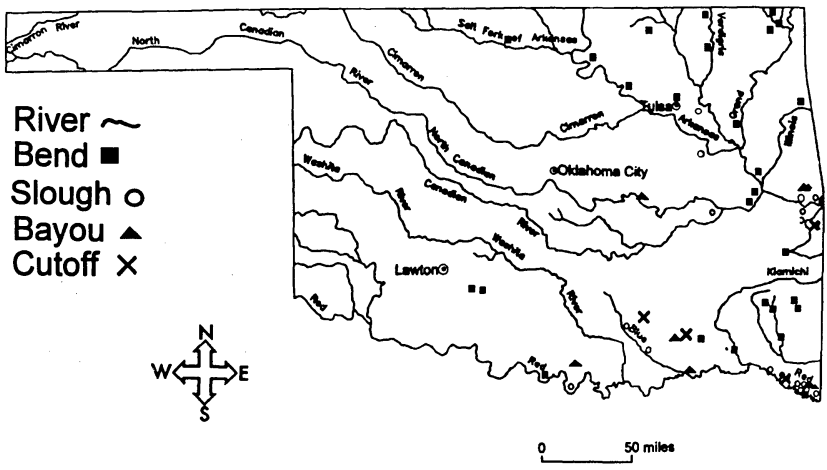
Map 3. Distribution of *Creek*



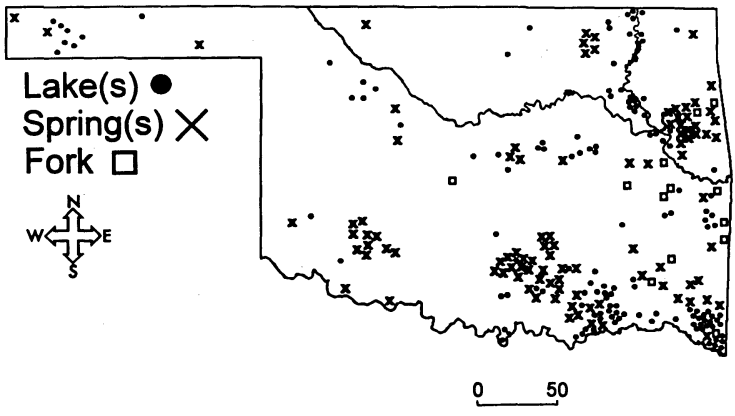
Map 4. Stream Generics



Map 5. Riverine-Associated Features



Map 6. Selected Hydronymic Generics



A number of toponymists have recognized a hierarchy of generics applied to streams of various sizes (Kuethe 1935; McDavid 1953; Stewart 1958; Zelinsky 1955). Oklahoma's streams best fit Zelinsky's model for the Deep South in which *river*, *creek*, and *branch* or *fork* are applied to streams of decreasing size.

Oklahoma's non-stream water bodies show a variety of generic names. According to GNIS, the state has 155 natural *lakes* (map 6). However, an examination of these *lakes* on large scale topographic maps showed that at least four are unquestionably artificial, and others appeared to be man-made, but this could not be positively determined. The natural *lakes* of Oklahoma are usually small and they are most numerous in river bottoms. Included among the features to which the generic *lake* is applied are old stream channels, ox-bows, swampy meander scars, and backswamps. There are 98 *springs* (map 6), concentrated in the rugged Ozark, Ouachita, Arbuckle and Wichita regions. The term *bend* (map 5) names 26 prominent curves in Oklahoma's rivers. *Falls* (map 4) is found 24 times, concentrated in the Arbuckles. The generic *slough* (map 5), found 15 times, is generally confined to river bottoms where it is applied to swamps, sluggish streams, old stream channels, poorly drained sections of streams, and marshy ox-bow lakes. There are four *cut-offs* (map 5) in the state, and the name is given to an abandoned stream channel, a secondary stream channel, an ox-bow lake, and a segment of the Red River bottom. One of Oklahoma's *holes* (map 4) is a small pond, while the other three are classified by GNIS as "lakes," but on the topographic maps they look more like wide sections of streams.[4] *Channel*, *chute*, and *pond* (map 4) each appeared one time, the first two were old stream channels and the third was a swampy meander scar.

