

Toponymic Generics II

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The Results to Date

SINCE THE FILE OF CARDS for the 15,000 or so maps covers most parts of the country and most of the physically different regions, a high percent of the toponymic generics has probably been recorded, though almost certainly not 100%. The number found so far is something over 750. This is rather more than most people realize, for the vocabulary of even well educated Americans appears to include only a limited number of topographic terms. The geographers and geologists to whom portions of the list have been read as a test have known generally fewer than one third of the terms in the sample and have differed in their concepts of meaning for some of the terms with which they were familiar. The average American's vocabulary of such terms is unquestionably smaller and more directly related to the region of residence. Almost every one of the many persons with whom the terms have been discussed has known some that most of the others did not.

All occurrences of about 100 of the terms recorded have been plotted on United States maps. The selection includes terms from all of the classes but not all from any class, some widely distributed and numerous, some with both a regional concentration and a wide scatter, some with a regional concentration and little or no scatter, some with a wide proliferation of connotations and some with relatively few. The maps completed may not be the ones that will contribute most to the understanding sought, but a start had to be made somewhere and the order will probably prove in the end not to be critical. Maps so far completed are those for arroyo, bayou, bog, brake, brook, butt, canada, chute, cienega, coteau, coulee, draft, draw, folly, gulf, gully, gut, gutter, hammock, heath, hummock, hollow, lake, pocoson, rincon, rio, slash, slough, stream, towhead, tump, vlei (vly — fly) wash, branch, butte, canyon, cliff, cove, creek, drain, flat, fork, gap, glade, glen, hill, hope, knob,

knoll, lowgap, mesa, mound, mountain, narrows, notch, pinnacle, point, pond, prairie, ravine, ridge, river, roundtop, run, swamp, top, valley, backbone, basin, bend, crevasse, floodway, hogback, hole, inlet, levee, marsh, neck, outlet, pass, plateau, savanna, bluff, bay, key, ledge, lick, gulch, peak, and meadow.

The distribution maps at this stage show only occurrences drawn from the topographic maps, even when the features extend into adjacent unmapped areas or when occurrence of the term is a matter of personal knowledge, e. g. The Canyon near Pemaquid, Maine, that is a small gorge at the mouth of a brook known to the author as a local smelt-fishing place. It is not named on the topographic map and the contour interval is not small enough to show it unless one knows it is there. It is expected that most people who see the maps will check against their personal knowledge and exclaim that there is a such-and-such at this place where the map doesn't show one. The author is hopeful that such reports will reach him at first hand, for such informants are likely to be able to furnish information on the connotation of the generic to the people of the locality that is not inferable from the topographic map.

A number of generalizations can be supported reasonably well on the basis of mapping so far accomplished, even though much must still be classed as "uncovered but not understood".

Variation in connotation is the rule and few exceptions have been noted. Robert C. West, who previously worked out distribution of *bayou* and made a map of its subregional connotations,⁴ found it impractical to make a separate region for each connotation, since different applications occur near one another. In the four subregions he outlined he therefore cited three connotations for one subregion and two for two of the others. This may have been done for most of the terms. The author's bayou map corresponds closely with West's, except that West did not encounter the outlying occurrences in New Jersey, Michigan, Nebraska, Montana, California and the false generic in Colorado. His method of working outward from a known center of occurrence was the only practical

⁴ The Term "Bayou" in the United States. A Study in the Geography of Place Names. Robert C. West. *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*. Vol. XLIV, No. 1. March 1954. p. 67.

one for his study, but as was discovered early in this study, it does not catch the distant unsuspected one.

Differing connotations of the same term come about, perhaps oftener than is generally realized, by physical changes in the entity after naming. Islands become tied to the mainland, lakes become full of vegetation or drain off, meander necks become cut off, stream channels are abandoned or are reshaped by man, the flow of streams is profoundly modified by the same agent; beaches and associated features are notoriously unstable. In many cases the names persist after the features lose the characteristic or set of characteristics that the generic connotes. If this happens to several features of the same type in a region the generic may come to connote a somewhat different characteristic, or set, more or less related to the originally connoted one. This has happened to *towhead* although the dictionary definitions give no indication of it. They say it is a river island or shoal, especially with cottonwoods on it; or a shoal indicated by white ripples or foam. Editions of topographic maps based on surveys spaced several years apart show that a number of towheads that are now part of the river bank used to be islands. The distribution map shows that it is a Mississippi River term, restricted to the main river though similar features undoubtedly occur elsewhere on the Mississippi bottoms, which together with the fact that it occurs on the Ohio and Tennessee Rivers but not on the western tributaries, suggests a rivermen's term.

