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A Look Back at the American Name Society

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A Classification of Place Names

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A Look Back at the American Name Society is an occasional section of influential articles from this journal. George R. Stewart's essay on place names provides a classificatory scheme, which includes: (1) descriptive names, (2) possessive names (3) incident names, (4) commemorative names, (5) euphemistic names, (6) manufactured names, (7) shift names, (8) folk etymological names, and (9) mistake names.

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In writing on place names various categories of names are generally assumed, e.g., descriptive names, incident names, etc. This present study attempts to set forth the matter systematically, and thus to present, with an attempt at consistency and completeness, the classes into which place names may be divided according to their manner of origin, which is in general the matter of primary interest and importance to the onomatologist.

The classification might also be said to be with respect to the means or mechanisms by which places are named. These means or mechanisms have, furthermore, a relationship to the psychological processes (i.e. the motives) of the original namers in distinguishing one place from another by various methods, but any adequate study of the psychological processes of naming would have to be conducted at a much deeper level than is here proposed.

In brief, however, we may attempt to distinguish between mechanism and motive in naming . . . All naming of places stems from one basic motive, that is, the desire to identify a place and thus distinguish it from others. In order to do so, the namer

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makes use of one of several different mechanisms, e.g., description. (A desire to describe can scarcely be called his motive, unless the namer happens to be a self-conscious artist.) At the same time, however, other motives may be present in his mind, even consciously. He may be thinking, for instance, "I want to distinguish this place, and have some fun too." In such a case we may say that humor is a secondary motive, as it often is. But by setting up a category of humorous names we would only be heading for confusion. We should have to go on to establish such categories as patriotic names, obscene names, sentimental names, *ad infinitum*.

Nevertheless, two of the common classes of names (commemorative and euphemistic) seem to require for their definition some consideration of the secondary motive.

The essential field of the onomatologist seems, however, to be the mechanisms of naming, rather than the motivations of the namers, except in so far as the former at times reflect the latter. Study of names will probably progress better if this distinction is kept clear. Humor, for instance, cannot be called a mechanism of naming in the same way that description is. In fact, most of our humorous namings will be found to use a descriptive mechanism, that is, they name the place by means of one of its characteristics that seems ridiculous, as when an out-of-the-way community is called Seldom Seen.

Since almost any conceivable stimulus, conscious or unconscious, may be working on the namer at the time of naming, a study of the motivations of naming would scarcely be able to stop short of a whole treatise on human psychology. On the other hand, the mechanisms of naming are comparatively few, and at the same time yield a useful classification of the names themselves.

Nine classes of names are here postulated, viz., 1) Descriptive names, 2) Possessive names, 3) Incident names, 4) Commemorative names, 5) Euphemistic names, 6) Manufactured names, 7) Shift names, 8) Folk etymologies, 9) Mistake names. In addition it is recognized that borderline cases may occur.

I have some confidence that this classification is practical and is as nearly all-inclusive as can be expected. I worked it out some years ago, and have tested it pretty thoroughly since that time.

1) **Descriptive names.** A descriptive name is one that originates from some permanent or semi-permanent quality of the place itself. The practical test of a descriptive name may be said to be that a traveler coming to the place of naming should be able to recognize the reason for the naming.

The majority of descriptive names perpetuate a quality of the place that can be appreciated by one of the senses, most commonly sight. Hearing, smell, and other senses may serve. More intellectualized or fanciful descriptions are possible, as in Pliocene Ridge, and Matrimony Creek — so named because it was hard to get out of.

It should be remembered that description may apply only to the particular place picked upon by the namer. Thus Roaring Creek may roar only at one point in its whole twenty-mile course. Streams, in particular, are very likely to be named by their characteristics at one point, that is, at the place where the first trail crossed them. Obviously, a stream is usually named before anyone has a chance to explore all along it and decide upon what would be the best descriptive name for the whole.

