



***Corn Belt* as an Enterprise-Naming Custom in the United States**

Michael D. Sublett

Illinois State University, Normal, Illinois, USA

ans-names.pitt.edu

ISSN: 0027-7738 (print) 1756-2279 (web)

Vol. 69, Issue 4, Winter 2021

DOI 10.5195/names.2021.2254



Articles in this journal are licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).



This journal is published by the [University Library System](https://library.pitt.edu/), [University of Pittsburgh](https://www.pitt.edu/).

Abstract

Enterprises, be they for-profit businesses or not-for-profit organizations, require names to differentiate themselves from other entities. Since the late nineteenth century, US American entrepreneurs, corporate boards, and organizational founders have chosen to use *Corn Belt* or some spelling variant to identify their enterprises. This mixed-method research article examines the United States at the beginning of the use of *Corn Belt* as a vernacular term for an agricultural region. It identifies the earliest uses of *Corn Belt* as an inspiration for enterprise names; diachronically tracks *Corn Belt* enterprises in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, one of the core locations of the naming practice; and presents the enterprises across the United States that greeted the public in 2020 with *Corn Belt* in their names. The article highlights a naming practice by which residents of a rather amorphous agricultural zone bring a sense of place to their enterprises by bestowing on them a commonly known and highly respected identifier that many in the United States find immediately familiar. A study in traditional dialectology, this article brings together linguistics and geography to heighten public and scholarly appreciation of the spatial distribution of an onomastic marker in one part of the world.

Key words: Corn Belt, Midwest, United States, business names, organization names, ergonym, dialectology

Introduction

Writing a century ago, geographer J. Russell Smith penned a profound piece of prose. About the midwestern Corn Belt of the United States, he wrote, “The Corn Belt is a gift of the gods—the rain god, the sun god, the ice god and the gods of geology” (1925, 290). Geology’s gods provided the wide stretches of open land underlain by nearly horizontal rock layers. Courtesy of the ice god, continental glaciers enhanced soil fertility, smoothed many of the remaining surface irregularities, and facilitated the deployment of today’s gargantuan crop-handling machinery. The god of sunshine delivered (and still delivers) an abundance of corn heat units. The rain god provided (and provides) the intense but short-lived summer rainstorms and high summer-season humidity that corn (maize) needs to mature its grain. Corn Belt agriculturalists know how to take full advantage of these fortunate circumstances.

The Corn Belt is a vernacular region. Vernacular or perceptual regions have no firm, legally defined boundaries, either delimited on official maps or demarcated on the ground. Instead, each person is free to determine on their own where regions like *Gold Coast* or *Upstate South Carolina* or *Corn Belt* begin and end. Widely recognized cultural geographer Terry G. Jordan said vernacular regions

exist as part of popular or folk culture. Rather than being the intellectual creation of the professional geographer, the vernacular region is the product of the spatial perception of average people...such regions are the composites of the mental maps of the population (1978, 293).

Fellow geographer Wilbur Zelinsky echoed Jordan, agreeing that “identifying and understanding our vernacular regions is a justifiable, even necessary, pursuit if we wish to apprehend the major social and geographical realities of [...] America” (1980, 2).

Over time, many have attempted to pin down the Corn Belt statistically and cartographically. Among the most often cited is economist Oliver E. Baker (1927) who mapped the region using concentrations of corn acreage and yield. Using this method, Baker ended up with a band of corn dominance. His “Corn Belt” stretched westward from western Ohio to western Nebraska, as far south as south-central Illinois and as far north as southern Minnesota. A couple decades later, in 1950, a team from the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) produced a map of 10 agricultural regions in the United States. Their mapping included what they called the “Corn Belt,” an area with a focus on feed-grains and grain-consuming livestock. Their mid-century study nudged the southern margin of Baker’s Corn Belt southward down the Wabash River to its junction with the Ohio River. At the same time, it introduced a peninsula of Corn Belt agriculture that bulged south along the Missouri-Kansas line almost to the boundary between Kansas and Oklahoma. The USDA’s northern boundary crept northward, following the Red River of the North to the North Dakota-South Dakota line (US Department of Agriculture). Laingen (2012) attempted to even more precisely delineate the “Corn Belt Region” and arrived at a map with three “Core” areas: central and northern Illinois, central and northern Iowa, and a small cluster of counties in eastern Nebraska. Green et al. (2018, 1614) offered “a geospatial definition of the Corn Belt” based on satellite detection of cornfields as determined by the USDA National Agricultural Statistical Service for the successive crop years of 2001 through 2016. Their Corn Belt stretched from central Ohio to the eastern edge of the Great Plains, in Nebraska and the Dakotas.