Terrain Generics

There are 41 terrain generic toponyms found in Oklahoma. These are shown in table 2. The most numerous by far was *mountain*, with nearly 400 occurrences, concentrated in the Ozarks, the Ouachitas, and the Wichitas. The widespread occurrence of *mountain* (map 7) conflicts with Stewart's (1943) statement that mountains often go unnamed. This is an area in need of further study.

Table 2

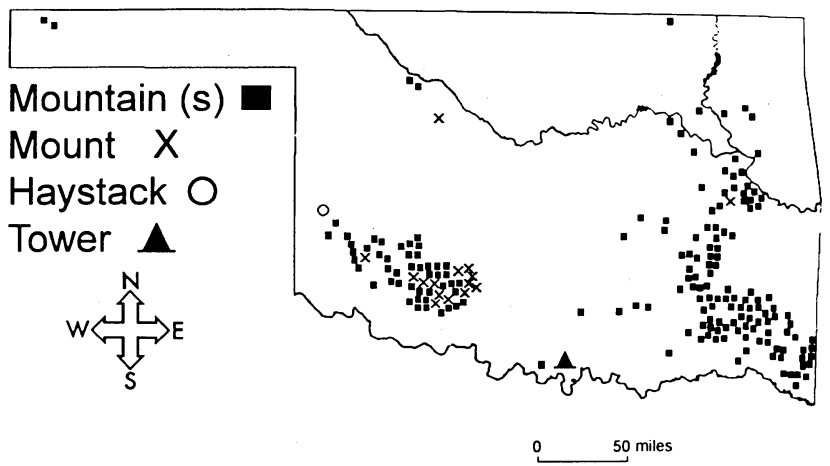
Terrain Generic Toponyms of Oklahoma

Toponym	N	Toponym	N
Mountain	399	Backbone	3
Hollow	268	Gulch (W)	3
Hill	123	Mesa (SW, W)	3
Canyon (W,SW)	60	Butte (W)	2
Ridge	55	Divide	2
Knob (S/M)	27	Knoll	2
Mound	27	Pass (W)	2
Bluff	26	Roost	2
Peak	26	Arch	1
Flat (upland)	21	Badlands (W)	1
Bottom (S/M)	19	Baldy	1
Valley	15	Caverns	1
Mount	15	Cliff	1
Gap (S/M)	13	Den	1
Point	12	Haystack	1
Draw (W)	10	Head	1
Rock	9	Hole	1
Top	6	Narrow	1
Cave	4	Ravine	1
Island	4	Tower	1
Flat (stream)	4		

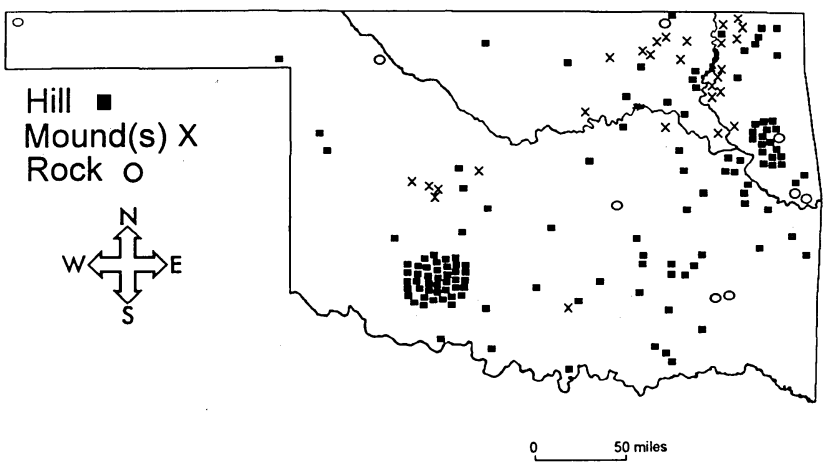
S = Southern M = Midland W = Western SW = Southwestern
Sources: US Geological Survey topographic maps and OGN (1981)

Mount (map 7) appeared 15 times, especially in the Wichita Mountains, and it was usually associated with personal names. *Hill* (map 8) occurred 123 times, and the name exhibited a particularly tight clustering in the Wichita Mountains. *Hills* are generally smaller than *mountains*, and their rarity relative to mountains in Oklahoma parallels the situation in the Arkansas Ozarks (Miller 1969). Fifty-five *ridges* (map 9) were found, most of them in the Wichitas, the Ozarks and the Ouachitas. Many were the predictable linear features, but *ridges* in Oklahoma may assume a variety of shapes.[5]