Actual *false description* is rare. Most of its examples would be better classified under euphemistic names. Others are to be explained as incident names, that is, the original namers observed the place under unusual circumstances and their name perpetuates these circumstances, and does not describe the ordinary nature of the place.

Negative description is also so rare as to be of little importance, but may be found in such a name as Nowood River.

Since descriptive names constitute a very large class, a breakdown into the three chief sub-divisions is offered.

1a) *Pure description*. This specifies a quality genuinely and inalienably connected with the thing named, e.g., Black Butte, Long Island, Crescent Lake, Granite Mountain, Roaring Run, Echo Rock, Stinking Spring, Bayport, Horse Heaven.

1b) *Associative description*. This specifies a trait rather loosely connected with the thing named. It might be said not so much to describe the thing itself as to identify it by means of something associated with it. Thus a stream may be identified merely by the fact that certain plants or trees happen to be growing near-by (Pine Creek, Onion Creek). It may be called Boundary Creek, because it happens to run close to some boundary. Or it may be identified by some work of man (Mill Creek, Bridge Creek). Being less a part of the thing itself, these names are also less likely to be permanently appropriate. Mill Creek will become a misnomer if the mill falls into decay and disappears. Although there would be grounds for setting up associative names as a separate class, such names are usually considered descriptive, and I think that they are better made a sub-division.

1c) *Relative description*. This specifies a relationship of the place to something else, e.g., Fourth Crossing, Lake Superior. Here also may be included *compass-point names* (North River, South Island), and *mile-post names* (Ten Mile Creek). Although, in a sense, relative description may be said not to describe at all, yet it cannot be surely distinguished from other descriptive names. In fact, rather few descriptions can be called absolute. Thus there is no absolute standard of bigness, and Big River may get its name only because it happens to be bigger than the streams near it. Many *counterpart names* display this tendency toward relative description. Thus Red Butte may scarcely be red in any absolute sense, but may be called so because it is relatively red as compared with nearby Black Butte.

2) **Possessive names.** Many names have been applied because of the feeling that some person or group of persons owned that particular place. The ownership, of course, need not have been legal, because the mere residence of a squatter would supply an equally good title for this end. In fact, the "ownership" might rest upon mere right of discovery. In English, these names are generally marked, in their original forms, by the use of the possessive case.

These names resemble associative-descriptive names so closely that they could well be classified with them on purely theoretical grounds. For practical purposes, however, they seem to be better distinguished.

Three sub-divisions are of value.

2a) *Personal names*. These are very common, and most parts of the habitable world are studded with such names as Culp's Hill, and Smith Creek.

2b) *Ethnic names*. These names merely do for a group what the personal names do for an individual, e.g., Mohawk River, Chinese Camp, American Fork. The term *ethnic* has not been much used by American scholars, but seems better than the more common *tribal*, which is hardly fitting for such names as Chinese and American. *Gentile* has also been used as a technical term in this sense, but it is likely to cause even more confusion.

2c) *Mythological names*. Names are sometimes given to places under the belief that they are "possessed" or haunted by some supernatural being or beings. The occurrence in Siouan place names of the element *-wacan*, meaning *spirit*, is an example.

3) **Incident names.** These identify the place by means of some incident which has occurred at or near it. As opposed to descriptive names, incident names record only a temporary characteristic or association of the place. This is a very important distinction. For instance, most *animal names* (Wolf Creek, Antelope Spring) fall into this category. They do not mean that the animal was unusually plentiful at that spot or especially characteristic of it, but merely record a particular occasion upon which the animal was encountered. Many names of people as applied to places record merely some momentary incident which caused that particular name to be associated with the place in the minds of an early traveler.

Incident names have seldom received their due, and the whole class seems to be in bad odor with some scholars. This is unfortunate, but the reason for it is obvious. Incident names, by their very nature, suggest stories, and so people tend to tell tall tales to explain them. These later-made-up stories are unauthentic, and many of them are ridiculous. An investigator thus tends to become disgusted, forgetting that the falsity of one story does not prove that the place was not named for an incident of which the true story may be still to be discovered. Anyone who has studied the actual records of explorers is struck by the many names given as the result of incidents. (See, for instance, the narratives of the expeditions of Portolá and of Lewis and Clark.)

