

What is PLANSUS?

Grant Smith

Eastern Washington University

The roots of the American Name Society can be traced to the formation in 1938 of a “place name interest group” within the American Dialect Society, and place name studies have remained a core focus of our organization ever since.

A few years later (1943), George R. Stewart began a correspondence with Robert L. Ramsey (subsequently involving Alan Walker Read, Helge Kökeritz, and others) proposing a “Place-Name Society” independent of ADS in order to facilitate a “Place-Name Survey of the United States.” For the proposed “Constitution” of the society, “The object of the Society is to prepare and publish a place-name dictionary of North America, as well as to encourage any projects which may be subsidiary to that end” (Lance, 2).

For the proposed “Place-Name Survey of the United States,”

The objects of this work are (a) to provide a scholar’s tool for historians, anthropologists, geographers, philologists, and others needing specific and authoritative information upon place-names, and (b) to make available for the United States an easily usable and obtainable work of reference by means of which to satisfy the wide-spread human interest in place-names, to present a means of relaxation and pleasure, and to demonstrate the past development and present nature of the United States and its people. (Lance, 2)

These general goals have been reiterated in different words over many decades and continue to fuel name study in general and especially the interests of toponymists and efforts by state, federal, and even United Nations officials.

Kökeritz envisioned the publication of “approximately fifty volumes, averaging 600 pages each, treating altogether the names of an estimated

310 Names 49.4 (December 2001)

750,000 places.” At first Princeton University Press expressed “a good deal of interest” but then backed away. Then the University of Chicago expressed interest, but Mitford Mathews at Chicago “expressed his concern that a larger group than the ADS place name interest group was needed for such a large undertaking” (Lance, 1). The scope of the undertaking, the limited number of people involved, and their differing research interests (e.g., history, geography, and linguistics) led to detailed discussions but, in the final analysis, no coordinated action.

This was a pattern to be repeated later. The idea of a Place-Name Survey would galvanize the interests of scholars, they would discuss standards in detail, but they would publish independently. The actual work of a coordinated and comprehensive survey could not get off the ground until it was adopted in part as a government project. The correspondence among Stewart, Ramsey, and other leading scholars petered out in the spring of 1946, but we see Stewart’s *Names on the Land* appear in 1945 and Ramsey’s *Our Storehouse of Missouri Place Names* in 1952.

Also in 1952, Ramsey joined the Board of Managers in the inaugural year of the American Name Society. ANS embraced then, as it does now, name study of all sorts (e.g., personal names and literary names), but Ramsey’s presence illustrates the continuing and strong influence of the old “place name interest group” from ADS.

By the late 1960s, a new generation of scholars within ANS became interested in pursuing a comprehensive survey of place names, and in 1969 Byrd Granger, Kelsie Harder, Don Orth, and others petitioned the ANS to form a special commission entitled “The Placename Survey of the United States.” Its goal once again envisioned a thorough and coordinated collection of place name data, i. e., “to organize the collection of placename information and promote toponymic studies throughout the United States.” The commission was formally approved, Byrd Granger was elected National Director, newsletters were produced, and the recruitment of state directors proceeded. In 1971, Professor Granger produced a small manual, including sample 3x5 cards, on how to organize research state by state and reported that 36 state directors had been identified. She also began editing a larger collection of essays but was unable to complete the task.

As a formal structure within ANS, "The Placename Survey of the United States" was sometimes referred to as "the commission," but more and more commonly as "PLANSUS," an imperfect acronym that appropriately suggests discussions and planning more than the actual doing of place name research. However, enthusiasm for the survey stimulated name studies in general. In addition to the "Names Institute" directed by E. Wallace McMullen at Fairleigh Dickinson University, a second names institute was established at Indiana State by Ronald Baker and a third at East Texas State by Fred Tarpley.

At the beginning of 1974 Fred Tarpley succeeded Byrd Granger as National Director and announced his goal of recruiting directors in each state by the beginning of our nation's Bicentennial. He did, in fact, manage to persuade someone to accept nomination as State Director in every state, which completed the infrastructure of the Survey at least on a nominal basis. Professor Tarpley was also very successful in publicizing the work of the Survey. Articles appeared in the Wall Street Journal and Chronicle of Higher Education, and a feature story was distributed through Associated Press. It was a high point of organizational structure, and at his last meeting which he hosted in Commerce, TX, in 1986, Professor Tarpley was even interviewed on TV for the CBS evening news.

However, for all its activity, no state name study was ever published as a direct result of PLANSUS activity. Tarpley himself has pointed out that the real achievement of PLANSUS during his time was to establish scholarly standards through its sponsorship of paper presentations and the ensuing discussions about the scope, form, and value of a "Place-name Survey." PLANSUS could and did encourage more and better place name studies, but there were never enough committed researchers who had the time to do comprehensive studies, and the special interests of independent researchers did not lead them to a coordinated survey.

