Anglicized Native American Placenames in Oregon: Their Number and Distribution

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The personal computer permits the storage and analysis of many types of placename data, enabling researchers to conduct large scale studies which otherwise would be prohibitively tedious and time consuming. One use to which computers and their handling of placename data can be put is to distinguish among various general classes of Anglicized native American placenames and to examine their frequency and distribution in different regions of the country or in single states, in this case Oregon.

Introduction

The placement and use of anglicized native American placenames in Oregon is complex, to the point of appearing random in many instances. Here I deal with native American placenames whose pronunciation has been rendered into English. I outline one way these placenames may be sorted and studied in order to determine some of the factors involved in the naming process or processes through which they have evolved.

There are a number of problems one faces in approaching native American names in Oregon, or indeed in most other areas. Two of these are major concerns. First: what are native American names? An Iroquois name in New York or a Navajo name in Arizona has an entirely different meaning when applied by white settlers to a feature in Oregon. Second: current native American placenames represent only a fraction of their original number. Here I deal only with names that have survived and are currently in use. Research by linguists and anthropologists, along with accounts by early explorers and settlers, record many names that have disappeared. Some are variants of names still in use, while others are different names for the same feature given by various tribes.

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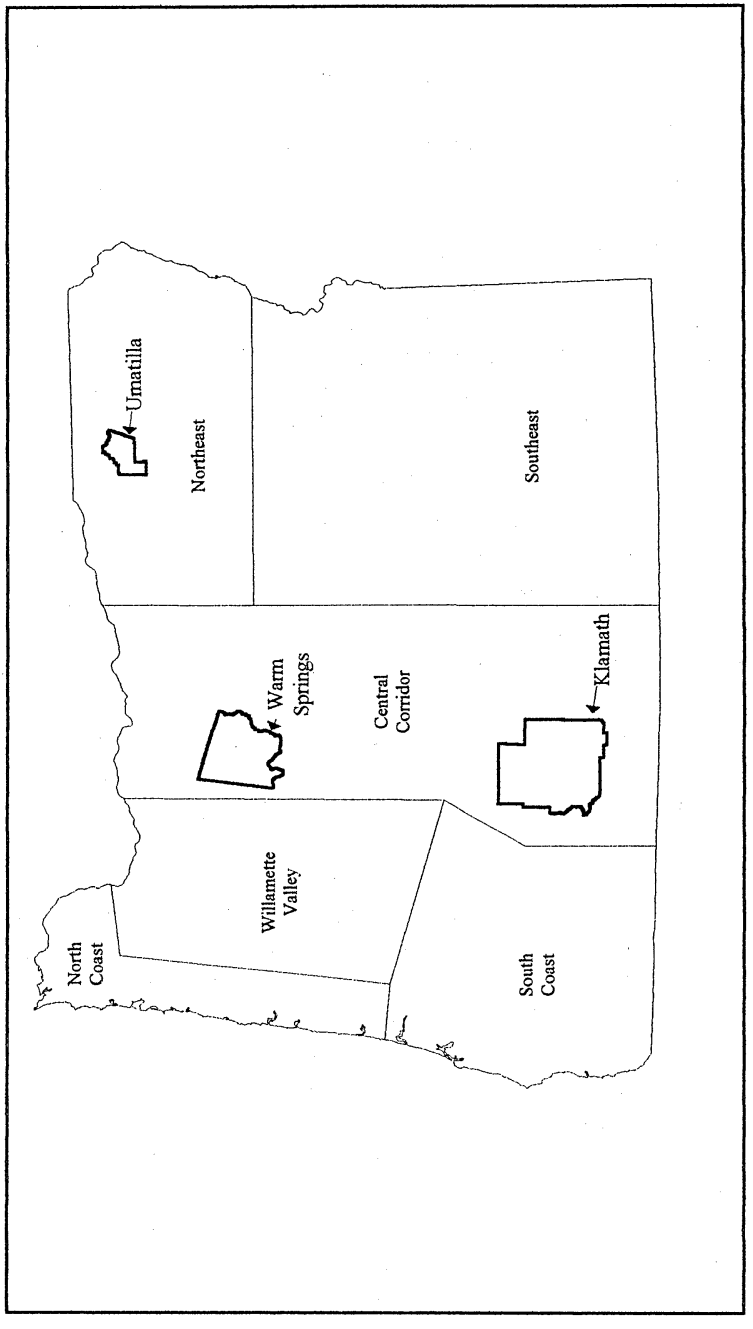
Naming in Oregon, Washington and, to a certain extent, British Columbia evolved in nearly identical time periods and under very similar circumstances. There was an initial period prior to the arrival of whites when the indigenous tribes applied names in accordance with their cultures, customs and naming practices. From the late 1700s to about 1850, white traders and fur trappers came to the area and used adaptations of native names, as well as English and French names. From about 1850 to 1900, settlers, miners, and in some cases military personnel established farms, mines, mills, towns and many other features, all needing names. In addition, this settlement required the naming of many minor topographic features to facilitate communication. From about 1900 on, the native American influence dimished rapidly as white settlement expanded and dominated the land, and most native Americans were restricted to reservations.

