

Book Notice

Memories of the Land: Placenames of San Luis Obispo County. By Mark P. Hall-Patton. E-Z Nature Books, P.O. Box 4206, San Luis Obispo, CA 93403. 1994. \$9.95 Paper. Pp 159.

“Popular” placename books are nearly as great a threat to serious onomastics as popular baby name books. Happily, this is one of the best popular presentations of placenames that I have seen and I wish there were more like it. The author, Mark P. Hall-Patton, who is identified only as a native Californian, former history writer and now aviation curator for the McCarran Aviation History Museum in Las Vegas, NV, has a knack for presenting geographic names in an accessible and interesting way. He has read all the right scholarly books on California placenames (e.g., Gudde, Clark, Kroeber), and he has translated this first-rate scholarship into a first-rate onomastics book for general readers.

Hall-Patton’s bibliography shows that he has done his homework well; it includes nearly 100 books, newspaper articles, pamphlets and oral histories, as well as the appropriate USGS quadrangles of this California county, so rich in history for so many centuries.

The short forward introduces a dictionary of about 800 of San Luis Obispo’s placenames. There is the usual amalgam: names of populated places, hills, valleys, ghost towns, creeks and railroad sidings, but several additions make this collection different from most county placename listings and more interesting to readers. Hall-Patton includes the names of school districts (which often bear little relationship to the towns or counties which they serve); he also includes the names of land grants, military installations, parks, camps, coves, reservoirs and dams and even the names of rocks, flats, and an underwater mountain or two. Also, for the major cities and towns, he gives the origins of the names of selected streets; all this in a clear, honest and graceful style.

The publisher has done an admirable service by including several dozen pictures, sprinkled throughout the book; not your usual touristy pictures of California sun, surf and sand, but gritty, grainy 19th century black and white photos of early settlers, ranches, mines, and canyons; these contribute greatly to the presentation of the names.

Edward Callary