Chute is another Mississippi term, this one obviously French and applied generally to cut-off channels behind islands, the name being frequently Chute of Island so-and-so. Varying connotations along the Mississippi appear to be the result of physical changes. The Wisconsin examples along the river, however, include distributaries of the Black River, and Jerry Chute on the Thunder Mtn. quadrangle is a rapid or fall, which is the common French-Canadian connotation as exemplified by Red Chute, some 80 miles north of Ottawa. The California example is Manzanita Chute in Lassen Volcanic National Park, a dry sloping area.

Coulee, equally French and with a distribution pattern more like that of other French terms, namely a great arc from Louisiana up the Mississippi — along the rivers across the northern plains — over the mountains — and (though not in the case of *coulee*) down

into northern California, is most commonly applied in the Columbia basin to a steep-walled, flat-floored former glacial meltwater channel with now no better than an underfit stream in it. In the northern plains it is like the "creeks." The upper Mississippi River coulees are short steep tributaries. The Louisiana ones have natural levees. The only occurrences of coulee as a false generic are adjacent to areas where it is a true generic. This is what was expected to happen in the case of most terms but didn't.

It was fortunate that there occurred on one of the first maps carded a term unfamiliar in a topographic connotation, *folly*, in an island name, The Folly, that might have such a meaning since there was no other explanation suggested by the map context. The first source consulted, the *Dictionary of American English* (DAE), gave a broad definition that could apply, "A topographical term of varying meaning, common in place names in England." The several volumes published by the British Place Name Society confirmed the occurrence in that country, but left both etymology and connotation up in the air. The special contribution of that early encounter was that it led to questioning of many other terms that might otherwise have been passed over, and to a profitable detour into glossaries of British terms and into processes of name evolution in Britain that have their counterparts in the United States.

The arrangement of the terms on the card in the process of listing was primarily for convenience in finding the terms for mapping. A second consideration was that when a term was applied to features of a class other than the usual one for that term the fact would show on the card. *Cove*, *creek* and some others were known to do so. It turned out that the second consideration was the important one. Nearly all of the wetland terms are also applied to watercourses and vice versa, practically all the terms for spring are applied to watercourses, watercourse terms to coastal waters, and so on. This is well illustrated by *lake*, one of the more widely dispersed generics.

Although alternative terms are certainly not lacking for small impounded waterbodies the great majority are named lakes. So are several other things. Conversely, many terms for standing waterbodies ordinarily apply to something else. The greatest variation occurs along the coast in names of bodies of open water in wetland or marsh, or of lagoons wholly or nearly enclosed.

Fairly typical of the variation in terminology of widely occurring features, 80 different toponymic generics were recorded in names of standing waterbodies in states bordering the Atlantic and Gulf of Mexico, together with Arizona and New Mexico. They are: lake, pond, reservoir, reserve, lac, tarn, inside pond, outside pond, tide pond, oyster pond, lily pond, frog pond, mill pond, factory pond, sand pond, great pond, mud pond, mill lake, big lake, alkali lake, salt lake, dry lake, sunk lake, dead lake; river, bayou, dead-water, dead river, old river, coulee, drain, ditch; slough, vly, fly, marsh, meadow, prairie, brake, quag, alderbed, marais, breaks?, slash, cyperier, bog, cienega; bay, sound, lagoon, laguna, estero, cove, harbor, old bay, ocean, sea, baie; sink, hollow, hole, basin, picket, punkhole, mudhole, duckhole; flat, blind, moulier; horseshoe, bend, cutoff, elbow, eddy, widewater; flowage, flow, deadening; puddle, pool; tank, tanque; spring, saline; lago, and loch; dam was reported in the literature but not found on the maps.