There is another way to delimit the Corn Belt, however, a way that none of the aforementioned authors employed. That approach, which I adopt for this investigation, involves looking at the practice of naming enterprises, both businesses and not-for-profit organizations. In using this method, I try to answer several questions. When did *Corn Belt* come into use as a term to identify a region of the United States? Where and when did early enterprises pick up *Corn Belt* as part of their names? How has *Corn Belt* held up through time as an enterprise name in one of the core communities of the region Bloomington-Normal, in McLean County, Illinois? The largest county by area in Illinois, McLean led all three thousand plus United States counties in terms of corn and soybean production in 2020 (Eggert and Heather 2021, A1). Along with these research questions, this investigation also seeks to determine which enterprises in 2020 had some version of *Corn Belt* (perhaps *Cornbelt*, *CornBelt*, *Corn-belt*, or *Corn-Belt*) in their names and where these enterprises were located across the United States.

Identifying a region and tracing its roots as an informally named component of the human landscape is not an exercise in linguistic trivia. Rather, as Zelinsky said, it is “a justifiable, even necessary, pursuit” (1980, 2) if we are to understand the human realities of Earth’s surface—where we all reside. Geographers are not alone in building and analyzing regions. Practitioners of various other disciplines across the scientific universe, including dialectologists and onomasticians, do the same. As I model herein, this technique of mapping a vernacular region on the basis of naming practices is a transferrable methodology—one that I will address later in this article with additional examples of what I or others could investigate next.

Methodology

A combination of Internet sources, printed books, and personal contacts made this mixed-method research possible. Information about the first uses of *Corn Belt* to characterize crop regions of individual and clustered US states and of multiple states came mainly from newspaper databases, as I searched for “Corn Belt,” “Cornbelt,” and “Corn-Belt.” These databases included Nineteenth Century U. S. Newspapers; Newspapers.com; ProQuest Historical Newspapers: The New York Times; and ProQuest Historical Newspapers: Chicago Tribune. Names of early *Corn Belt* enterprises across the USA also came from the aforementioned newspaper databases, using the same three search terms: “Corn Belt,” “Cornbelt,” and “Corn-Belt.”

To conduct a longitudinal study of *Corn Belt* enterprises in and around Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, I turned to printed copies of city directories published by R. L. Polk and Company, Polk City Directories, City Directory Inc., Pantagraph Printing & Stationery, W. F. Curtis, Leader Printing, Western Publishing, and Equifax. These directories list businesses and not-for-profit organizations, including common-interest or purely social clubs. They typically provide a street address and, in many cases, name a principal officer. In total, I consulted 116 Bloomington-Normal city directories, 1855 through 2020, beginning with 1855 because it was the oldest available. Fifteen of the 116 directories (12.93 percent), mainly in the nineteenth century, covered two years rather than the more typical single year. In the biennial cases, when the run of an enterprise began or ended with such a directory, I opted always to use the first date in the pair. For instance, I listed the start or stop year of an enterprise as 1943 when the directory dates were 1943–1944. City directories were similar to but provide one with more information on each enterprise than would the telephone directories that Zelinsky (1980) used to collect enterprise names from 276 metropolitan areas of the United States and Canada for his article in which he mapped “The South,” “The Middle West,” “New England,” etc.

