

NECROLOGY

Robert M. Rennick, 1932–2010

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American onomastics lost one of its best scholars in 2010. Bob Rennick made important contributions to name study in place names, personal names, names and the law, and humorous names, but he was best known for his excellent state-wide dictionary, *Kentucky Place Names* (1984) and his little book on unusual Kentucky names, *From Red Hot to Monkey's Eyebrow* (1997), both published by the University of Kentucky Press.

The University of Kentucky Library catalogue lists nearly fifty titles by Rennick, including a series of post office histories of about fifty of Kentucky's counties, a sizable slice of the 120 counties in the state. He told me that over the years he had published over 150 articles on names.

The quintessential Kentuckian to those of us who knew him, Robert Morris Rennick was actually born in Brooklyn, New York, on June 28, 1932. He was the son of Dan and Betty Rennick, both of whom, according to the 1940 census, were born in Russia. Bob did graduate work in sociology and folklore and taught at several colleges and universities, including Central Michigan University in Mount Pleasant and DePauw University in Greencastle, Indiana. In 1970, at the age of thirty-eight, he and his wife, Elizabeth, moved to Kentucky, where he took a teaching position at Prestonsburg Community College.

While at Central Michigan, Bob published his first of many articles to appear in this journal: "Judicial Procedures for a Change-of-Name in The United States" (*Names* 13.3 [1965]: 145–168). A few years later, he published another name-change article in *Names*: "Hitlers and Others who Changed their Names and a Few who Did Not" (17.3 [1969]: 199–207).

Two years after moving to Kentucky, he went to work with the state Division of Licensing and Regulations, a position he held from 1972 until his retirement in 1997. In this position he traveled the highways and back roads of the state, making him aware of Kentucky's many unusual place names. His wife suggested that he might undertake a formal study of those names. The result was his comprehensive and well-researched dictionary of Kentucky's place names.

Meanwhile, he continued to research and write about other kinds of names. An especially charming essay is titled "The Alleged 'Hogg Sisters,' or Simple Ground Rules for Collectors of 'Odd Names'" (*Names* 30.3 [1982]: 193–197). There was indeed an Ima Hogg, daughter of Texas governor James Hogg, but there was no

sister named “Ura” or brother named “Hesa.” Rennick wisely cautions those who collect odd names to make sure that they have used reliable sources before publishing these humorous names.

One of his last articles on names was published in 2005, and it summarized his years of experience as a place-name collector in a how-to-do-it article: “How to Study Placenames” (*Names* 53.4 [2005]: 291–308), with practical advice based on his own experience and reflecting his sometimes eccentric views.

His deep knowledge of Kentucky place names led to his appointment to the committee charged with collecting names for Phase II of the Geographic Names Information System (GNIS). Mainly through his effort, thousands of names were added to the GNIS database for Kentucky. In 2007 he hosted the annual meeting of the Council of Geographic Names Authorities (COGNA) in Lexington.

Bob Rennick could be charming, but he could also be contentious. He and I had several conflicts over the years, and between 2004 and 2008 we exchanged an interesting series of letters. He believed that the insistence that papers be submitted in electronic form left him and others out. In June 2008 he wrote to me, “I’m still unable to submit anything electronically or by lazer beams or whatever they’re called that’s now a requirement for Names. [...] I’m not wired and have no intention of ever being so [...].”

Robert Rennick’s legacy to onomastics, to the American Name Society, and especially to Kentucky, is significant. Jenny Runyon, with the US Geological Survey, wrote to me recently that “he was truly passionate about the toponymy of Kentucky. And he believed that the history of his state was told through its place names. He probably tramped over more of its hills and through more of its valleys and ‘hollers’ than just about anyone.”