Pond is also widely distributed over the eastern half of the country and ubiquitous in the extreme northeast; but uncommon in the west. *Pond* in New England is gradually losing ground to *lake*. A number of instances are of record where the change was made because in the local opinion lake "sounded nicer" or was "too big for a pond". Local opinion, often spearheaded by a local minority, has been known to spring from a feeling that a commercial venture would be more successful if the name of some natural feature involved were more attractive. In the case of the cottage proprietor on Dishwater Pond this was probably true.

Rincon has essentially the distribution typical of Spanish terms, though with less frequency than some of the others. The false generics in the Coast Ranges are from land grant names. The false generic in South Carolina is a town name, Rincon, and one near the Canadian border is Rincon Creek. One might guess that these were names left by Spaniards in those areas rather than terms carried by Americans later. It would not be surprising if the local people in those two areas have no clear idea what a *rincon* is. It would also not be surprising if some of the people in areas where it occurs as a true generic were not too clear about all its meanings either. Literally "corner," and usually defined as an angular reentrant in higher land with rimming cliffs, in New Mexico it is also a ridge and a tributary valley, and in south Texas is an angle of coastal lowland.

Colorado seems to have an extraordinary variety of toponymic generics imported from all parts of the country. The great influxes of treasure seekers probably had something to do with it. Oklahoma, however, literally settled with a rush, has far less variety.

Generally the areas of relatively unbroken or unvarying terrain have little variety in generics; the areas of either vertically or horizontally complex terrain have not only generics for more kinds of features but also more generics for a given kind of feature. Small features are given a greater variety of terms than large features, if for no other reason than that the large-feature terms have a wider spread and there are fewer large features.

Each major protected indentation or much indented section along the Atlantic coast has its own cluster of terms, including one or more not often used (at least in the same connotation) outside the area. The Bath, Me. area has *gurnet* for a narrow passage through which the tide at certain stages runs so strong that small boats cannot pass through; Buzzards Bay has *hole* for a narrow passage between islands; Long Island Sound has *hammock* for islands; Jamaica Bay on Long Island's south shore has *hassock* for marsh islands and *pol* for an island not marshy; Chesapeake Bay has *tump* and *broad* for marsh island and estuary respectively, behind Atlantic City are *thorofare* for a winding channel and *tide pond* for an open water area in a marshy lagoon, the end of the Mississippi delta has *inside pond* and *outside pond*, and so on. A possible explanation is that these are terms developed by local boatmen who do not venture far afield, and apply to features to which reference need rarely be made by the sailor of ships.

The occurrence of *thrumcap* on the shore of the Delaware River suggests that an offshore feature term may be carried farther afield, for *thrumcap* is a Maine term applied to a few offshore islands with conifers. Thrum, according to Merriam's New International Dictionary (NID), is "(1) *Weaving: a* One of the ends of weavers' warp threads. *b* The fringelike row of such threads on the loom when the web has been cut free. *c* Any soft, short threads, tufts or fringes. (2) Hence, any mass of hairs on an animal, or fibers or threadlike leaves on a plant, which suggest thrum. (3) Any loose coarse yarn waste. (4) pl. Naut. Tufts, or short pieces of rope yarn used in thrumming canvas". The word thrum is no longer in the vocabulary of any Maine coast residents queried by the

author, and as the word has passed out of common knowledge the pronunciation has become “thumbcap,” and any function the word may have had as a designator of islands with particular characteristics seems to have disappeared. The fact that it was not applied to all islands in the region that would qualify suggests that such distinction never did have practical significance, in which case it would be logical for a resemblance-name to evolve as this one has. No pertinent definitions were found for most such terms.

Brake is a toponymic generic of the Yazoo Basin and the bottom lands of the lower Sabine, Red, Arkansas and White Rivers with an outlier region in eastern La.-Miss., a quite restricted range. This term is particularly interesting in view of the difficulty of matching recorded occurrences with definitions. According to the New International Dictionary (Webster) *brake* is probably of Low German origin; in Middle Low German *brake* meant bushes, probably originally the growth on rough, broken grounds, from the root of English *break*, the verb. The NID definition is: a thicket; a dense growth of shrubs or brushwood. The Dictionary of American English notes that it occurs in English before 1600 A. D. and defines it as: 1. a thicket or copse; an area covered with bushes, briers, reeds, etc. 2. (an American application) a canebrake. McJimsey⁵ cites the Oxford English Dictionary and defines *brake* as a clump of bushes, brushwood or briers. McMullen⁶ cites the DAE but omits the “thicket or copse” part.

