

An Onomastic Journey

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I first heard of the American Name Society over 30 years ago when I was preparing to take a graduate course in the history of the English language. I had come upon a brief biography of my new professor, who had the imposing name of Wilhelm Fritz Hermann Nicolaisen, and noted that he was a member of the American Name Society. At the time my ignorance of the subject led me to wonder if members of that society were interested in genealogy of the type expounded upon by great aunts, but I soon moved on to other facts more clearly relevant to the heavy academic load that I faced that semester.

As the semester progressed I learned enough about the study of names (which I also now knew was called onomastics) to pre-register for an experimental graduate course offered the following semester by Professor Nicolaisen on the study of names and, in particular, place names. Thus began my journey as a student of an interdisciplinary body of knowledge that I still find exciting.

I became increasingly interested in onomastics throughout my graduate student years—now knowing that Professor Nicolaisen not only knew his subject very well but also was himself known internationally for his scholarship in the field. I progressed through several independent studies—having teamed with a fellow doctoral student to learn as much as possible about the toponyms of New York state. Early on we learned that a name does not exist alone; it is an element in a larger set of elements in which there is connectivity, in which the name must make sense onomastically. We became more immersed in settlement history, in aboriginal languages, in bilingual interaction and in phonological adaptation. It was during one of these early years of discovery that Professor Nicolaisen introduced me formally to ANS.

Attending meetings of the society was a delight. The gatherings were among the highlights of my early years in onomastics. There I

heard firsthand from those whose publications I had admired: scholars with names like Cassidy and Bryant, Ehrensperger and Orth, Pyles and Algeo, Harder and Smith, Read and McDavid, and, yes, my own W. F. H. Nicolaisen. I was able to listen, to learn, to question, and to socialize with these scholars. From them I learned new directions I might take in pursuing my own research. Meetings of ANS were exciting and I looked forward to them. At the presentations, at the banquets, in the hallways, we talked about specific names, how to go about studying names in general, the use of computing to make sense of the often huge amounts of data to be analyzed, and most important, the theory and rigor which must underlie our interdisciplinary approaches.

I must say that over the years some of that excitement has faded. Certainly I have become more jaded and perhaps we have, at times, lost our way. It seems that now we spend more time on internal politics and petty disagreements than we do on matters of substance. I have, more than once, thought of the famous quote from Henry Kissinger that "university politics are vicious precisely because the stakes are so small." We have so very little to gain from infighting.

Occasionally, though, I again feel the excitement of those early years. It happens when I hear a particularly enlightening paper or listen to one of my colleagues who has obviously thought very deeply about a particular subject and offers me new insights. It also happens when I share with others something that excites me. One particular discovery that I shared years ago with my ANS colleagues comes to mind. I remember recounting, with great energy, the evolution of a particular New York state toponym from its aboriginal beginnings to its places in the present day American English onomasticon and lexicon.

The history of the toponym, Tuxedo Lake, describes a time of bilingual interaction as the name was transferred from one language to another with phonological adaptation. Tuxedo Lake presently identifies a lake of relatively insignificant size and importance in Orange County, New York. It was called, as recently as 1860, Duck Cedar Pond, an obvious Anglicization of aboriginal sounds. The name derives from an Algonquin (Lenni Lenape) word which its wolf subtribe came to be known by: *p'tucksit*, also phonetically rendered as "took seat." "This name," Frederick Webb Hodge (1907, 338) says, "is a socio-esoteric term for wolf and signifies literally, 'he has a round foot,' from 'P *tuksiteu*' [eu=o]."

In an obscure journal called *Travels in North America in the years 1780, 1781, 1782*, by the Marquis de Chastelleux, the reader is afforded a rare glimpse of what it must have been like for a European to encounter unsettled and largely unexplored land. The following, from Chastelleux's entry for December 19, 1780, is, so far as I can tell, the first record of the Algonquin name passing from an Indian guide to a European traveler, from an outgoing onomastic system to its incoming successor:

I found myself on the borders of a lake, so solitary and concealed, that it is only visible through the trees by which it is surrounded. The declivities which form its banks are so steep, that if a deer made a false step on the top of the mountain, he would infallibly roll into the lake without being able to recover his balance. This lake, which is not marked on the maps, is called 'Duck Sider,' it is about three miles long and one or two wide. I was now in the wildest and most deserted country I had yet passed through.

From de Chastelleux's first recording, the toponym has had various other forms: Duck Cedar Lake, Duck Cedar Pond (1860), Duck Sider (1780), Took-Seat, Tuck sedar, until, in the late nineteenth century it was standardized in local spelling to Tuxedo Lake. This was not the last effect it was to have on American English, however. In the early twentieth century a millionaires' residential colony had grown up around the "solitary and concealed" lake, and it became fashionable to wear dinner clothes at social gatherings. It was not long before the name for the lake had been transferred to the type of clothing worn by the male inhabitants and *tuxedo* became the common term for men's formal dinner wear in the United States.

I still remember the thrill with which I shared this obscure bit of onomastic history with my colleagues at ANS. I urge us to come together as often as possible to pursue our common interest in the study of names and, wherever possible, to create opportunities for young people to be thrilled by that study, as I was. May the next 50 years of ANS continue to provide a setting for students of onomastics to become inspired and excited by names.