



Top left: Donald J. Orth in the Teton Range, Wyoming, 1950. *Top right:* In Alaska, 1956. *Upper middle left:* Beside the Yukon River, during Don's toponymy field work in Alaska, 1956. *Lower middle left:* Donald J. Orth and Martha Camille (Beggs) Orth, 1985. *Middle right:* Don and Martha Orth, 1995. *Bottom left:* Pen and ink drawing of the house at Linden Farm, Northern Neck, VA. *Bottom right:* Rear view of the house at Linden Farm on a winter day.



Donald Joseph Orth. Washington, D.C., 1962

Donald Joseph Orth: A Career in Toponymy

Richard R. Randall

Washington, D.C.

During his 39-year career (1953-91) in the United States Geological Survey, Donald J. Orth made outstanding contributions to the United States Board on Geographic Names, especially in the development of principles, policies, and procedures related to domestic names. While he was chief of the Board's domestic geographic names staff from 1960 to 1991, he adroitly handled a number of difficult issues, and consistently advised Board members on the most effective ways to address particular problems. After 1977 he actively participated in United Nations work on names standardization and provided that body with significant recommendations concerning international names programs. Orth has written several papers and documents relating to name standardization and, as well, compiled the *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names*.

It is perhaps not surprising that Don Orth acquired an interest in names at an early age. He was born in 1925 in the City of Fond du Lac, Wisconsin, to Joseph and Julia (Shaw) Orth. His life began in the nearby rural community of Malone, in the Town of Calumet, Fond du Lac County. His parents operated a dairy farm, where his first work was helping with farm chores. He attended the one-room Garnet School two miles away, with a single teacher handling its eight grades. Later, he went to Roosevelt Junior and Fond du Lac Senior High Schools in the City of Fond du Lac, located at the south end of Lake Winnebago. This variety of educational experiences certainly resulted in a knowledge of the names of the communities and natural features in the area and throughout the state. It is also likely that his classes included geography which, in those days, taught facts about places in the United States and elsewhere in the world.

In 1942, shortly after the attack on Pearl Harbor, Orth joined the U.S. Navy and saw service in the armed guard on cargo ships delivering

essential goods to Murmansk in the Soviet Union. Later he was involved in the invasions of North Africa and Sicily, as well as the landing on Omaha Beach on D-Day, where he was assigned to set up ship-to-shore communications. Subsequently, he was active in Allied campaigns in Normandy and Brittany.

From 1947 to 1952, Orth attended the University of Wisconsin, Madison, under the GI Bill, and took undergraduate and graduate studies in anthropology, cartography, and geography. He was a co-founder in 1949 of the Wisconsin Mountaineers, a climbing group that still exists at the university. He also took graduate courses in geography at the University of Colorado during the time he was employed (1953-58) by the U.S. Geological Survey's Topographic Division in Denver.

For nearly half a century, the name Don Orth has been increasingly closely associated with geographic names in many ways. Although he was initially involved in topographic surveying programs in the western United States, his first activity relating to names occurred with his move in 1959 to the USGS headquarters in Washington. His assignment was to assist that agency to incorporate staff responsibility for domestic geographic names, which had been located in another part of the Interior Department. From 1947, when the U.S. Board on Geographic Names was recreated by public law, the Board's domestic names staff and foreign names staff were part of the Office of Geography of the Department of the Interior. By 1958, officials agreed that USGS mapping programs would be better supported if that agency could work more closely with the domestic names staff. Accordingly, the staff was relocated in the National Mapping Division of the USGS. (In 1968, the Board's foreign names staff was transferred to the Army Map Service so work on names in foreign areas could meet military cartographic requirements more effectively.) Orth became chief of the Office of Geographic Names in 1960 and, until his retirement in 1991, established many procedures that benefitted federal and other organizations dependent on accurate placenames of the United States and its territories. This experience permitted him to increase not only his administrative ability to work with names, but also enhanced his professional understanding of the many historical, linguistic, and political aspects of names. During the period 1965-74 he taught courses in geography at George Washington University and Catholic University.

Reflecting these interests, Orth compiled a number of publications, notably the *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names*, issued in 1967 as USGS

Professional Paper No. 567. His earlier USGS map work in Alaska gave him a wealth of information about placenames in that territory, and the publication of this 1084-page book firmly established him as a high-ranking names expert. In 1984 he compiled the *Official Authorities and Other Organizations Involved With Geographic Names—1984, United States, Canada, and Mexico*, published by the Geological Survey. This work reflected a growing involvement with a range of official and academic agencies of the cited countries. Another series of publications that demonstrated his interests and responsibilities was *The National Gazetteer of the United States*, published for New Jersey in 1982 as the first official U.S. publication on that topic. Between that year and 1991, volumes were published for Delaware, Kansas, Arizona, Indiana, South Dakota, North Dakota, and Florida. A concise national volume was produced in 1990.

