Sense of Place in Place Name Studies: Some Needed Work in Onomastics

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When I cover place names in my American folklore class, I spend a class meeting on one name: Lyles Station. Located in Gibson County, Indiana, the village formerly was called the Cherry Grove Community, but Joshua Lyles, a freed slave from Tennessee, bought land there in the 1840s, other African Americans followed after the Civil War, and the name was changed to Lyles or Lyles Station, honoring the founder. The historical account of the naming of this all-black community is interesting in itself, but, of course, it doesn't take a full class meeting to present. To contextualize the name and emphasize what the name means to those who live and have lived there, I show the video *Joshua's Battle: The Story of Lyles Station* (1988), produced by WTIU, Indiana University. In the video, historians Richard Blackett and James Madison interview Carl and Earl Lyles, great-grandsons of the founder, as well as others in the village, especially those attending a community reunion. Contextualizing the name, physically and socially, with the video recording, endorses W. F. H. Nicolaisen's dictum of a quarter of a century ago that there is a difference between words and names and thus between lexical meaning and onomastic meaning (1976, 4). Besides a name's etymology or historical provenance—or what a name meant at the time of naming—there is a host of attitudes, emotions, and stories attached to a place name, revealing what a name and the place it identifies mean to present and former residents.

Over the years some folklorists have emphasized place, for they have recognized that physical and social settings as well as historical experiences shape culture. This is especially true of the works of Richard M. Dorson, who foreshadowed the contemporary interest in sense of place and symbolic geography. In *Land of the Millrats*, for instance, he speaks of "symbolic landscapes," "cognitive maps," and "shifting boundaries," emphasizing that a regional folk culture is

Names 49.4 (December 2001):268-272
ISSN:0027-7738

dynamic and "lies in the mind and spirit as much as in physical boundaries" (1981, 6-7). Likewise, a dozen years later essayist of place Scott Sanders writes that "the geography of the land and the geography of the spirit . . . are one terrain" (1993, xvi). Dorson, in fact, calls the last section in Chapter 4 of *Land of the Millrats* "A Sense of Place."

Knowing that Gary, Indiana, was founded in 1906 and named for Elbert H. Gary, chairman of the board of directors of U.S. Steel, explains something about the geography of the land, but does not reveal the geography of the mind of those living outside the city as well as those living in the city. Although outsiders view Gary as "the blighted city" and speak of it with "fear and disgust," one African American resident told Dorson that he wouldn't move from his downtown Gary home even to Glen Park because "I love this place. I love my neighbors on both sides . . . . I love the area." "These Garyites," Dorson notes, "exhibit perhaps the strongest sense of attachment to place of any of the Region's people, for they are staying put" (1981, 212). *Staying Put*, as a matter of fact, is the title of Scott Sanders' excellent book, which suggests how the contemporary literature of place can inform place-name studies.

Sometimes geography of the mind is all that's left. Today, as places are destroyed or drastically lose their individual character through such things as urban renewal, suburbanization, flood control, and interstate highway construction, place names may disappear and legends and personal experience tales connected with those places may be lost and replaced by other stories not so place dependent. When a place is obliterated, sense of that place survives only in memory. For instance, Scott Sanders' boyhood home in Portage County, Ohio, now lies under water, "a drowned landscape." Sanders writes that "In the early 1960s, when I was in high school, politicians and bankers and realtors ordained that the Mahoning should be snared. A dam was built, the river died, and water backed up over most of the land I knew." Some years later on returning to his native ground, now at the bottom of a lake "named for a man who had never lived in that valley," Sanders observes, "Unwilling to dive through so much water, I can return to that drowned landscape, as I can return to childhood, only by diving through memory" (1993, 4-5).

Likewise, though examining folklore and oral history instead of personal recollections, folklorist Alice Morrison Mordoh (1986) shows

what happened to a community's sense of place when the construction of a reservoir in south central Indiana completely obliterated a community—razing homes and farm buildings, bulldozing farmland, and scattering the people who once prospered there. Before construction of Lake Monroe began in the early 1960s, Salt Creek Valley was a community of several thousand people, mainly subsistence farmers. Through folklore research among farm families living on the fringes of the reservoir and life histories of past residents now relocated on new farms, Mordoh recreated the community, physically and socially, that existed in Salt Creek Valley prior to construction of Lake Monroe and that now exists only in the geography of the mind.