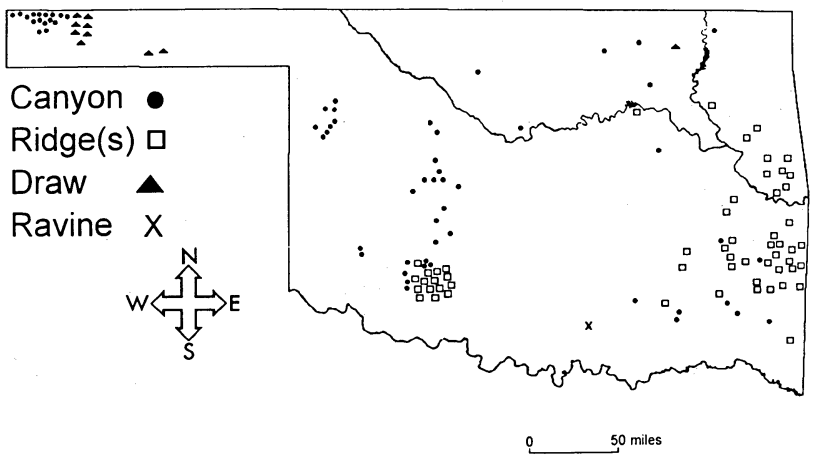
Map 7. Promontory Features



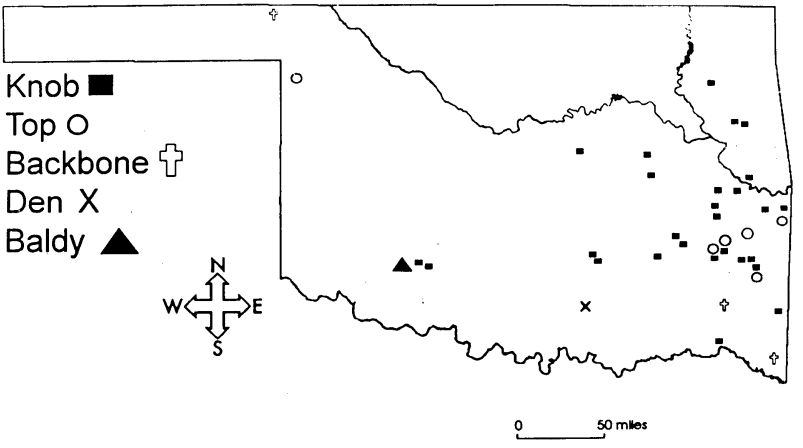
Map 8. Hill, Mound(s) and Rock



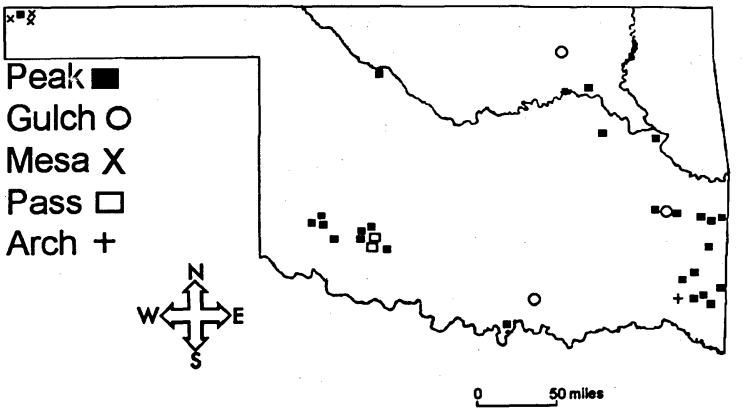
Map 9. Valley Features



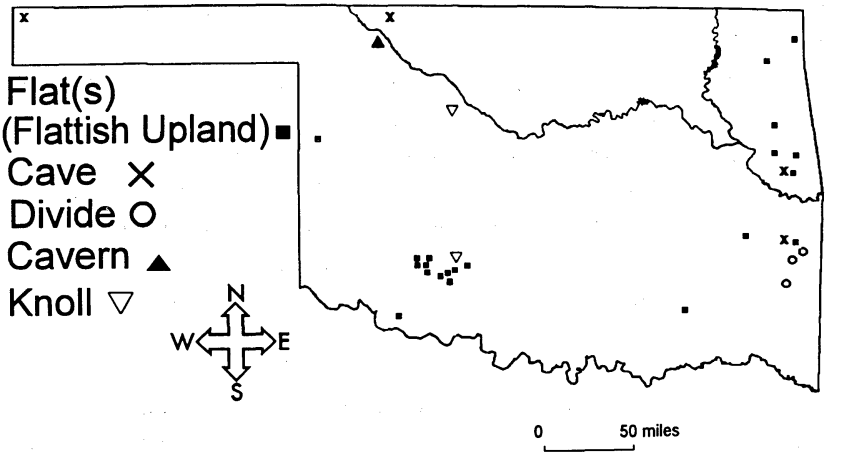
Map 10. Summit Features



Map 11. Peak, Gulch, Mesa, Pass and Arch



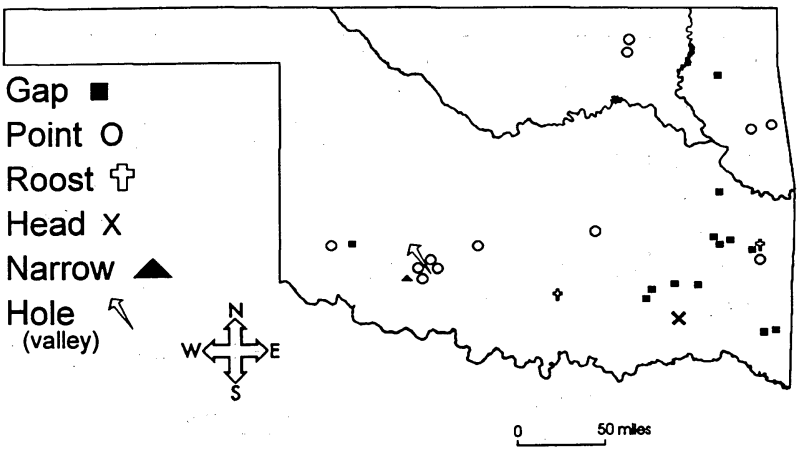
Map 12. Flat, Cave, Divide, Cavern and Knoll



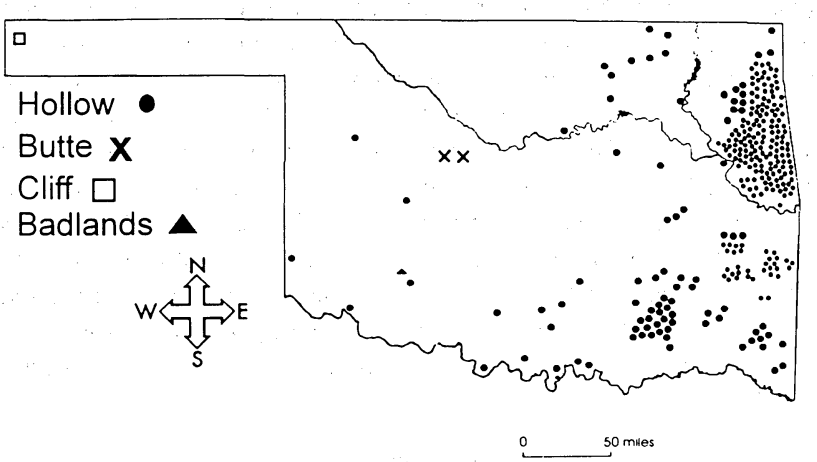
Twenty-seven *knobs* (map 10) were found. Characteristic of the South (Wilson 1900; Zelinsky 1955), *knobs* are largely restricted to eastern Oklahoma, especially the Ouachitas. The 27 *mounds* (map 8) were clustered in northeastern and west-central Oklahoma. *Peak*[6] (map 11) was found 26 times, mostly in the Ouachitas and Wichitas. *Flat* in the sense of a level upland (map 12), was counted 21 times, and it was concentrated in the Ouachitas. The latter mountain range was also the location of most of Oklahoma's 13 occurrences of *gap* (map 13), a Southern/Midland term (Hale 1932; Random House 1987; Zelinsky 1955). The generic *point* (map 13) was recorded 12 times, and it ran the gamut from prominent summit to stream-side cliff. *Rock* (map 8) occurred nine times, and it marked a small hill, a ridge, or a cliff. Six *tops* (map 10) were found, and they were generally associated with substantial summits. There are three *backbones* (map 10) in the state, two of which are cliffs and one is a hill. The Southwestern generic *mesa* (map 11) appeared three times in the western edge of the panhandle. *Pass* (map 11), a Western term, was tallied twice in the Wichita Mountains. The Western generic *butte* (map 14) was found twice in the western part of the state (Adams 1968; Atwood 1962; Austin 1933; Cassidy 1985; Hale 1932; Stewart 1958; Wilson 1900). *Knoll* (map 12) and *roost* (map 13) were counted only twice. *Baldy* (map 10), *head* (map 13), *tower*, *arch* (map 11), and *haystack* (map 7), appeared but once each, all applied to hills. *Sugarloaf* was counted four times, all as composites with other generics.[7]