Oregon Geographic Regions

In this preliminary study I have divided Oregon into six geographic regions, which allows me to reach some general conclusions about the relative frequency of native American names within the state. These regions, along with the location of the three principal Indian reservations in Oregon, are shown on map 1. The geographic regions are:

The North Coast. The tribes of the northwest coast and lower Columbia River subsisted on locally available fish, shellfish, edible roots, berries, and game. They were generally friendly toward whites, and when the first ships and traders arrived in the late 1700s, an active trapping program and fur trade began. This trade continued for some forty years before any substantial settlement by whites, but at the same time, disease decimated the native population. In 1845, permanent white settlers established themselves along the coast; their numbers were small and they maintained good relations with the natives. The new white settlers did not take over large land areas nor did they have any noticeable effect on the huge salmon runs which were the natives' single most important food. The whites introduced many English names but continued to use native terms and adopted them for numerous geographic features. For instance, the native *Ne-hay-ne-hum* or *Nekonikon* 'a native lodge upstream' is now the *Necanicum* River; the *Tlats-kani* River (the home of a native tribe) is now the *Klaskanine*. The two groups co-existed with little strife for many years, although by 1900 the native population was a small minority of the total population.



Map 1. Oregon Geographic Regions and Indian Reservations

The Willamette Valley. Here the tribes had some permanent settlements, but they covered a good deal of ground while hunting and during seasonal foraging for berries and edible roots. Trappers were active in the valley from 1820 on, and the native population, as on the coast, was greatly reduced by disease. In the late 1830s missionaries and settlers first appeared. As in other parts of the state, they found it convenient to call rivers by the names of the local tribes. The large immigrations starting in the 1840s brought hundreds of white families to the area. They rapidly took over most of the land which had supported game and edible roots, and thus hastened the decline of the tribes. Some of the native names were maintained but most were changed to honor presidents and generals or to transfer a name from some familiar eastern locale. The native *Sam Tomeleaf,* the name of a local tribe, was adapted as Long Tom River but the area known as *Champooick* became Marion County and the name Portland was transferred from Portland, Maine.

The South Coast—Rogue River Valley. The southwest part of Oregon, along the southern coast and inland in the Rogue River Valley, supported a substantial Indian population. As in the Willamette Valley, tribes had both permanent settlements and traditional hunting and gathering grounds. Trappers were active here in the 1830s and immigrants came in the 1840s. White settlers and miners arrived in the early 1850s and immediate conflict led to the Indian Wars of 1853-55 which resulted in the removal of the native American population to reservations on the middle coast. Native names such as Shasta Costa Creek from *Shas-te-koos-tee,* and Siletz Lake from *silis* 'black bear' were maintained along the coast, but few were retained in the interior Rogue River Valley.

The Central Corridor. In the central Oregon corridor a few permanent indigenous groups lived in the northern part near the Columbia and Deschutes Rivers, while the Klamath Basin, the southern part, was home to a substantial population. The entire strip was visited first by trappers from the Hudson's Bay Company and later traversed by the Fremont and Pacific Railroad Survey parties. These early explorers all referred to and recorded the native names of the more important geographic features. On the northern end, white settlement began in the 1870s and trouble followed almost at once. The whites not only farmed along the streams but introduced cattle and sheep to land that had

supported the Indians' game. White settlement in the Klamath Basin began a bit later, but by the 1880s most of the native Americans were gathered on the Warm Springs Indian Reservation in the north and the Klamath Indian Reservation in the south, where they made an effort to maintain at least some traditional names. As in other areas, whites adopted numerous indigenous names (e.g., Tumalo Creek from *Temolo* 'wild plum' and Moyina Hill from *Muni-yaini* 'big hill') and also applied many Chinook Jargon names (e.g., Windchuck River 'windy water'), especially to unnamed features (*Tyee* 'Chief' Mountain).