Many of the most colorful place names are derived from incidents. These names may generally be distinguished from descriptive and possessive names by their being, superficially, inappropriate. A certain Mad River, for instance, is a comparatively gentle stream; it was so named because a man once lost his temper there.

Some names, by their very nature, suggest incidents — Hat Creek, Murder Creek, Earthquake Creek, Moonlight Ridge, Lightning Peak.

Calendar names generally record the incident that someone was at this particular place on a particular day. Thus Independence Rock was named because some early travelers celebrated the Fourth of July there. Even the common use of saints' names among the Spanish explorers, although it is usually attributed to piety and thus considered commemorative, could just as well be considered a mere attempt to record a particular day.

Many names may arise from either description or incident. Thus Horseshoe Creek might come from a bend in the stream or from the finding or loss of that important bit of pioneer equipment. Even Blue Lake should not be written off thoughtlessly as only another commonplace description; it might have arisen because someone happened to feel "blue." Occurrence from an incident is often difficult to prove, but

this should not mean that names should therefore be classified as descriptive until shown to be something else.

4) **Commemorative names.** These arise by the process of taking an already established name and giving it a new application, for honorific ends. In this instance the secondary motive, i.e., commemoration, or at least a desire to perpetuate the old name for some reason, may be considered essential.

The mere application of an old name to a new place does not suffice to make the name commemorative. A body of water in Vermont, for instance, is called Caspian Lake because its outline resembles that of the Caspian Sea. This should, it would seem, be classed as a descriptive name. The namer presumably had no interest in re-applying the old name, but was merely noting that the lake in question was "like the Caspian Sea."

In the same way a California town is named Sebastopol, not — it is believed — from any interest in the Russian city, but because of a local squabble that was humorously compared to the famous siege of the Crimean War. Sebastopol has here become really a symbol or a common noun, as if we should speak of "a sebastopol." The name, therefore, would be classed as an incident name.

The situation is also complicated by the current use of the term *transfer name*. This refers to a place name that has been "transferred" from an older place to a newer one. Thus Cambridge, England, was transferred to Cambridge, Maryland, and then to Cambridge, Ohio. *Transfer name* is not, however, synonymous with *commemorative name*. Most transfer names are commemorative, but not all of them, e.g., Caspian and Sebastopol, in the examples given above, would seem to be transfers but not cornmemoratives. Moreover, many commemoratives, especially those honoring people, are not transfers. I therefore consider *transfer name* to be a useful special term, but not a primary one in my classification.

The term *commemorative* itself, though it is well enough established and seems to cover the situation fairly well, is not altogether a happy one. Sometimes the actual idea of commemoration is scarcely apparent. Along early western railroads, for instance, the stations were often given old-world names merely because they had to be named in some way, and such names were conveniently available to anyone consulting a gazetteer. Nevertheless, it would be rash to say that some conventionalized idea of homage to the already established names was not present even here.

In spite of these difficulties, the commemoratives form a well-established and useful group, as clearly distinguishable as any of the others.

Frequently thus honored are famous men. The common use in the United States, for instance, of the name Washington rarely indicates that any Washington owned the place or lived there, or was ever connected with it by an incident, but usually that George Washington is honored.

Saints' names should doubtless be separated from those of famous men, especially since they include St Michael and certain others who presumably never were men. As noted under incident names, the application of a saint's name on the calendar-day of that saint can possibly be included under the head of incident.

A notable usage of commemorative naming occurs when colonists, whether ancient Greek or modern European or American, name their newly founded town after some town of the mother-country. (See also, however, under *Euphemistic Names*.)