In 1973, Orth was appointed Executive Secretary, Domestic Geographic Names, which provides staff support to the Board's domestic names activities. He also was the deputy member of the Department of the Interior on the Board for the next two years. These positions required him to work with a staff at the Geological Survey, with Domestic Names Committee members, and with the Secretary of the Interior as they functioned not only to establish but also to implement procedures for standardizing names in the United States and its territories and possessions. (Members of the committee officially represent six federal agencies: the Department of Agriculture, the Department of Commerce, the Department of the Interior, the Library of Congress, the U.S. Postal Service, and the U.S. Printing Office. Each agency has a member and a deputy member, but periodically additional deputy members have been appointed. Three additional agencies, which have worked with the Board's Foreign Names Committee are the Department of Defense, the Department of State, and the Central Intelligence Agency. All nine agencies are appointed by law to serve on the Board.) The practices and procedures of the Domestic Names Committee were incorporated in a series of principles and policies to provide operational directions for work on names. An important aspect of such work requires collaboration with state and other local authorities to reach the most acceptable names and their applications. It is important to note that states may use different names on their maps, since Board decisions apply only to federal maps or other federal documents that carry names. In any case, cooperation with state

agencies required Orth to participate in joint annual meetings with state organizations involved with mapping and authorizing names.

Over the years, Orth became increasingly aware of the many cultural and political dynamics associated with naming in the United States which required appropriate Board actions. Changing long-standing names considered to be inappropriate or opprobrious often became a major agenda item. Orth was invariably attuned to each issue and was able to recommend suitable responses at the committee level which then gained full Board—and official federal—approval. He also had to deal with a variety of other factors, such as those relating to the spelling of names.

With the advent of automation in federal and other offices, Orth saw that such technology would also benefit research and production of gazetteers. In the mid-1960s he directed efforts to create what became the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS), the world's first effort to deal with national names by automated methods. The GNIS led to the National Geographic Names Data Base, a vast reservoir of U.S. names data that permitted federal and other users to obtain information about placenames. Since then, virtually all domestic names procedures are tied to automation. Importantly, the data are available now to the public, and a significant portion of the staff's time is dedicated to responding to requests from the public.

Because of differing views held by federal officials for many years, no Board domestic staff or committee members were involved in official foreign or international names programs. (These programs, however, involved the active participation of Board members and the Foreign Names staff.) In 1977, Orth was invited by his colleague, Richard Randall, the Executive Secretary of both the Board and its Foreign Names Committee, to attend the Third United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in Athens. From that time forward, Orth and other individuals associated with U.S. domestic names were able to meet with representatives of the U.N., as well as specialists from other nations, and to make important contributions to international toponymic policies and practices. Orth's contributions to various U.N. sessions, such as those in 1982 in Geneva and 1987 in Montreal, and biennial meetings of the U.N. Group of Experts on Geographical Names, included serving in an official capacity on various committees and presenting papers on behalf of the U.S. His work included articles on the standardization of geographic names in the

U.N.'s publication *World Cartography*. Without question, his presence enhanced the reputation of the United States as the world's foremost practitioner of names standardization for national, foreign, and areas beyond a single sovereignty such as Antarctica and undersea features. He and other U.S. representatives believed that some presentations at U.N. meetings seemed to emphasize academic aspects of names and thus diverted the U.N. from its principal goals of standardization: to ensure each named place had a single official name, and that national and international maps and other products depicted such names accurately. During the 1977 U.N. conference, Orth expressed his view that national and international bodies should focus almost exclusively on "applied toponymy," as opposed to those aspects of names that relate to less significant subjects, such as their pronunciation. This statement reflected the opinions of several nations long involved with U.N. programs, and serves today as an appropriate focus.

In 1984 Orth received the U.S. Department of Interior's Medal and Meritorious Service Award for substantial contributions to cartography through his work in toponymy.

Orth has been active in several professional organizations. He was the U.S. member of the International Congress on Onomastic Sciences from 1969 to 1990, and was president of the American Name Society in 1972. He was a co-founder of the Placename Survey of the United States in 1969. Although he retired in 1991 after 42 years in the federal service (including three years of military duty), Orth has retained an active interest in geographic names, and continues to attend and contribute to a variety of professional meetings. He attended the Sixth United Nations Conference on the Standardization of Geographical Names in New York in 1992. Up to 1999, he took part in all but two of the 22 meetings of the Western States Geographic Names Council (now the Council of Geographic Names Authorities), which during those years met annually in various western states. For some twenty years Orth has participated in many of the annual meetings of the Canadian Society for the Study of Names. He has continued his work on the history of the Board on Geographic Names, and keeps close personal contact with his many former colleagues.

Among Orth's earlier hobbies was a special interest in mountain climbing. In the 1950s, he climbed 46 mountains in Colorado with elevations of 14,000 feet or more, and also climbed in California and Wyoming. His personal and work-associated travels have taken him to

168 Names 48.3/4 (September/December 2000)

all countries of Europe, Antarctica, most of South America, and much of Africa and Asia. With his wife, Martha, Orth traveled around the world in 1967 in connection with a trip to New Delhi, India to attend a meeting of the International Geographical Union. He is also an avid student of ancient numismatics.

Orth has a strong interest in early American architecture as evidenced by his work in helping to restore the Ball-Sellers House, a 1750 log cabin in Arlington, Virginia. In 1977 he and his wife purchased and restored Linden Farm, a national historic landmark in Farnham, Virginia, which dates to the early 1700s, and may be one of the earliest timber frame houses still extant in the state. He was the director of the Arlington Historical Museum for five years in the early 1970s, and was president of the Arlington Historical Society in 1974. Reflecting his interest in our world, he has been a longtime member of the U.S. Explorers Club and served as president of its Washington Group in 1978-79.

Don Orth is a model of considerable professional accomplishment in many fields. However, it is his many achievements with the U.S. Board on Geographic Names that will remain as testaments to his excellent contributions to the nation.