Interest in a highly structured organization had already waned by the time Randall Detro of Nicholls State University succeeded Tarpley as National Director. Within a year Professor Detro became ill and therefore inactive. No one stepped forward to assume leadership, and PLANSUS ceased to function for about three years.

Meanwhile, ideas generated in PLANSUS discussions, such as the form of "authoritative information," and the scope and value of a "Placename Survey" were transplanted, took firm root, and flowered

312 Names 49.4 (December 2001)

abundantly in governmental soil. A strong and valuable connection had developed between PLANSUS and the U.S. Geological Survey. A national collection of standard geographic names would greatly aid the U.S. Board on Geographic Names in settling disputes and would become an important tool for a variety of government agencies in administering our nation's resources.

Don Orth was the fulcrum of this development. As both chief of the Office of Geographic Names and a co-founder of the original ANS commission, he was in a unique position, had a comprehensive vision, and pushed hard for government action. It was also the dawn of computers and automated data storage and retrieval, and, as shown in a paper he presented at the 1970 meeting of PLANSUS, "Computers and Place Names: A New Challenge," Don Orth foresaw the fit of computer technology with standardized names.

He later coined the term and led the development of the Geographic Names Information System. By 1976, a contract was awarded, later known as Phase I, to load names from all the USGS quadrangle maps into a data base organized state by state. Later, Phase II was to have individual contractors in each state add names from other federal, state, and local sources. Phase II was initially planned to result in a gazetteer for each state, but it was later decided to maintain electronic files only. The first gazetteer, New Jersey, appeared in 1982, and in the next nine years volumes for seven more states were published.

As a government project, GNIS focused "almost exclusively on 'applied toponymy,' as opposed to those aspects of names that relate to less significant subjects, such as their pronunciation" (Randall 2000, 167). Of course, Stewart, Ramsey, and Kökeritz had assumed that "the cultural and philological aspects are most significant" (Lance, 4), but the independent scholars who served on PLANSUS nonetheless strongly supported Don Orth in his governmental project.

Don Orth himself has often acknowledged the help of PLANSUS scholars in forwarding the GNIS project. Byrd Granger, for example, secured vital support for Phase II funding through Senator Barry Goldwater, who wrote a timely letter to the Department of Interior. Also, individual members of PLANSUS sometimes functioned as Phase II contractors and occasionally contributed data to their state projects. Fred Tarpley, for example, is currently in the process of giving his files to the Texas contractor, thereby adding about 10,000 names to that data

base. Thus, in terms of founding ideas, political contacts, and actual data collection, PLANSUS has functioned as a lumberyard from which GNIS has been built.

GNIS has flourished in ways that PLANSUS never could because GNIS could pay contractors to collect data of a specified type and in a specified form. The success of GNIS has also been an important model for other governments and for the discussions of the United Nations Group of Experts on Geographic Names.

However, as GNIS flourished, interest in PLANSUS declined, and this is unfortunate for at least four reasons: First, the thirteen data fields of GNIS are meager compared to all the types of information so enthusiastically discussed by scholars, and these fields also emphasize topographical information (type of feature and location) at the expense of cultural information. Although any information (e.g., linguistic and name origin) can be entered as part of a brief history of a name, contractors are not required to enter data in this particular field.

Second, contractors generally employ work/study students at universities, and their budgets allow very little time (at most a few minutes per name) for research. Often the employees will omit cultural information simply to save keyboard time.

Third, Phase II is incomplete even as it is being done. Because there is heavy emphasis on required sources and almost no time for research, many names, especially historic names, are omitted.

Finally, declining interest in PLANSUS results in fewer scholars doing general types of place name research, and therefore fewer contributing data or supporting GNIS in other ways.

Thus it was that Don Orth, with his usual prescience, sought to resuscitate PLANSUS by inviting recently active place name scholars to meet at USGS offices in Reston, VA in April of 1989. At that meeting, Bill Nicolaisen was elected Chair, and Kelsie Harder was elected National Director. It was agreed that they would work with Don Orth to write the new charter of a reconstituted PLANSUS for approval at the next annual meeting of ANS in November. Late that autumn, Nicolaisen decided to go on leave the following year and asked to step down as Chair. PLANSUS met again during the MLA meeting in Washington, DC, and elected Grant Smith as Chair. From that time to the present PLANSUS has met twice a year, once with the ANS annual meeting in

314 Names 49.4 (December 2001)

December and once with the Council of Geographic Name Authorities (state agency representatives, formerly known as Western States).