For my nationwide contemporary list and map of *Corn Belt* enterprises, I began by searching in general online databases: Google Advanced Search, Super Pages, 411.com, Bing, Google, Yellowbook.com, and Business White Pages. I devoted considerable time to relatively recent items brought up via Newspapers.com over the period 2018–2020. Later I visited the websites of the 50 state Secretaries of State (SOS). All SOS offices provide a search tool allowing one to look for active and inactive entities by name. Of the 2020 enterprises I tabulated and mapped, roughly one-quarter (28.75 percent) came up due to these SOS searches. Google Earth allowed me to look into the front yards of questionable enterprises in the hope of discovering evidence of relevant activity at the address I found online. On numerous occasions, for clarification of their status, I reached out directly to enterprises via electronic mail, website query services, hard copy correspondence, and telephone calls. Were they still operational in 2020? What was the nature of the enterprise? Did an enterprise of exactly the same name in another state have any connection? Where should I locate the enterprise on my 2020 map when their website listed multiple addresses? Many such inquiries were successful, but some produced no response. When there was no response, I used my best judgment to resolve the dilemma.

General decision rules guided the research. My focus was on the enterprises themselves, on entities with personnel (leaders, employees, and volunteer members). I excluded product names such as *Cornbelt Amine Liquid Herbicide*; places with no assigned personnel like *Corn Belt Park* (in El Paso, Illinois); and nicknames for enterprises like *Great Corn Belt Route* (really the Wichita, Richfield & Trinidad Railroad). For the 2020 list and map of enterprises, I ignored inactive *Corn Belt* entities, of which there are scores across the country.

Among the many indicators of inactivity were disabled telephone numbers, no verifiable websites, or downgrades in activity status by the appropriate SOS. I included for consideration *Corn Belt* subdivisions of enterprises with a different name. For example, the *Corn Belt Chapter of the Illinois Activity Directors Association* got counted this way. I excluded spinoffs, like *Corn Belt Decommissioning Trust, LLC*, which carries a name derived legally from Iowa's *Corn Belt Power Cooperative*. When a multiple-site enterprise, like an athletic conference, had a clear headquarters community, I used that place as the official location. Otherwise, I chose one of the participating municipalities that seemed central to the enterprise. Finally, on the enterprise list and map for 2020, I included recurring events that involve organizing personnel like conventions (e.g., Indiana's *Corn Belt Seed Conference*) and competitive races (e.g., Iowa's *Corn Belt Clash*).

Results

Corn Belt Emerges as a Vernacular Region

Warntz (1957), Laingen (2012), and OED (2021) credited an article in the July 1882 issue of *The Nation* with the earliest known use of *Corn Belt* to name a region. Warntz wrote, "In 1882 there occurred what might have been the first printed use of the term 'corn belt' in the sense that the concept is now used [...] Of course, the term was enclosed in quotation marks and was not used as a proper noun; yet, it represented the beginning of a trend" (43). That *The Nation* item, however, did not represent the beginning of anything. Writers had been identifying concentrations of corn production west of the Alleghenies as *Corn Belt* for many years prior to 1882. "The business of kiln-drying corn and grinding it into meal has become, all at once, quite common throughout the great Western **corn belt**—that is along a line of the rivers emptying into the north side of the Ohio [my emphasis]," said an untitled piece on page 2 in the *Scioto (Ohio) Gazette* of June 16, 1847. The author of that earliest known print reference had in mind corn cultivation in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois.

Corn Belt references multiplied in the last half of the nineteenth century. By 1868, the *Lancaster (Pennsylvania) Daily Evening Express* was telling its readers that "In the great **corn-belt** running through Southern Iowa and Northern Missouri, Central Illinois, Indiana, and Ohio, not more than three-fourths of the land which the farmers expected to devote to corn will be planted [my emphasis]" (2). In 1871, the *New Orleans Times-Picayune* said, "The **corn belt** lies between the 36th and 40th parallel of latitude, St. Louis being nearly in its centre [my emphasis]" (2). A couple of years later, *The New York Times* (1873, 3) conferred regional centrality on a different midwestern metropolis, saying, "The dispatches embraced reports from almost every county in the great **corn belt** through the States of Illinois, Iowa, and Kansas, of which Chicago is the primary market [my emphasis]." *Corn Belt* was enough in the news by 1884 for a humorist at the *Wall Street News* to report a father from "the great **corn-belt** region [my emphasis]" advising his son, who was setting out for New York City, that he could do his part to protect producer prices for that year's crop by telling the Wall Street bulls one thing about the potential yield and the bears something quite different (*Boston Globe*, 6).