The examples on the maps are admittedly of a class difficult to interpret from a topographic sheet, but they appear to be most often old cutoff meanders or channels with the wetland symbol but no standing water. Brake also is applied to a stream in a narrow strip of wetland, a stream without wetland, and an oxbow lake called Old Cypress Brake with no wetland symbol. All this may go to prove only that the author doesn't know much about brakes, but it is submitted that both the term and the wetland symbol are ambiguous.

The NID, which does not equate brake with canebrake, defines

⁵ McJimsey, George Davis. *Topographic Terms in Virginia*. American Speech, Reprints and Monographs, No. 3. New York, Columbia Univ. Press. 1940. p. 48.

⁶ McMullen, E. Wallace, Jr. *English Topographic Terms in Florida 1563-1874*. Gainesville. Univ. of Florida Press. 1953. p. 77.

the latter as: a thicket of canes, esp., in the southern United States, a dense growth of the giant cane. No instance of canebreak as a toponymic generic was recorded, and only two or three instances of false generic occurrence, though the term is in everyday use as a common noun.

Wash, for instance, appears to be remarkably uniform in application. To be sure, the features with this term that are distant from the core area are quite different things, but within the core practically all the things called "washes" can probably be covered by a single definition since they appear to have essentially the same origin and have common critical appearance characteristics.

Alternatives are relatively few and localized for *spring*, though the feature is one of the most widespread. *Fountain*, *seep*, *ojo*, *ojito*, *hole*, *saline*, and *lick* as local alternatives do not completely replace *spring* even within their localized areas.

Brook, a solidly New England term for minor watercourses, in its widely scattered occurrences sticks fairly close to the New England concept of a small, short, perennial, fairly high gradient, clear stream in hilly or mountainous terrain, though some have trouble with the clearness qualification. Some of the scatterings, however, are in terrain that provides little similarity, notably one on Pamlico Sound, one in central Kansas, and one in the northern part of peninsula Florida. The occurrences in the lake states would undoubtedly be more numerous but for the gaps in the mapped area. This term has wider use as a false generic than any other generic ordinarily applied to watercourses. In fact, there are numerous instances of a brook-something-or-other on the banks of a watercourse called a creek. *Brook*, thanks to the power of literature, has that "nice" or "pleasant" connotation.

Stream presents interesting contrasts. Its core area shown in solid green is not merely restricted to New England, it is really "down east" in Maine and northern New Hampshire. Its scatter area starts out like *brook* but seems not to have stood the westward migration well. Only two examples are recorded in the lake states, one in Colorado, where one finds some of almost everything, one in Utah in an unlikely setting, one each in California and Washington.

In Maine and northern New Hampshire the term connotes the middle sized watercourse smaller and shorter than a river in that

region, larger and longer than a brook. The *river* — *stream* — *brook* pattern has strikingly little variation in the core area.

Heath as a true generic was recorded only in Maine, and there chiefly in the eastern corner where it occurs frequently. It is applied to poorly drained flat upland areas, at least one of which looks something like Alaskan muskeg. The surface of one near Cherryfield that was examined is hummocky, the vegetation low shrubs with abundant sphagnum and a clump of trees that at a distance look like black spruce. One could not cross it dry shod. It may be that the limited range of the term is associated with restricted area of occurrence of the feature. A false generic occurrence near Richmond, Virginia, may be a surname, though the occurrence of *brook* and of flat, wet low upland in this area would make a topographic connotation not entirely illogical.

Pocoson appears to be much like heath in its topographic setting though unlike in vegetation association. Its range as a true generic is limited to the Carolinas and Virginia. False generic occurrence in the Appalachian ridge and valley region may indicate that the Indians used the term in a broader sense, or that in the process of spread by English speakers it shifted connotation. Many terms have done so.

Slough is of special interest in several connections. It has a wide range of both occurrence and connotation, but it was recorded only once in New England and few New Englanders knew the term. The three who did, pronounced it to rhyme with *cow*. The rest hesitated, guessed; none guessed it to rhyme with *grew*. The features to which the term is applied are varied indeed, including natural and artificial standing waterbodies with or without vegetation and with or without outlets, winding channels through coastal wetlands, large and small flowing waterbodies with or without associated wetland and of all degrees of gradient, coastal and river coves, and even underwater channels through sand bars. Quite different connotations may be used in the same area, as on the Bath, N. C. quadrangle where Beachman Slough is an underwater channel and Cupler Sloughs are wetlands or the streams that flow through them or both.