Hollow (map 14), with 268 occurrences, was the most numerous lowland toponym. The term was particularly abundant in the highly dissected Ozark Plateau. Found 60 times, *canyon* (map 9) is the most common Southwestern generic in the state. *Canyon*, understandably, is most common in western Oklahoma, but it also occurs in the eastern part where it is found along with *hollow*. There were 26 *bluffs* (map 15), most of which are steep banks adjacent to streams.[8] *Bottom* (map 15), a Southern/Midland term (Cassidy 1985; Kurath 1949), occurred 19 times, adjacent to the state's major rivers. *Valley* (map 15), applied to lowlands of various dimensions, appeared 15 times. There were ten occurrences of *draw* (map 9), a Western term for a dry stream course (Adams 1968). Nine of these were in the Panhandle and one in the northeast.

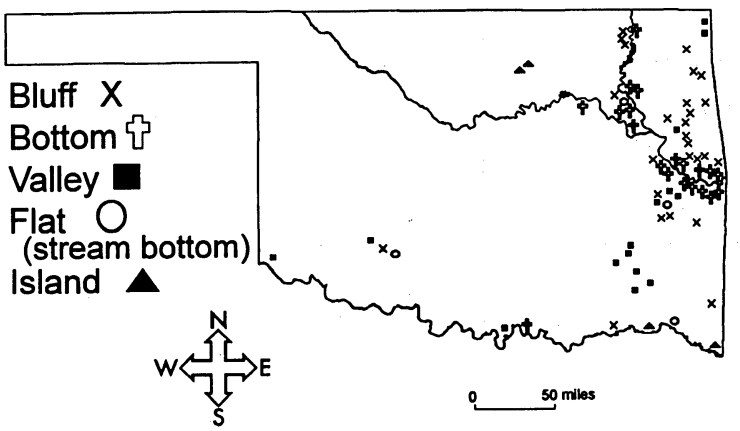
Map 13. Gap, Point, Roose, Head, Narrow and Hole



Map 14. Hollow, Butte, Cliff, Badlands



Map 15. Bluff, Bottom, Valley, Flat and Island



Cave (map 12) was tallied four times and *caverns* (map 12) was counted once. *Flat*, as applied to stream bottoms, (map 15) and *island* (map 15) were both counted four times. The latter were merely segments of river bottoms and not true islands. Three Western *gulches* (map 11) were found and all, somewhat surprisingly, are located in the eastern half of the state. There were two *divides* (map 12), sections of land that separate streams flowing in opposite directions. Oklahoma has but one *cliff* (map 14) which happens to border a stream. The term *narrow* (map 13) was counted once, in the western part of the state, where it was applied to a constricted gorge. One *ravine* (map 9) and one *hole* (map 13) were found, and both named small valleys. *Den* (map 10) appeared once, as "Devil's Den," in a rugged, highly dissected area. The Westernism *badlands* (map 14) appeared once, in southwestern Oklahoma.

Conclusions

Most physical generic toponyms of Oklahoma are aregional, more than 90% are not associated with specific culture or speech regions

(table 3). Also, Oklahoma's physical generics correlate only approximately with natural phenomena. *Creek* is most common in the humid southeast while *lake*, *bluff*, *bend*, *slough*, *bayou*, and *cut-off* are generally associated with rivers. *Mountain*, *hollow*, *mount*, *hill*, *ridge*, *spring* and *falls* are most abundant in the rugged Ozark, Ouachita, Arbuckle, and Wichita regions. By contrast, the relatively level sections of the state show fewer physical toponyms.