Early Use of Corn Belt in Enterprise Names

By the late 1880s, *Corn Belt* was a familiar part of growing-season press coverage about the chances for a good corn crop in the Midwest and year-round conversations about land prices in this booming agricultural region. Roving correspondents, local newspaper stringers, editors back home, and readers of the papers knew the term and no doubt used it in everyday discourse. It was only a matter of time until somebody dropped *Corn Belt* into a new enterprise's name.

The place was Mitchell, Dakota Territory; the year was 1889. "Jas. S. Foster left Monday for New York via St. Paul," said a brief item in the January 31, 1889, *Mitchell Daily Republican*, "on business connected with the **Corn Belt** Investment Co [my emphasis]" (2). *Corn Belt Investment Company*, said a different Mitchell newspaper several months later, was "a new institution just incorporated by some of Mitchell's enterprising citizens, having as its object to invest in cheap Dakota lands, make real estate loans, and generally induce the investment of outside capital in this section" (*Mitchell Capital* 1889, 5). As it happened, the investment business hardly lasted a year. Foster told the *Capital* (1890, 4) that the newly adopted constitution of the State of South Dakota prohibited "the holding of lands by corporations for speculative purposes, and as that was the principal object of the company, it was deemed advisable to close up its business." But the new naming practice was off and running.

Mitchell soon had another newspaper, another *Corn Belt* business enterprise, the *South Dakota Advocate and Corn Belt Herald* (*Sioux City Journal* 1890, 4). What may have been the first not-for-profit enterprise with *Corn Belt* in the title, the *Corn Belt Real Estate Association*, sprang to life in Mitchell in July 1891, with plans

to promote South Dakota farmland at the South Dakota State Fair and then at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago (*Mitchell Capital* 1891, 9). That same month, also in Mitchell, "business men from the southern half of the state" organized the *Corn Belt Immigration Association*, which sought to raise funds inside South Dakota to assist residents "suffering on the account of crop failures" and "to induce immigration" primarily from eastern states (*Chicago Daily Inter Ocean* July 1891, 5). In 1892, South Dakotans held the first *Corn Belt Exposition*, which took place that fall in Mitchell's extravagant Corn Palace (*McHenry Plaindealer* 1892, 2).

While Mitchell was the hub of early enterprise-naming toward the Corn Belt's western margin, residents of Bloomington, Illinois, near the heart of the Illinois Grand Prairie and in the eastern core of the Corn Belt, were by 1891 ready to inaugurate their own naming tradition. One wonders whether the custom had diffused eastward from South Dakota or if Bloomington developed as an independent innovational hearth. The first inkling that Bloomington was going to join the naming parade came in a tiny segment of a long piece about happenings in various Illinois cities. "Mr. A. S. Eddy," said the *Chicago Daily Inter Ocean* (November 1891 19), "cashier of the Third National Bank, has accepted the cashiership of the **Corn Belt** Bank, which will open Dec. 1 [my emphasis]." When the Illinois Auditor of Public Accounts issued a final certificate of authority for the bank to begin business, capitalized at \$100,000, said action set into motion not only a banking success story that lasted almost a century but also legitimized the name choice and made it easier for other Illinois businesses and social organizations to adopt it (*Chicago Daily Inter Ocean* December 1891, 9). *Corn Belt National Building and Loan Association* received its license from the State of Illinois on 24 December 1892, in Tuscola, nearly 100 kilometers southeast of Bloomington (*Chicago Daily Inter Ocean* 1892, 14). By 1893, the *Corn Belt Tent of the Knights of the Maccabees* was welcoming lodge members to meetings at Red Men's Hall in Bloomington (*Bloomington-Normal and McLean County Directory for 1893*, 58). *Corn Belt Drug Store Company* began in December 1894 advertising Chamberlain's Colic, Cholera and Diarrhea Remedy from the store's location on the courthouse square in Bloomington (*Bloomington Pantagraph* 1894, 3). In September 1895, when the Modern Woodmen of America, a fraternal lodge, met at Bloomington's Miller Park, delegates organized a *Corn Belt Modern Woodmen's Picnic Association*, and scheduled their 1896 annual picnic for another Grand Prairie community, Farmer City, 40 kilometers southeast of Bloomington (*Bloomington Pantagraph* 1895, 5). *Corn Belt Printing & Stationery Company* made its Bloomington debut in June of 1896 (*Bloomington Pantagraph* 1896, 7). Elsewhere in the Corn Belt's Illinois core, by 1899, the *Corn Belt Lodge of the Knights of Pythias* was installing new officers at Ogden, 100 kilometers to the east of Bloomington (*Champaign Daily Gazette*, 5). In 1903, Bloomington's twin city, Normal, was sending high school students to compete during the annual meeting of the *Corn Belt Oratorical and Athletic Association* (*Chicago Tribune*, 2).