The reconstituted PLANSUS articulated similar goals of the past but with a new focus on computer technology. Eight goals were specifically delineated in early discussions:

1. To encourage scholars at the state level to pursue contracts for Phase II of GNIS.
2. To lend recognition to particular institutions as centers of toponymic research.
3. To develop, describe, and define appropriate fields of information that might be added to GNIS.
4. To develop standards of research and scholarship, stressing both the interdisciplinary and systematic nature of toponymic studies.
5. To seek ways to aid and assess scholars seeking grants for toponymic research.
6. To pursue the publication of an annotated, perhaps automated, bibliography.
7. To pursue international dialog about all aspects of toponymic research, but especially about formatting, possible classification, and the automated storage, sorting, and retrieval of information.
8. To expand our "Mission Statement" in more detail.

It may be noted that a key feature of earlier goals is missing in this list, and that is the recruitment of state directors. The National Director was instead given the discretion of recruiting regional or state directors as he saw fit, but no mandate was given and no plan for systematic fieldwork was described. Discussion in PLANSUS had clearly shifted to automation and the classification of information in terms of data fields.

Kelsie Harder resigned as National Director in 1991 in anticipation of his retirement, and Don Orth agreed to fill in. A common expectation was that Orth might encourage Phase II contractors to go beyond their contracts and fill in additional information, creating thereby more comprehensive place name studies throughout the U.S. In short, state contractors would function as regional directors of PLANSUS. However, this expectation went totally unfulfilled because work beyond a specified contract could not to be paid. There was no money for

additions to GNIS and no realistic plan for recruiting PLANSUS volunteers. After considerable frustration, Don Orth resigned, and PLANSUS has functioned with a Chair but no National Director since September of 1995.

Meanwhile, PLANSUS has made significant progress in pursuing its eight goals:

1. Several PLANSUS members have been GNIS contractors.
2. In December of 1990 PLANSUS voted to designate the Geography Map Library at the University of Alabama and the Lurline Coltharp Collection at the University of Texas at El Paso as national research centers.
3. In December of 1991, the chair, drawing on semantic theory, presented a paper summarizing discussion of the types of information in place name research. This was soon published in NAMES and is currently posted on the PLANSUS web site (<http://www.wtsn.binghamton.edu/plansus/>).
4. PLANSUS voted to adopt "Four Essential Data Elements" which are needed for any place name study (without which the subject cannot be determined or specified), and singled out McArthur's classification of "Meaning" as a standard example. Again these are on our web site.
5. The only grant funding reported so far has been from an Oregon foundation for the Oregon GNIS project. Clearly, PLANSUS is not organized as a grants office, but it can recommend worthy projects.
6. An annotated bibliography is being constructed on our web site, and other bibliographical web sites are linked.
7. International dialogue has been vigorously pursued, and several presentations by Australian and Canadian representatives have been a part of PLANSUS programs. Also, in 1998 Helen Kerfoot was elected Secretary.
8. 1998 also saw the final approval of an expanded "Mission Statement" with a specific goal and supporting objectives. These can be found on our web site as well.

Throughout the last decade, PLANSUS has maintained the 1969 goal of "promot[ing] toponymic studies," but it has changed dramatically in how it expects to achieve that goal. A key recommendation from the 1995 meeting with COGNA was that PLANSUS should build a web site

316 Names 49.4 (December 2001)

as a way of publicizing its goals and the standards of place name research. It has done so. "The Place-Name Survey of the United States" was once an "interest group within ADS," but is now considered an interest group within ANS. PLANSUS still emphasizes place names in the United States, but its vision now includes "current methods and progress of placename research worldwide" (from web site). For this and other reasons, there is now a proposal to change its name. PLANSUS originally planned to collect the place name data on millions of 3x5 cards, but it now sees that many types of data can be collected automatically. It was originally structured so that directors would supervise small armies of volunteer researchers, but it is now structured as a facilitator of many types of research: that of senior scholars working with students, government employees working in agencies, and private citizens working independently or in task force groups. An important topic at the most recent PLANSUS meeting concerned standards and procedures of a good book on place names.

Change has occurred because the specific goal of a multi-volumed dictionary was too big for a few people with 3x5 cards, and because GNIS has developed a large collection of names with a narrow range of data. As always, PLANSUS facilitates presentations and discussion, and much of the discussion in recent years has been about maintaining and adding to the data in GNIS. Maintenance, in this sense, is the updating of names that change, and additions are new types of data about existing names as well as new names.

Many goals of GNIS grew out of PLANSUS, and now the goals of PLANSUS are very much tied to GNIS and the use of computers. Clearly, PLANSUS will continue to change in order to pursue its goal amid changing circumstances.

References

- Lance, D. M. 1998. "George Stewart and Robert Ramsey Propose a Place-Name Society and a Place-Name Survey, 1943-46: Gleanings from Ramsey's Correspondence." Ms.
- Randall, R. R. 2000. "Donald Joseph Orth: A Career in Toponymy." Names 48:163-168.