Many other names are also applied to places commemoratively. Returned soldiers have frequently used the names of their victories, and thus Cerro Gordo and other Mexican names were multiplied across the United States. Any famous name, whether actual or legendary or mythological, is likely to be used. Thus in the United States, as the result of our admiration for classical Greece, we have place names for actual people and places (Lysander, Solon, Athens, Corinth), and also for legendary characters (Hector, Ulysses), for mythological places (Hesperia, Elysian Fields), and for gods (Apollo).

5) **Euphemistic names.** These are names, comparatively few in number, given with reference to the future, rather than with reference to the past or present. They picture the place by means of an idealization, and are therefore to be distinguished from descriptives, which picture the place, in essence, realistically. The name Greenland — given by Eric the Red, "because men would the more readily go there if the county had a good name" — may serve as a type-example.

As with commemoratives, the secondary motive must be considered with euphemistic names. On the whole, this is the most uncertain and probably is one of the smallest of the classes. On the grounds of pure logic the objection can be raised that euphemistic names always display some other mechanism, and so can better be grouped as descriptives, or commemoratives, or in some other class.

Yet the term is established and is a useful one. If a promoter names his "development" Eden or Paradise, one can hardly maintain in a serious way that this is a descriptive name. Moreover, though Eden and Paradise are old names, one can scarcely maintain that they were re-bestowed for commemorative purposes — unless indeed the namer had come from a place already so named.

The point at which description becomes euphemy is, in fact, often doubtful. Downright *false description* is comparatively rare. The matter of looking toward the future, of an expression of an ideal to be attained rather than of a present reality, is probably the best test of a euphemistic name. Thus Homeland may be named before anyone has established a home there; Wheatland, when the country is still unplowed prairie.

The line between euphemistic and commemorative names is also difficult to establish, and probably a great many names will always be classed as commemorative which might equally well or better be classed as euphemistic. For instance, the replacement of Indian names by the names of English towns for early colonial settlements is generally considered commemorative. But in some instances it might certainly be considered euphemistic — that is, the namers were trying to make the new settlement seem more attractive to settlers by getting rid of what they sometimes termed "the savage name" and substituting the safe-sounding name of a well-known English town.

Not a few places in the United States have been named Athens in the hope that they would become educational centers, as at least two of them now actually are. In such instances, one can note again the idealistic or symbolic quality that is usually associated with euphemistic naming. In the early nineteenth century the name Athens was scarcely so much the name of a city as a symbol of education and culture. The naming of a town after a man may mingle commemoration with euphemy. The giving of the name Lincoln, for instance, honors the hero but it also is a "good" name and

may be thought attractive to settlers. In the same way, this name and others like it have been given to commercial products.

6) **Manufactured names.** These are names constructed, to form new words, from recombined sounds or letters, out of fragments of old words, from initials, by backward spellings, by reversal of syllables, and so forth. Saybrook, Connecticut, formed in 1635 from the titles of Lord Say and Sele and Lord Brook, is probably the earliest example of such a name in the United States. As typical examples we may note Tesnus (from Sunset), Romley (from Morley), Somerange (from Summer Range), Alicel (from Alice L.), Ti (from the reversed initials of Indian Territory), and Michillinda (from the abbreviations of three state names, with an added *a.) Boundary names* (Calexico, Texarkana) form a sub-division.

7) **Shift names.** These are names that are placed upon places by the mere shift of the specific from one generic to another in the vicinity. Thus from White Mountain may spring White Lake, White River, and Whiteville, although none of these may be white. The resulting group of names is often called a *name-cluster*.

I have been forced to coin the term shift-name. *Transfer name* has sometimes been used. This term, however, more commonly indicates a name transferred from one place to another, not merely from one generic to another in the same region. I am unable to find that any other term has been used for what I here call *shift name*.

By a very broad interpretation shift-names might be classed with associative–descriptive names, but they are better, I think, kept distinct. Shift names differ in that they are really not descriptive at all, and are often actually misleading.

The possibility, however, cannot be ruled out that a shift name may *also* be descriptive. Thus, White Lake might actually have a whitish tinge to its water.

