

# Thoughts on the American Name Society

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In 1989 I was elected third vice-president of the American Name Society and began what was to be a seven year tenure on the Executive Council. My election was both challenging and rewarding. I was challenged to show that a person who had spent most of his adult life as a construction executive and amateur historian could contribute something of value to a learned society. My reward was an opportunity to be involved with interesting and informed individuals in a field hitherto largely unknown to me.

In due course, I was elected president, in 1992. The Society had operated for more than 40 years under its original 1951 bylaws that badly needed updating and the cost of the physical production and distribution of the Society's journal was a serious drain on our finances. I was fortunate to have the help of an able Executive Council and Tom Gasque as editor. Don Orth and Marian Harris prepared a draft for a new set of bylaws and when I succeeded to the presidency, the revisions were the number one item of business. The task consumed much of the time of the Executive Council and Annual meetings as both important and trivial sections were argued and counter argued. New bylaws were finally approved but I was amused to find the time-consuming job revisited within three years. The journal updating was simpler. Tom Gasque and Wayne Finke both had ideas, including a more competitive printing house, direct mailing from the printer to the members instead of the costly bulk shipment to New York City and an overview of mailing labels to insure that only paid up members received the journal. The real work on the bylaws and journal was done by the society's officers and dedicated old hands. As president, I only claim credit for keeping both items at the top of our agenda.

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We were less successful in efforts to expand the membership. The question of the time and location of the annual meeting continued to be controversial. I believe the problems of membership and the time of the annual meeting are inextricably linked. Academic members certainly find the December meeting with the MLA, adapted to university schedules, highly convenient. There are now many toponymists who do not teach. They dislike the Christmas holiday timing and as a result often look to the Council of Geographic Names Authorities (COGNA) meetings in early September. This is not a good time for academics and we see a dichotomy. When I joined ANS there were several regional meetings at different times and locations. Now there is only one, the May Names Institute in New York City. These regional meetings not only provided a forum for those members unable or unwilling to attend the annual meeting in December but also were events where members of the Executive Council who were present could discuss current problems and digest thoughts for the future. The Society might sponsor a regional meeting with COGNA. COGNA meetings lately have had numerous academic papers on subjects of only minor concern to many representatives of federal and state mapping agencies. An ANS meeting, either concurrently or immediately preceding or following might be productive. It could attract both toponymic onomasticians not directly interested in the technical side of the electronic data base as well as those involved in literary and other onomastic fields. Of course, other regional meetings at various times and locations would do much to increase interest and membership.

I believe the Society has four major fields of interest. Others may select more or less but mine are toponymic studies, literary studies, personal and family name studies, and applied name studies, such as brand names, boat names, CB handles and the like. A few thorough students work in two or more fields but most concentrate in one area. I can speak only to toponymy. The Society sponsors PLANSUS but these meetings have been devoted to organization and planning with little real promotion of study and assistance to potential authors of books and papers. The Council of Geographic Names Authorities now appears to be working this field. The American Name Society should be a more active participant. An ANS regional meeting, as described above, could attract people involved in all types of onomastic studies.

My introduction to toponomy was at an early age. In the 1920s my father, Lewis A. McArthur, was immersed in preparing the first edition of *Oregon Geographic Names* and I traveled around the state with him listening to seemingly endless conversations with all sorts of strange characters. This was not a particularly inspiring experience for a pre-teen boy and it was a good many years before I picked up the cudgel myself. At the conclusion of World War II, in sequence, I got a new job, married, helped my wife with four children and in my late forties found time to continue in father's footsteps. The fourth edition was my first. I had no interest in linotype and galley proofs and was fortunate to find Gordon Nelson, both a professional printer and computer programmer. I typed the additions and corrections. He keyboarded the whole text into a program which hyphenated, justified, paginated and indexed all on the computer. It was tremendous but the PC drove him out of business and I moved the sixth edition to WordPerfect where it is today, added to and modified for a forthcoming seventh edition.

Working with *Oregon Geographic Names* suggested new lines of inquiry other than name origins and histories. PLANSUS devised a classification system that did not depend upon prior knowledge about a name. The Geographic Names Information System (GNIS) provides the data base and it is simple to modify it to add fields for known and suspected types of names, dates, and sources. Thus one can study the entire corpus of names of a state or other political unit. It will be interesting to see the correlation of names with population density or descriptive names with local geography, flora and fauna.

When PLANSUS was activated, I was appointed Oregon director. After corresponding with Byrd Granger, I prepared a simple form designed for the computer equipment then available. We scheduled a meeting in Tucson but when I arrived she was laid up with serious back trouble and my trip was in vain. Not long after, the USGS announced the GNIS project and the initial PLANSUS program was moot.

My exposure to the old timers from Byrd Granger to Kelsie Harder to Lurline Coltharp to all the recent officers and editors has been a wonderful experience, a real addition to my intellectual life. Again, local meetings might attract older members who prefer the more salu-

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brious weather of spring, summer and fall. I have a photo taken at a meeting in El Paso of seven of us, the then current ANS president and six past presidents, Lurline Coltharp, Don Orth, Fred Tarpley, Roger Payne, Sarah Jackson, Mary Miller, and me. It was taken in Lurline's garden overlooking El Paso. She remarked that a short time before someone had tried to break into her premises by clambering up an extremely steep bank covered with almost impenetrable brush. The intruder was not successful. Of course, Don Orth and Roger Payne were regular attendees at the Western Geographic Names Council meetings, the predecessor to COGNA, but Lurline became a regular and Mary Miller showed up in Rapid City, a long trip for her.

To conclude, I return to my pet subject. The American Name Society, if it is to grow, must be more multi-disciplinary. We need scholars who will not only study the origins and histories of toponymic names but consider all the reasons and ramifications of naming. I look forward to the day when toponymic papers will cover the same variety of interests as presently represented by colleagues who study personal names.