The Northeast Corner. The development of the northeast corner was similar to that of the central corridor. Many of the natives lived a nomadic life without large, permanent settlements, subsisting on fish, game and edible roots. Several tribal groups were skilled horsemen and thus highly mobile. Trappers and traders passed through and Captain Benjamin Bonneville explored the area in the early 1830s. White settlers came to the southwest perimeter in the early 1870s and by the 1880s had penetrated the interior valleys. The natives were relocated to the Umatilla Indian Reservation after the end of the Nez Perce War in 1879, and only a few indigenous names survive to mark important areas and features. White settlers shifted many of the important indigenous names to adjacent or minor features. (*Wallowa* from *Lacallas* 'fish trap' now refers to a lake, a county, a mountain range, a town and a national forest.)

The Southeast Corner. The southeast part of the state is high and arid and did not support a large native population. The few early white settlers in the 1870s established large cattle ranches. After a major conlict between whites and the nomadic tribes in 1878, few Indians remained in the area.

Native American Placenames in Oregon

The placenames themselves may be roughly divided into four groups. First are the anglicized Indian names with the approximate sounds of the names of features actually used by the native Americans in their own languages. None of the indigenous tribes of Oregon had a writing system and many sounds of their languages could not be reproduced accurately by non-natives, so they were transcribed only

approximately. I will refer to these as "indigenous" names. Second are names taken from Chinook Jargon, a language developed by the Indians and used as a common language for trading. When white traders and trappers came to the Pacific Northwest, numerous French and English words, or their approximations, were added. Third are Indian names brought or "transferred" by whites from the eastern and midwestern states. Fourth are a limited number of terms, such as *Indian, squaw, wigwam* and the like, which, for lack of a better term, I will call "generic." Some of these names, *squaw* in particular, are now considered derogatory by many native Americans. An examination of the items in each of the first three groups will allow us to see some of the major reasons for the current frequency and distribution of native American names in Oregon; the names in the fourth group do not, of course, fit native American naming patterns.

Elsewhere (McArthur 1995), I have discussed how the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS), along with the personal computer, can be used to discover patterns of geographic naming. The Oregon GNIS contains some 56,000 records (a record is a single name and its associated information). Although many of the records are incomplete, a scan of the Oregon GNIS shows about 1800 native American names known to date, a suitable size for a sample pattern study. I found that the best method was to scan the hard copy and then code the electronic file so that all native American names could be identified, isolated, and sorted appropriately.

Since this study is not a statistical micro-analysis, intended to identify patterns rather than specific details, some numbers are rounded. The scan of the 1995 GNIS Oregon file shows 1340 names in the first three categories combined. (The fourth category, "generic" names, contains some 450 names.) The first three categories have been partly classified as prescribed by the Place Name Survey of the United States (PLANSUS), a commission established by the American Name Society, one of whose aims is to establish workable standards for the classification and storage of geographic onomastic data (Smith 1992). In this area PLANSUS extends earlier work, especially that of Stewart (1975). Here I am especially interested in the use of a name, whether it is a primary name, a shift, or a transfer. Each of these uses is defined as follows:

PRIMARY: The original use of a name in an area.

SHIFT: Other uses and combined forms of a primary name in a related or other area, such as the use of primary name to refer to, for instance, a school, a mountain, a park or a shopping mall.

TRANSFER: A name introduced from outside the area; it may be a primary or a shift.