8) **Folk etymologies.** A well-recognized process is that of folk etymology, e.g., *Purgatoire* to Picketwire, *Cayo Hueso* to Key West, *Chemin Couvert* to Smackover. Objection may be raised that this does not originate a new name but merely results in the transformation of an old one, and that it therefore cannot be considered basic. Although this may be granted theoretically, the transformation is often so great as to result in what is something wholly new, and for practical purposes the onomatologist will do well, I think, to recognize it as independent.

Some may prefer the term *false etymology* to that of folk etymology, since the process does not always occur at what they consider the folk level. Thus Seneca Lake (or originally, the Seneca tribe) left its Indian original and assumed the form of the name of the Roman philosopher and dramatist presumably by the error of someone who possessed some Latinity. The term folk-etymology, however, seems well enough established to be left in possession. It certainly covers the vast majority of cases. And are not even men of learning also of the folk in the larger sense?

A difficult but fascinating problem is, sometimes, to determine the point at which folk etymologies have gone far enough to be considered to have produced new names and not merely transformations of old names. In some cases only a part of the name may be affected; in others, the result may merely resemble new words or word-elements. As examples of names in which the process seems to have stopped halfway, we may list: Kingsessing, Walpack, Westkeag, Aughwick, Octorara, Quisquamego. All of these go back to originals in some Indian language, but have assumed a partial or nonsensical English or Latin form.

In connection with folk etymology one should also not forget that it represents, in a special way, its own mechanism for the forming of new names, i.e., a kind of punning or verbal play. In many instances the process was undoubtedly wholly conscious and had a humorous motive. We can hardly think, for instance, that the British soldiers of 1914 really were confused to the point of thinking that Ypres was the equivalent of *Wipers*. In fact, we should note that this is actually what may be called an eye-pun and can have nothing to do with speech in its origin. In the same way the unknown Arkansan who made *L'eau Froide* into Low Freight may well have been a wholly conscious humorist.

9) **Mistake names.** These result from a mere mistake. In some instances, the mistake may result only in a somewhat changed name, e.g., in a variation of spelling. In many instances, however, the mistake means that the name shifts from one word to another having a different meaning, or else to a linguistic combination having no meaning at all. A mistake may also be said to be involved in folk etymology, but folk etymology always rests upon some kind of logic, even if false logic. Mistake names, however, arise from what might be called the operations of chance and mischance, e.g., typographical errors, illegible handwriting, careless copying, faulty enunciation, faulty hearing. An example of a mistake name is Lamoille River (Vermont), originating from *La Mouette*, which first became *La Mouelle*, supposedly by failure of a map-engraver to cross his t's. Oregon is another name believed to have originated from a mistake on a map. Other examples of mistake names, originating in various ways, are: Tolo (Oregon) from Yolo; Darrington (Washington) from Barrington; Plaski (Texas) from Pulaski.

A question arises whether mistranslations should be classed as mistake names. If the mistranslation is complete, the result would have to be considered an entirely new name, and might therefore be called a mistake name. More commonly mistranslations are mere inaccuracies, and lead back to the original. A famous example is the Staked Plains. Several explanations have been offered as to what the stakes were, but actually the Spanish *estacado* would apparently have been more properly translated as *palisaded*, and refers to the cliffs or palisades that bound certain parts of the plain.[1]

Although the great majority of names will be found, if their manner of origin can be determined, to fall clearly into one or other of these nine classes, there also exist a certain number of borderline instances. Some of these — such as descriptive-euphemistic and commemorative-euphemistic have already been discussed. A few others may also be illustrated.

a) *Descriptive-incident*. An incident, if recurring, may become characteristic and therefore descriptive. Roaring Creek, for instance, might have been named at a time of an exceptional flood (incident); Rattlesnake Lake, because a man came upon a single rattlesnake there. Yet the creek may roar for enough of the time to make the name properly descriptive, and the lake may be the location of a den of rattlesnakes, and therefore have many rattlesnakes at the end of every hibernation-period.