Iowa, another key state of the Corn Belt, standing between South Dakota and Illinois, got into the naming game early, too. By the summer of 1893, country newspaper editors in western Iowa had formed the *Corn Belt Editorial Association*, bringing together representatives of small publishing concerns out of places like Le Mars, Ida Grove, Mapleton, and Onawa (*Davenport Daily Leader*, 1). Also in western Iowa, Smithland could claim the *Corn Belt Minorca Yards*, site of efforts in the late 1890s to improve a particular breed of chicken—the Minorca (*Cedar Rapids Gazette* 1898, 2). Smithland's much larger Iowa neighbor, Sioux City, home to the *Corn Belt Baking Powder Company* (which also made *Corn Belt Yeast* and *Corn Belt Antiseptic Bluing*), sometimes referred to itself as the "Corn Belt City" (*Sioux City Journal* 1898, 8). A couple years into the twentieth century, Sioux City saw the incorporation locally of the *Corn Belt Land and Cattle Company* (*Sioux City Journal* 1903, 10). Iowa became the focus of lobbying by the *Corn Belt Meat Producers' Association* for better railroad rates to benefit shippers of live cattle and hogs (*Chicago Tribune* 1908, 7).

A Localized Longitudinal Study of Corn Belt Enterprises

Although Mitchell managed a head start in the naming of *Corn Belt* enterprises, Bloomington, Illinois, with nearby Normal, soon matched and surpassed Mitchell. These adjacent Illinois communities have hosted 42 *Corn Belt* enterprises, according to entries in their published city directories from 1893 (*Bloomington-Normal and McLean County Directory for 1893*) to 2020 (*2020 Polk City Directory Bloomington Area, IL*).

Bear in mind that there can be a lag between the founding of an enterprise and its initial listing by a city directory, or between enterprise demise and its final listing. Furthermore, an enterprise does not have to broadcast its existence in a city directory, although a for-profit entity like a bank would welcome a standard listing and might pay extra for a display advertisement. Directories will not pick up every enterprise, particularly those that either cannot afford to participate, do not wish their address to be public, or choose not to see their name in print. Sometimes directory field personnel simply fail to capture enterprises. Though authoritative and an excellent source for study of a naming practice over time, city directories are not perfect. In any given year, they tend to understate the actual number of enterprises.