Table 3

Regional Affiliation of Oklahoma's Physical Generic Toponyms

Regional Affiliation	N	%
Aregional	4166	91.24
South, Midland	319	6.99
West, Southwest	81	1.77
Total	4566	100.00

Midland includes North and South Midland

Generic toponyms of the South and Midland comprise about 7% of the total. This might suggest that Southern culture is minimal in Oklahoma, but aregional toponymic generics are common even in the Deep South. For example, *creek* is the most numerous stream generic in many of the Southern states (Campbell 1991), and other aregional generics are found there as well. As mentioned earlier, the South's hierarchy of stream names is present in Oklahoma. Southern generic placenames are most common in the eastern, and especially the southeastern part of the state. In terms of culture this region lies on the periphery of the Upland South, but some writers recognize the Red River Valley as part of the Lowland South (Gastil 1975; Jeane 1987; Jordan 1982; Noble 1984; Pillsbury 1989; Zelinsky 1992). In addition, many Southerners consider Oklahoma, especially eastern Oklahoma, to be part of the South (Lowry and Zonn 1989). Southeastern Oklahoma, where Southern generic toponyms are most common, is referred to by the majority of its residents as "Little Dixie" (Zdorkowski and Carney 1985, 102-103).

Western and Southwestern terms account for less than 2% of Oklahoma's generic toponyms. These are most numerous in western

Oklahoma, but they are also present in the eastern part. The relative scarcity of Western and Southwestern placenames in Oklahoma is inconsistent with the self-image that many Oklahomans have of their state. Residents of northwestern Oklahoma perceive their region as part of the West, while those of the southern half of the state (as far east as the Arkansas boundary) regard their area as an extension of the Southwest (Zelinsky 1980). One study of vernacular (popular) regions went so far as to include nearly all of Oklahoma as part of the Southeast (Shortridge 1987). Possibly Southern/Midland generics are more numerous in Oklahoma because the first permanent occupants of the state, including the Native Americans, were in large part migrants from the Upland South.

Notes

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1. Texas and an indeterminate portion of surrounding states are characterized by Southwestern speech, a branch of General Southern that contains many words from the Southwest (Atwood 1962).

2. Northern speech is spoken from Maine to northern Pennsylvania to the Upper Midwest. Southern speech is that of the Lowland, Plantation South. Midland speech, largely of Pennsylvania origin, is spoken in most of that state, the Upland South, and in much of the Midwest. The boundary between North Midland and South Midland runs approximately through central West Virginia. South Midland is the dialect of the Upland South, and it has so much in common with Southern speech that it might be more Southern than Midland (Atwood 1962; Kurath 1949; McDavid 1970).

3. It soon became clear that names of natural features in common usage in northeastern Oklahoma in particular might not appear on topographic maps. The deficiencies of utilizing maps for toponymic study are well recognized (see Berleant-Schiller 1991; McDavid 1985; West 1954; Zelinsky 1955).

4. The generic *hole* is often applied to certain wide or deep parts of streams. In northeastern Oklahoma a number of *holes* bear specific names, but they are absent from the topographic maps.

5. This observation parallels that of Zelinsky (1955) in the Northeast, where the term *ridge* is applied to a number of features.

6. Zelinsky (1955) claimed that *peak* lacked regional significance, but Stewart (1958) considered it to be a Westernism.

7. The term appeared twice as *Sugarloaf*. This observation partly supports Gudde's notion that this toponym is often written as two words when it is used with a generic (1956).

8. Stewart implied that *bluff* was a Southernism (1958).

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The *Ehrensperger Report* is the main vehicle by which members of the American Name Society are informed on current onomastic research and activities of members of the Society. The editor of the *Ehrensperger Report*, Michael McGoff, is now collecting information for the 1996 issue. Please send a summary of your activities for the year by 31 October to

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To be successful as a major information clearinghouse for the Society, the *Ehrensperger Report* should be as complete as possible, with reports from as many people as possible and reporting as many activities as possible. Even though your activities are in progress rather than completed, please submit a summary to Michael McGoff. Appropriate reports might include such things as onomastic studies under way, publications (onomastic or not), public and media appearances, onomastic data collected or investigated; in short, any information which might be of interest to fellow members of the American Name Society.