One of the towns that disappeared in the construction of Lake Monroe was Elkinsville, named for William Elkins, first settler and founder, who arrived there in 1816. It isn't under water, but the government bought the town and surrounding fields as a flood plain for the lake. The church, one-room schoolhouse, and old family homesteads were torn down, and the residents scattered. On October 5, 1997, 30 years after Elkinsville disappeared, nearly 200 former inhabitants gathered at the old townsite to remember their town. At that reunion, one former resident, Mary Followell, recalled, "It was a really nice town . . . . We had a church and a school and a grocery store. It was a real good place to live" (Terre Haute *Tribune Star*, Oct. 6, 1997, A7). The physical community and the subjective experience of living in Elkinsville are recalled only in the memories of former inhabitants like Mary Followell. Unless a writer like Scott Sanders lived there, it's up to place name scholars, folklorists, and oral historians to preserve the sense of a particular place as well as its names.

As the video about Lyles Station illustrates, in stories and celebrations family and age groups play an important role in constructing and maintaining sense of place. In our diverse and mobile society, family reunions, often held in the hometown of a family's patriarchs, are essential in forming and maintaining sense of the old home place. Some communities, such as Bowling Green—the oldest settlement in Clay County, Indiana, and probably named for Bowling Green, Virginia, home of an early settler—have old settlers picnics or reunions. These celebrations commemorate local history and continue to honor the old settlers or founders. Bowling Green's old settlers reunion, held annually since 1868, is the community's major social event and serves as an extended family reunion, much as the reunion in the Lyles Station video

functioned. Activities honoring the community's old settlers include band concerts, horse- or tractor-pulling contests (now lawn tractor-pulling contests), picnicking, and storytelling. The Constitution and By-Laws of the Old Settlers Association of Clay County, Indiana, even specify that, among other things, "The exercises of the annual meetings [the reunions] of this association may consist of . . . addresses, declarations and experiences touching the pioneer history and settlement of this part of Indiana in particular and of the country in general" (Buckingham, et. al. 1968, 3). These activities serve to preserve local history and define Bowling Green as a community. Old people telling tales contribute to a sense of place, diachronically and synchronically, by creating a feeling of community with old settlers of the past as well as among people of all ages of the present. Situating themselves in history assists residents in forming a closer bond with place, giving them a deeper onomastic meaning of its name.

Inspired by the land that supports them physically and spiritually, contemporary essayists of place, with deep concern for the environment, stress sense of place, obligation to place, human culture, and bonding to the natural world as part of the landscape. Like those in culture studies, many contemporary essayists of place stress social responsibility and activism, but their responsibility extends to the whole environment, natural and human, not just to marginal groups. As disciplinary boundaries are being redrawn, place name scholars interested in the meaning of a name in all of its manifestations, especially in Nicolaisen's notion of onomastic meaning, can emulate the essayists of place and local ethnographers, who show that place names that people make and use to denote the physical landscape also suggest a cognitive landscape produced through local experiences.

As we enter the 21st century, we may question whether, in fact, there can be a sense of place for many people in our multicentered society. Contemporary essayists of place suggest that there can be. In fact, in a mobile and diverse society they suggest that there are *senses of place*, or what Lucy Lippard calls "a serial sensitivity to place," for we grow up in one place, go to school in other places, and then work and finally die in still other places (Lippard 1997). Scott Sanders, for instance, points out that "Before settling in my present home, I lived in seven states and two countries, tugged from place to place in childhood by my father's work and in early adulthood by my own" (1993, 117). What's more, the new essayists of place go beyond their particular

places and provide connections to other places as well as to our place in nature. Sanders points out that "to understand your life as woven into the local life does not prevent you from recognizing and honoring the diversity of other places, cultures, ways. . . . Local knowledge is the grounding for global knowledge" (1993, 114). In fact, Robert Penn Warren suggests that perhaps we can appreciate our placeness only by experiencing other places. "I was raised in the South," Warren says, "but I really discovered my Southerness only when, at the age of twenty, I went to California and began my wanderings. It was only then that I began to read Southern (and American) history—though I had heard those things 'talked' all my life. So I discovered the South: a fish doesn't think much about water" (quoted in Warren 1992, ix).

In addition to etymology and/or historical provenance of a name, place name scholars should be sensitive as well to the meanings people give to place through their stories and celebrations. About these things we can learn from Sanders and other so-called new regional writers, who in their literature of place have come to know who they are by achieving a sympathetic understanding of their physical and natural environment. As Sanders writes, "There is no division between where we live and what we are" (1993, 51), so examining sense of place as well as place names provides a better understanding of the people who live there and reveals what the name means to them.

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