Table 1 provides an example-rich summary of what the directories reveal. Bloomington's *Corn Belt Bank* began operations in 1891. The bank first appeared in the 1893 directory, and it was in every directory thereafter until the bank merged and dropped out as a separate entry beginning with the 1986 directory. Its 93 continuous

years of directory presence stand thus far as the longest local continuous record for a *Corn Belt* enterprise; but still counting and currently at 81 years (1940-2020) is the customer-owned, not-for-profit cooperative, *Corn Belt Energy*, originally *Corn Belt Electric Cooperative*. Mean number of years in the city directories for the 42 enterprises is just under 18, at 17.92. Closest to the mean, at 17 years, were the *Corn Belt Tent of the Knights of the Maccabees* (1893-1909) and *Corn Belt Motor Company* (1937-1953). Median directory life for an enterprise is eight years, a number that splits the seven years of the *Corn Belt Cigar Store* (1905-1911) and the nine years compiled by the *Corn Belt Auto Club* (1924-1932). The mode, the most common number of directory years, is one which a total of 11 enterprises could claim, ranging from *Corn Belt Traction Company* (1909) to *Corn Belt Collection Agency* (1984). Roughly three-quarters of the Bloomington-Normal enterprises (32 of 42 or 76.19 percent) have been for-profit businesses, like *Corn Belt Manufacturing* (1943-1946). The remaining 10 were (or are) not-for-profit entities, like the *Corn Belt Farmers' Cooperative Association* (1920) and the *Corn Belt Carving Club* (2017-2020).

Table 1. Chronological Summary, by Type, of Corn Belt Enterprises Appearing in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, City Directories, 1893-2020

First Listing	Type	Number	Percentage	Examples
1893-1906	Business	5	83.33	Corn Belt Bank; Corn Belt Drug Store
	Not for Profit	1	16.67	Corn Belt Tent of the Knights of the Maccabees
1907-1920	Business	10	90.91	Corn Belt Creamery Company
	Not for Profit	1	9.09	Corn Belt Farmers' Cooperative Association
1921-1934	Business	2	66.67	Corn Belt Auto Club
	Not for Profit	1	33.33	Corn Belt Area Council of the Boy Scouts of America
1935-1948	Business	4	80.00	Corn Belt Motor Company
	Not for Profit	1	20.00	Corn Belt Electric Cooperative
1949-1962	Business	5	62.50	Corn Belt Builders; Corn Belt Farm Store
	Not for Profit	3	37.50	Corn Belt Coin Club; Corn Belt Stamp Club
1963-1976	Business	2	66.67	Corn Belt Auto Parts; Corn Belt Foods
	Not for Profit	1	33.33	Corn Belt Library System
1977-1990	Business	2	100.00	Corn Belt Collection Agency
	Not for Profit	0	0.00	None applicable
1991-2004	Business	1	100.00	Corn Belt Roofing
	Not for Profit	0	0.00	None applicable
2005-2018	Business	1	33.33	Normal CornBelters
	Not for Profit	2	66.67	Corn Belt Kennel Club
2019-2020	Business	0	0.00	None applicable
	Not for Profit	0	0.00	None applicable

Sources: City directories; "Businesses Beginning with the Word 'Corn': 1893-2013," McLean County Museum of History Archives.

Figure 1 reveals that the number of *Corn Belt* enterprises in any particular city directory ranged from 2 to 12, with a 128-year mean (1893-2020) of 5.87 enterprises per year, a median of 6, and mode of 6. The single peak year of 12 enterprises occurred in 1962; but two other directories listed 11, and five had 10 of them. The local naming custom grew through the 1890s and the first six decades of the twentieth century. Though there has been numerical slippage since the 1962 peak, no Bloomington-Normal city directory from 1893 to 2020 has been without at least a pair of enterprises with the *Corn Belt* designation.