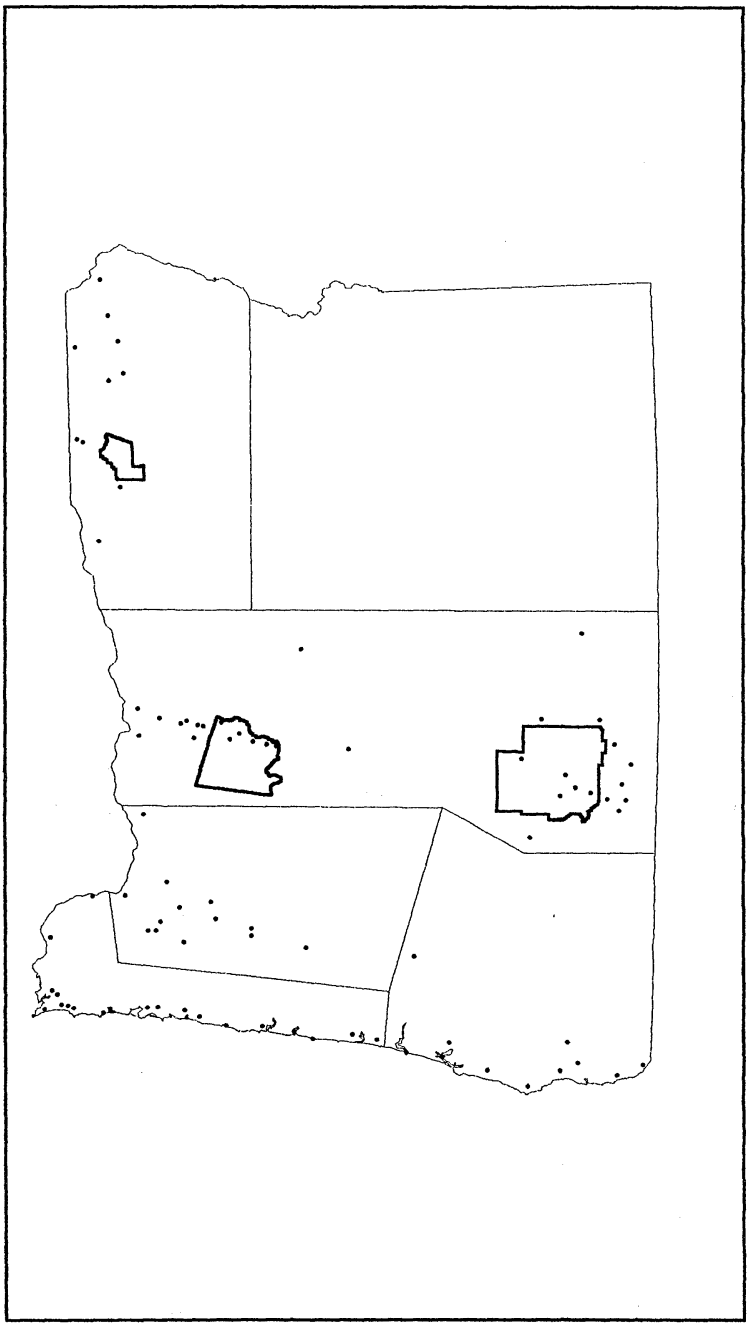
The use of the 1340 names in the three major categories, as primaries or as shifts, is shown in table 1.

Table 1. Major Categories of Aboriginal Names by Use

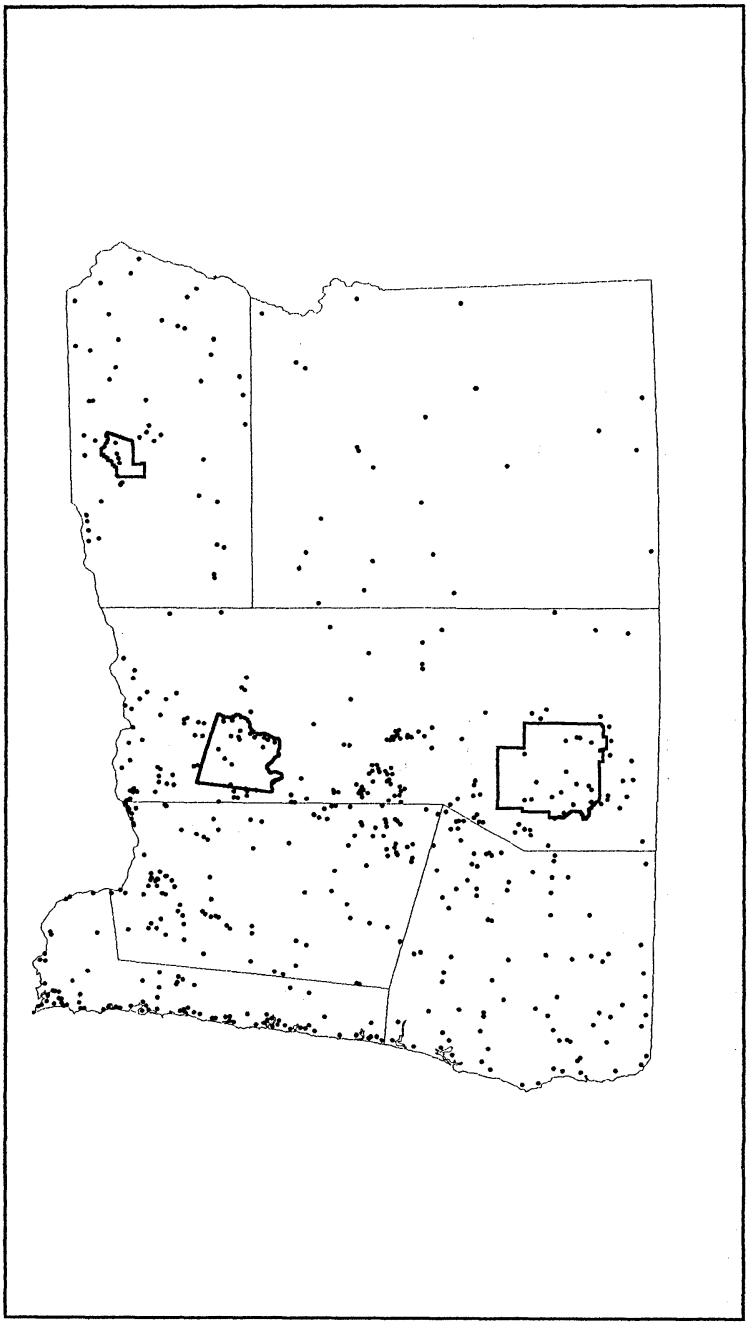
	Primary		Shift		Row Totals	
Name Source	N	%	N	%	N	%
Indigenous	282	21	576	43	858	64
Chinook Jargon	180	13	113	08	293	22
Transferred	105	08	84	06	189	14
Column Totals	567	42	773	58	1340	

