

Contributions of the United States Geological Survey to the Documentation of Alaska Native Names, 1950-75

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The mapping of Alaska, primarily at the beginning of the twentieth century and again just after the middle of the century, documented thousands of native-language placenames. A recent study of the placenames of a 3,800-square-mile area centered on the Stevens Village ancestral lands adjacent to the Yukon River provided the correct forms of more than 200 Athabaskan placenames, and rescued much of the oral system that had fallen into disuse. A systematic review should be undertaken of the approximately 3,000 Alaska native names collected in the 1950-75 period so that more accurate versions could be considered for adoption. An essential resource for such a review is Donald Orth's 1967 *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names*, which provides precise citations of sources.

Introduction

This is a case study of the native-origin names on the Beaver 1:250,000 quad, between lats. 66° and 67°, and longs. 147° and 150°. This quad covers an area along the Yukon River, between the communities of Beaver, in the east, and Stevens Village, in the southwest. This area is especially interesting for Athabaskan-language study because the boundary between two Athabaskan languages, Koyukon and Gwich'in, passes along Beaver Creek and Hodzana River, with the Koyukon language to the west and downstream, and the Gwich'in language to the east and upstream.

Donald Orth's *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names* (DAPN) has been a constant companion in my research on Alaska's Athabaskan languages and ethnogeography. A valuable feature of DAPN is Orth's careful citation of sources.

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As I began to work on Dena'ina placenames in the Cook Inlet area in the early 1970s, I noted that most of the native-origin placenames in Alaska in DAPN had been established either early in the American mapping of Alaska from about 1890 to 1920, or in the 1950s and 1960s. Because of the efforts of a few individuals, such as Don Orth, Tom Taylor, and Pete Isto with the USGS Mapping Division, many thousands of locally-used Alaska placenames along with hundreds of previously unrecorded native-language placenames were documented and published on maps.

Field Research of Native-Language Placenames

In 1997-99, I had the opportunity to research the native-language placenames in the ancestral lands surrounding Stevens Village. The Stevens Village ancestral land-use area, which embraces approximately 3,800 square miles, comprises the basin on the western edge of Yukon Flats. It extends along the Yukon River from Ray River upstream to Purgatory, and includes the Dall River watershed and surrounding mountains to the north, and the ridges on the upper part of Rogers Creek to the south. About two-thirds of this ancestral area is on the Beaver quad; its southerly areas are on the Tanana and Livengood quads.

The array of materials that pertain to native placenames in this portion of the Yukon River is quite rich. Portions of the Stevens Village placename network have been communicated and documented numerous times by different individuals from the Stevens Village area, beginning in the 1860s. The foremost source is a section of Jules Jette's 1910 unpublished manuscript *On the Geographical Names of the Ten'a*. In 1997-99, I compiled all previously documented Koyukon and/or Gwich'in names, and researched them with the elders of Stevens Village. Our report (Matthew et al. 1999) presents 212 Koyukon and/or Gwich'in placenames in and around the ancestral lands of Stevens Village. (Another 18 previously recorded Athabaskan placenames could not be reconfirmed.)

Our field methods allowed us to salvage a major portion of an oral Athabaskan placename system that had fallen into disuse. Many of the names are known only by the oldest persons at Stevens Village. The encroachment of English-language names in this area is conspicuous. Some native names for prominent features, such as the East Fork of the

Dall River, have not been used for some fifty years or more. The documented names network for the Stevens Village area is now fairly extensive, but not fully comprehensive. Based on my work with other Athabaskan placename networks, I estimate that the corpus of names within this area is about 75% to 80% of the potential toponymic detail of the aboriginal system. There are, however, nearby features, such as Abraham Lake and Jackson Lake, with no recorded native names.

According to Orth's *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names*, there are 214 official placenames on the Beaver quad. In 1956, USGS topographer Tom Taylor recorded 143 names or 66% of the total number of names on this quad during his field work at Beaver and Stevens Village. Of the remaining one-third, two names were from the 1860s, fifteen from 1899 to 1914, thirty-six from 1917, and two from 1951-52. This reveals the importance of Taylor's toponymic field work in collecting the quad's placename inventory.

Placenames of Athabaskan Origin

Table 1 is a list of the official 25 Athabaskan-origin names on the Beaver quad, along with their spellings in native-language placenames. There are sixteen names derived from native languages, examples being *Jokinaugh Island*, *Sussaymin Lake*, *Gushdoiman Lake*, and *Gushiate Lake*. As well there are nine translated names, based on native place-names, such as *Echoing Lake* and *Fishnet Lake*. Most of the names are Koyukon in origin. Five are via Gwich'in, i.e., are Gwich'in names that have been adapted into Koyukon. All but three of these names were provided to Tom Taylor in the fall of 1956 by Stevens Village men, and all but one (number 16) are on Stevens Village ancestral lands.