Most of the Dutch terms failed to spread far from the core area, though *kill* is applied to a stream in Kansas and to one on the Oregon-Idaho border. *Vlei* — *vly* — *fly* was not found, except for in-

stances of *fly* that appear not to be the Dutch term, west of the Appalachians. Flea Point in North Carolina, in an area where Dutch origin names are common, in fact it is on the Vandemeer sheet, may be drained wetland for which *vlei* or *vly* would not have been inappropriate, but one would have to go back to the old maps or historical records to establish or disprove any connection. The Dutch terms also seem not to have proliferated greatly. *Gut*, from Dutch *gat*, (cf. Barnegat, N. J.) has the widest range both of occurrence and connotation of this group but even for this term they are not great. In occurrence *gut* ranges from Maine to Louisiana along the seaboard, with two small core areas — one the fringe of the Delmarva Peninsula, the other in the Pamlico Sound area.

In the core areas the prevailing connotation seems to be a short low gradient watercourse tributary to tidewater, sometimes embayed, and sometimes the estuary of such a stream or a cove like such an estuary. In some cases along the coast *gut* is applied to a narrow passage. Spencer Gut, a short gorge on the Spencer, Me. map, has a counterpart on the Poughkeepsie, N. Y. quad, although the name on the latter might be inferred to apply to the whole valley instead of the gorge. This is another instance where possible ambiguity might be avoided if there were generally known a regional connotation of *gut* as a short gorge. Otherwise one might assume that the name applies to the entire length of the watercourse. As a matter of fact, it is possible that that is the local and intended connotation.

The only places where toponymic generics from languages other than English seem to predominate are parts of the Mississippi delta, south Texas, north central New Mexico, and some Indian reservations. The occurrence of names with such generics but with English specifics, e. g., (Crooked Arroyo) suggests that those generics are being assimilated into the American vocabulary. The opposite combination, English generics with non-English specifics, e. g., (Hondo River) suggests rejection. It would be interesting to know whether generics assimilated under such circumstances are generally used to distinguish a particular kind of feature or are applied indiscriminately.

Two major flowing waterbodies head near each other. Both named by Spanish speakers, both names Spanish in specific and generic. One is now the Colorado River, the other the Rio Grande.

Why did the one get changed, the other not? The answer may shed some light on the distribution of all the Spanish-derivation generics in the United States.

There are many kinds of natural features for which the professional vocabulary provides no convenient one-word term and the layman's vocabulary offers a variety with none widely used. Some of these have been mentioned. Examples that come to mind are an island wholly of marsh, a low flat island subject to inundation, an island cliffed on the seaward side, a channel through wetland connecting two bodies of open water, a tidal watercourse wholly in wetland and not connecting two waterbodies, a body of open water in coastal wetland, an abandoned stream channel, a perennial mountain torrent, and a large island. The list might be extended at length. Standard, generally accepted terms for some of these would be useful. The experience of some of the most erudite term-coiners in our disciplines has generally been that it is easier to propose terms than to accept someone else's terms. Perhaps the missing ingredient has been an understanding of language and speech habits⁷. In any event it should do no harm to try to focus such understanding on the process.

A gifted scholar, George R. Stewart, applied something of that sort of understanding ten years ago in his *Names on the Land*⁸, a book to which the author is deeply and continually indebted.

The discriminator value of most toponymic generics is probably slowly decreasing. The tendency of words, toponymic generics and others, to proliferate in meaning may be taken as established. The tendency of toponymic generics to change connotation with introduction into a new region, the relative popularity of some terms and unpopularity of others, the increasing urbanization and mobility of the population, man's physical alteration of natural features, the gradual breaking down of regional isolation and of regional cultural patterns, greatly increased mass-communication, decreasing preoccupation with the minor obstacles to movement and activity posed by the natural environment, the leveling of American language habits, perhaps even the standardizing activities

⁷ Geographical Review. XIV (1924) p. 660. A reference to *Short Stories of America*, by Robert L. Ramsey. Boston 1921.