b) *Incident-possessive*. Since possessive names are so closely connected with associate-descriptive, they also are naturally connected with incident names. The test is chiefly the length of time involved in the connection of the man and

the thing named for him. A typical incident-naming was the result, in frontier times, of some man being killed by Indians near a nameless stream, which was thereafter either formally named after him by his comrades or merely remembered for the incident and thus called by his name. On the other hand, if a man lives on a stream for a week and starts to build a cabin there and then is killed — is this a possessive or an incident name that results? Obviously we pass from one to the other at some point.

c) *Euphemistic-manufactured*. Although names may be manufactured in different ways, the product is usually submitted to a euphemistic test before finally being adopted. Obviously, if a certain scrambling of syllables or a certain chance combination of vowels and consonants should yield an obscene or ridiculous result; it would probably not be used. Experimenters with combinations of sounds generally have two interests — to avoid association with the past, and to attain euphony. Both of these have euphemistic suggestions.

Borderline cases can, in fact, be probably found lying between most of the classes. Descriptive-commemorative and incident-commemorative are certainly of some importance, but need not be separately discussed.

Since a discussion of the ways of naming, however, cannot entirely escape a consideration of motive, one can also point out that mixed motives naturally result in mixed mechanisms. Theoretically, one might assume that a single motive and therefore a single mechanism is always predominating, but even when a namer gives us two reasons for the naming, he does not always state, and doubtless he cannot always know, which was the predominating one. Thus Herrera declares that Ponce named Florida because of its flowers (descriptive) *and* because he discovered it at the season of *Pascua Florida* (incident). Although he necessarily states one before the other, he gives no indication as to which was the more important.[2] Actually, statements by namers that they gave a name for two reasons are rare. This must be attributed partly to the mere trouble of writing both reasons down. Even the recording of a single reason is by no means common. Yet we cannot doubt but that the namer was often conscious of more than one reason.

A special case occurs when names are given communally, e.g., by the vote of a group of settlers. In such a situation, one motive may dominate in one mind; another, in another.

Finally, it should be stated, as a special warning, that this classification does not mean that any particular word used as a name falls always under one heading. It would be incorrect, for instance, to say that *red* is a descriptive adjective and that therefore all features so named have been descriptively named. Obviously the scholar should recognize that Red Creek might originate as a shift name, a folk etymology, and a mistake name. But it can also be a possessive name, for a man nicknamed Red, and having doubtless passed through the intermediary Red's Creek. It can also be an incident name, being perhaps named from blood, just as we have Bloody Creek. It might, conceivably, be a commemorative name, named after some stream that a man had known in the region from which he had come. Doubtless a considerable majority of names using this adjective will be found to be descriptive, but this is no excuse for throwing all such names into that omnibus classification.

Notes

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[1] An occasional namer has called upon chance. Yet I have difficulty in seeing how a name could originate entirely from chance. If so, it would doubtless be a manufactured name. A man may close his eyes, put his finger on a map of South America, and thus get Callao. But the mere fact that he uses a map of that continent shows that he has determined to use a transfer name and that his motives must be much the same as those of anyone who transfers a name for commemorative reasons. Moreover, how do we know that he would not reject any chance-given name if he did not like it? The Russians in 1812 chose the name of their fort in California by drawing names from a vessel, but someone had previously written various names on slips of paper and placed them in the vessel, so that chance was confined to narrow bounds. The name thus selected would have to be classified as a commemorative one.

[2] Herrera did not name Florida and was not present at the naming, and so the case is not altogether certain. Yet Herrera was a careful historian, and he seems to be paraphrasing Ponce's own report, now lost. Incidentally, the name is an interesting one for another reason, that it seems to be an indubitable example of a name transferred from one language to another by means of the written or printed form. Otherwise we should expect it to be accented on the second syllable, as it actually is in the local pronunciation of the Florida Mountains in New Mexico. Englishmen, we may believe, first seeing Florida as a printed word, took to pronouncing it as if it were the Latin adjective, not the Spanish one.

Notes on contributor

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