Only 90 or so of the 282 'primary indigenous' names were used by native Americans, but not always in the same sense as they are used today. The rest of these, along with all of the Jargon and transferred names, were applied by white traders and settlers. Most of the indigenous names, as well as Jargon and transferred names, are repeated many times as shifts. These also were invariably applied by whites.

The Northwest natives rarely applied names specifically to classes of geographic features such as rivers, bays or hills. Their culture was based upon a deep involvement with the land and nature. Most of the approximately 90 indigenous names originally used by the native tribes were "locators," which is why they are often translated with phrases, such as "the river with white fish," "place of many oysters," or "abode of the gods." Other names designated such things as routes of travel, tribal territories, or village locations. Longer rivers like the Willamette would have different names for different stretches, applied by the different tribes which lived along them. However, white traders and trappers often called the main rivers by the name of the dominant local tribe, such as the *Santiam,* the *Calipooia,* and numerous others.



Map 2. Distribution of Names Used by Native Americans in Oregon



Map 3. Distribution of all Primary Native American Names in Oregon

Map 2 shows the location of the approximately 90 names used by native Americans. Seventy percent are found in three of Oregon's geographic regions, described above. The combined North and South Coasts, and the Central Corridor each has more than 30 names. The Willamette Valley retains 13 and the Northeast Corner retains 10. While it may be impossible to give exact reasons for the retention of indigenous names in these areas, the timing and circumstances of the arrival of whites provides a plausible explanation.

Map 3 shows the distribution of the 567 primary names. Their frequency correlates with the population density. Well over 300 of these primary indigenous, Jargon, and transfer names occur in the three most populous areas of the state: the North Coast, the Willamette Valley, and the South Coast-Rogue River Valley. This correlation would be even more regular but for two phenomena peculiar to the Central Corridor. In the 1920s the US Forest Service gave Chinook Jargon names to many smaller geographic features, long after the Jargon had passed from general use; and in the Klamath Basin the native Americans remained on a large reservation that included much of their original territory. Thus Jargon names are over-represented in one part and many indigenous names are retained in the other. The Northeast and Southeast corners, containing close to half the state's area, have only some 70 names (less than 15%).

I will conclude this brief survey of the distribution and frequency of native American names in Oregon with a few general observations. First, very few names used by the indigenous tribes of the state have survived. Second, most indigenous names were applied by whites and were based on tribal names or names of individual Indians. Third, whites tended to apply names with which they were familiar, either from the local tribes, Chinook Jargon, or names transferred from their homes in the East. These applications correlate very closely with population density (with the exceptions mentioned above) and they bear little relationship to local native nomenclature or culture. "Generic" names applied indiscriminately throughout the state (and throughout most other states as well) by whites have only a fleeting connection to native American tribes.

Note

I acknowledge with thanks the excellent work of Cynthia Gardiner in preparing the maps which accompany this article.

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