⁸ Stewart, George R. *Names on the Land*. New York. Random House. 1945.

of the Board on Geographic Names and state groups, all lead in the direction of less discriminatory application of toponymic generics.

The evidence seems to point to a shrinking number of toponymics generics along with decreasing discriminator values. Many terms still in use in the British Isles have dropped out completely and others are fossils like *thrumcap*, *folly* and *hope*, preserving the form but not the substance.

About two years ago, finding Townshend's statement in 1890⁹ that *pokeloken* was a term for a cove or backwater off a river commonly used in Maine, and having never heard the word, an inquiry was dispatched to my father, a lifelong resident of that state, who fished in countless inland waters and hunted in every section. He never heard of *pokeloken*, would call such a thing a *logan*; his father used to say *bogan*. No *pokeloken* was recorded but on a subsequent visit to the Bay of Fundy *Pocologan* was encountered in the name of a village, a bay, and a river. A few *logans* and *bogans* were recorded in northern Maine and both occur sporadically as a false generic all over the country. Other words used by my grandfather's generation have probably gone, too, unnoticed by my generation. Infrequency of occurrence as a false generic may indicate a shrinking area of application or relatively discriminatory application to a kind of feature not widely distributed. It may, of course, signify neither.

The problem posed at the beginning of this paper calls for a reversal of such a trend. Can it be done? Perhaps, if steps can be outlined with sufficient understanding of the problem and of people and their ways so that the steps make sense.

The maps of the national parks have a large number of generics. Since natural features in the parks are referred to by name with extraordinary frequency, those of any significance are named, and variety tends to increase with numbers. This is probably not the whole story, however, for the naming in the parks seems to have been done in the fashion of commercial cave owners to a greater extent than is true of naming in their regions generally.

⁹ Townshend, Malcolm. *An Index to the U. S. A. Historical, Geographical and Political. A handbook of reference combining the "curious" of the U. S.* 482 pp. Published in Boston by Lothrop in 1890. Has maps and illustrations.



Coulee has a different connotation in each of the four regions in which it is recorded. In the larger areas within the dashed lines the term occurs on many maps. Small ovals indicate one or two maps. False generic occurrence outside frequent true generic occurrence areas is shown by initial letters.



Rincon occurs often as a false generic in names of land grants in California.



Brook occurs on nearly all of the topographic maps in area I and frequently in area II. Recorded occurrence as a true generic is more widely scattered than in case of most regionally-concentrated terms. Wide occurrence as a false generic may be associated with a "pleasant" connotation.



Wash has a relatively uniform connotation in its principal region of occurrence.

It is regrettable in retrospect that it was not done with more of an eye to the interpretation of nature to the millions who come to see and hear. Perhaps in a new park, or in the less developed part of present ones, there are unnamed features that could be given names with generics carefully selected with a view to standard connotations of layman's terms as well as the professional's generic terms. If the features could serve as type examples of the generics used in their names, the parks might be an effective theater for connecting concept and type example in the minds of many people from all walks of life from all over the country. It is the author's belief that it would also facilitate interpreting the features to the general public.

It is readily apparent at this stage that there are distinct nomenclature regions, and many subregions, each with a reasonably homogeneous complex of generic terms and applications. Although boundaries will not be drawn until near the conclusion of the study, it appears that many will coincide closely with the division between land form regions or cultural regions or both. Other boundaries appear to cross such divisions, although a coincidence with the boundaries of earlier cultural regions may be found.

It is entirely possible that the widely scattered examples of some terms usually thought to be restricted to a single region may be traced to a relatively small number of enthusiastic and peripatetic name givers, rather than to sizable groups of people with the same nomenclatural experience and habit.

Nomenclature regions of the United States, if well done, can be useful to various disciplines. It is of principal concern here that they can help one to comprehend more readily patterns of nomenclature that have been seen before only dimly or fragmentally.

Analysis of the train of events by which the distribution of individual terms or groups of terms came about will undoubtedly shed new light on the name-giving and name-evolving process. Eventually we or our successors may fully understand them. Certainly we will know better what we are talking about if we know better what the other fellow is talking about. If we understand what his words mean to him and if we agree on a series of unambiguous terms for an area within our disciplines, we have taken at least two small steps toward clearer communication.