

# Watching Onomastics Come of Age

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During four decades of membership in the American Name Society, I have witnessed the maturing of onomastic studies in the United States and enjoyed the privilege of associating with the pioneers of our discipline. The society has provided scholarly growth, collegial friendships, and exciting involvement in onomastics.

My introduction to the American Name Society came from Dr. Lili Rabel-Heymann, one of my graduate professors of linguistics at Louisiana State University. She described the stimulating activities of the society and gave me an application for membership. Upon completion of doctoral studies and my return to teaching at East Texas State University, I attended my first meeting of the American Name Society in Washington D.C., in 1960. The society was completing its first decade when I became a member. The papers—on fascinating topics—were enthralling, but the opportunity to be in the same banquet hall with legendary founders of the society was awesome. Elsdon Smith, Margaret Bryant, Allen Walker Read, Frederic Cassidy, Francis Utley, Kelsie Harder, Leonard Ashley—all names I recognized from their published scholarship—were there. And they carried on genuine conversations and showed interest in a starry-eyed young Texan.

Later, I would work on various ANS projects and develop friendships with Lurline Coltharp, Donald Orth, W. F. H. Nicolaisen, Audrey Duckert, Ed Ehrensperger, Wallace McMullen, Byrd Granger, Grace Alvarez-Altman, John Algeo, Lewis McArthur, Alan Rayburn, Clarence Barnhart, Robert Barnhart, Raven and Virginia McDavid, and other outstanding names scholars, and at a meeting in San Francisco, I would meet George Stewart, whose *Names on the Land* had fired my imagination in graduate school.

I immediately detected among the leaders of the Society a seriousness and dedication in bringing onomastic studies in the United States to the level of academic excellence and esteem that the discipline enjoyed in Europe. Rapid progress was made in the development of scholarly methodology and public recognition of the importance of onomastics.

This success in onomastic scholarship and acclaim was the theme of my presidential address at the annual banquet in New York in 1981. Using an allusion to a book by Alvin Toffler, the country's leading futurist at the time, I discussed "The Third Wave of Onomastics." America had entered a third wave of technology following an early era of cottage industries which gave way to the deluge of the industrial revolution. Likewise, I found advances in the study of onomastics from a concern with oddities in names and random collections to efforts to establish theories of names and frameworks of investigation, to a current emphasis on sophisticated studies based on solid scholarship and employing current computer capabilities.

As national director the Place Name Survey of the United States from 1974 until 1987, I attempted to continue the solid foundation laid by Byrd Granger, the founding director. Survey directors in all fifty states were provided continuing education, handbooks of research methodology, inventories of place names studies, and national publicity. Efforts were made to identify the fragmented and uneven existing studies of place names and to stress the importance of combining geographical, linguistic, and historical information in future investigations. Support from the U.S. Geological Survey and cooperation from place name scholars in Canada were important in achieving the goals of the project.

The most important development for participants in the Place Name Survey was the announcement by Donald J. Orth in San Francisco in 1979 that the U.S. Geological Survey had designed an automated Geographic Names Information System and that an inventory of place names would be completed for all fifty states. With these tools, place name researchers were poised to enter their most productive era.

Recognizing that only a small percentage of Americans interested in onomastics would be able to attend annual meetings of the American Name Society in conjunction with the Modern Language Association, I

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organized the South Central Names Institute in 1971. The annual ANS meetings were held with the Modern Language Association, usually alternating between Chicago and New York at that time. For fifteen years, the South Central Names Institute met in June on the campus of East Texas State University in Commerce. National, regional, and local speakers made presentations on a variety of onomastic subjects, and selected papers were published in a series of seven volumes.

For many who attended the sessions, the papers were an introduction to name studies, sometimes leading to active membership in the American Name Society. Both undergraduate and graduate students on the campus were invited to attend programs and to mingle with some of the legendary members of the Society who made their way to northeast Texas. The institute was modeled after the original names institute organized in New Jersey by E. Wallace McMullen.

Through attendance at international, national and regional onomastics meetings, the ANS journal and bulletins, involvement with the executive committee and place name survey, and, especially, the warm, invigorating, and abiding friendships formed, my membership in the American Name Society has been an invaluable professional and personal experience. The occasion of the fiftieth anniversary is an appropriate time to honor the pioneering founders and to applaud the current members and leaders.