In the Stevens Village project, we used these names in our research, and Athabaskan versions of all of these names were obtained. I also had the opportunity, both during and after this survey, to review Taylor's draft field map (1958), now at the National Archives in Anchorage. On that draft map there are several additional native names, which had been recorded for some of the translated placenames and for features that already had official names. There is also one spelling discrepancy: Taylor recorded number 1 in table 1 as *Notina*, which is close to the original *Noteyə No'*, but the name was incorrectly spelled *Nolitna* when it was submitted to the United States Board on Geographic Names.

Table 1. Athabaskan-origin Placenames on the Beaver, Alaska Quad

Official name	Latitude	Longitude	Koyukon Placename	Literal Meaning	Year est.
<i>Athabaskan-origin placenames</i>					
1 Nolima Creek	661200N	1475800W	Notəya No'	'activity place creek'	1956
2 Jokinaugh Island	660600N	1483900W	Joxka Nu'	via Gwich'in 'island'	1956
3 Gushiate Lake	661200N	1485500W	K'əsh Yit Bene'	'in the willows lake'	1956
4 Datkokan Lake	660700N	1490600W	Dotsoka Denh	via Gwich'in 'place with no cache'	1956
5 Datkokan Creek	660200N	1491500W	Decheletonh Denh	'stream that extends into timber'	1956
6 Gushdoiman Lake	660900N	1490400W	K'əldoy Bene'	'lake outlet lake'	1956
7 Sussaymin Lakes	661030N	1493500W	Səsiy Bene'	'American wigeon lake'	1956
8 Guishiemana Lake	661400N	1493630W	K'ish Yit Bene'	'in the birch lake'	1956
9 Hodzana River	661730N	1474630W	Udza No'	'? stream'	1899
10 Tanjoga Lake	661600N	1484000W	Tonjəgə Məne'	via Gwich'in 'slough lake'	1956
11 Tulebagh Lake	662000N	1483600W	Teli Beghe	via Gwich'in '??'	1956
12 Clochacohua Lake	661720N	1484400W	Tloja Kayəx	'old village'	1956
13 Savayeit Lake	661600N	1491100W	Ts'əba Yit Məne'	'in spruce lake'	1956
14 Minkoshchaliton Lake	661100N	1485900W	Mənh Kok'ə Ch'ədaghilot Denh	'where the surface of lake is lengthy'	1956
15 Tishdogatamina Lake	661700N	1492300W	Təsh T'oghe Məne'	'beneath hill lake'	1956
16 Hadweenzic River	662700N	1465100W	O-zri: Njək	Gwich'in 'name stream'	1907

English-translation placenames

17	Beaver Creek	661400N	1473200W	Tsonjoge	via Gwich'in 'beaver stream'	1867
18	Fishnet Lake	661500N	1485000W	Tabil'K'at	'fishnet place'	1956
19	Echoing Lake	661630N	1492000W	Mets'enh Delittish Menə'	'echo comes from it-lake'	1956
20	Geese Lake	661400N	1490700W	Dach'əx Məne'	'white fronted goose lake'	1956
21	Island lake	660230N	1490400W	Tonidzə Nu Lə'ənh Denh	'where an island is in the middle'	1956
22	Flat Lake	661800N	1484000W	Menh T'əsjə'	'flat lake'	1956
23	Long Point	660300N	1484500W	Tledonənaale	'point that is long'	1956
24	Gull Island	660900N	1483100w	Bats Nu'ə	'gull's island'	1956
25	Moose Island	661300N	1483000W	Denjje Nu'ə	'moose's island'	1956

Notes: The orthographic conventions follow Athabaskanist practice and employ digraphs and trigraphs, e.g., **ch'**, an apostrophe ' for glottal stop, and **nh** for voiceless nasal. Koyukon vowels are with single symbols. Full vowels are **i** (high front), **a** (low front), **u** (high back), and **o** (low back). Reduced vowels are **ə** schwa and **ə** upsilon.

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The 1950-75 toponymic work by the USGS in Alaska was a sincere and significant effort to record the locally used placenames for their historic-preservation value. The USGS topographers in Alaska had no training in the phonetics of the Alaskan native languages, which unfortunately resulted in the spellings of the native names being approximate and inconsistent. No. 12, *Tlojə Kayəx*, lit. 'old village' had been distorted as *Clochacohua Lake*, and the resulting English pronunciation sounds strange to the ears of a Koyukon speaker. Most of the names in table 1 are not well known beyond the local area and the haphazardly spelled names are rarely used.

It is appropriate to suggest that the Alaska Board of Geographic Names consider adopting respelled versions of the native-origin names, which would create significantly improved pronunciations of the placenames. I believe it would be very constructive if most, if not all, placenames from Alaskan native languages were portrayed with some degree of accuracy on the official maps and in the gazetteers.

Conclusion

There appear to be more than 3,000 placenames of Alaskan native origin that were recorded by the USGS between 1950 and 1975. These names, which constitute a significant documentary source of native-language placename inventories, should be evaluated systematically. It would be best if we could review the draft field maps and submission forms used by the topographers, some of which are in the National Archives in Anchorage.

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