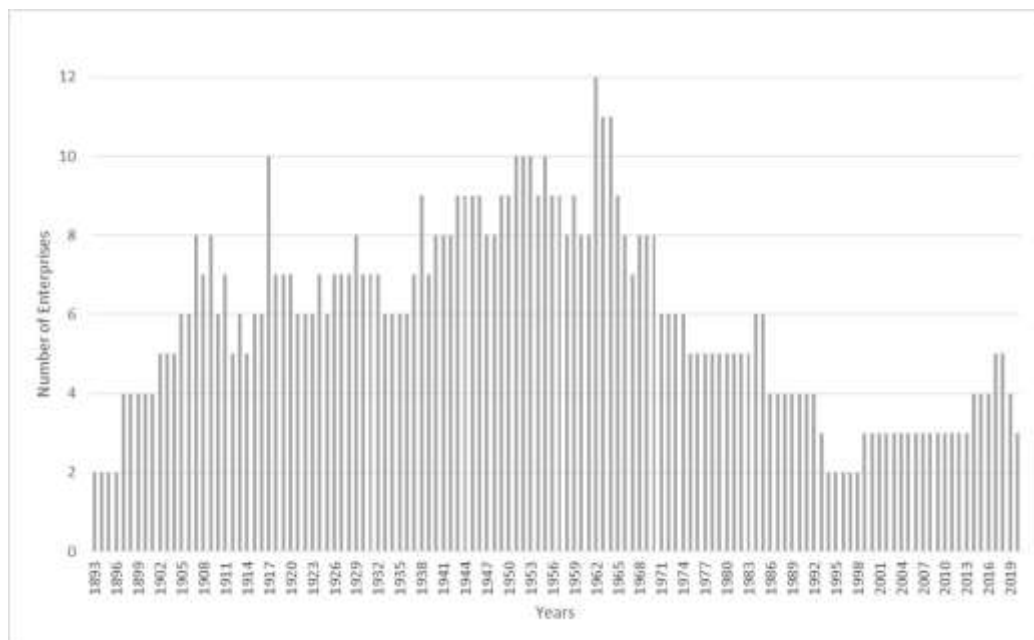


Figure 1. Number of Corn Belt enterprises in Bloomington-Normal, Illinois, city directories, by year, 1893–2020. Source: City directories.

Contemporary Corn Belt Enterprises

Eighty enterprises emerged as active 2020 *Corn Belt* or *Cornbelt* endeavors across the United States. Table 2 summarizes their numbers by state, indicates how many and what percentage were businesses or not-for-profit organizations, and provides examples. Leading with 30 of the 80 enterprises (37.50 percent) was Illinois; Iowa followed closely with 23 (28.75 percent). Illinois and Iowa, therefore, accounted for two-thirds of the total (66.25 percent). Indiana came in far below Illinois and Iowa, at six enterprises. South Dakota contributed five as did Nebraska; Minnesota had three; Missouri and Ohio both hosted two; and Colorado, Florida, Kentucky, and Wisconsin had one each. Of the 80 enterprises, 41 (51.25 percent) were businesses and 39 were not for profit. In terms of spelling choices, *Corn Belt* as two words, including one enterprise with a hyphen (Illinois’s *Corn-Belt Leasing Corporation*), accounted for 43 of the 80 (53.75 percent). The other 37 enterprise name designators (46.25 percent) spelled the term as one word, including three (Missouri’s *CornBelt Regional RNA Meeting*, Kentucky’s *CornBelt Tank Services, LLC*, and Illinois’s *Normal CornBelts Baseball, LLC*) that went with a capital “B.” All but four enterprise names began with *Corn Belt* or *Cornbelt*.

Table 2. Summary, by Type, of Corn Belt Enterprises in the United States, 2020

State	Type	Number	Percentage	Examples
Colorado	Business	1	100.00	Cornbelt Financial, LLC
	Not for Profit	0	0.00	None applicable
Florida	Business	1	100.00	Corn Belt Foods, LLC
	Not for Profit	0	0.00	None applicable
Illinois	Business	11	36.67	Corn Belt Ag Services, LLC; Cornbelt Signs, LLC
	Not for Profit	19	63.33	Corn Belt Two-Cylinder Tractor Club
Indiana	Business	5	83.33	Cornbelt Cycle and Shine, LLC
	Not for Profit	1	16.67	Corn Belt Seed Conference
Iowa	Business	15	66.22	Corn Belt Aluminum, Inc.; Cornbelt Lumber
	Not for Profit	8	34.78	Cornbelt Running Club
Kentucky	Business	1	100.00	CornBelt Tank Services, LLC
	Not for Profit	0	0.00	None applicable
Minnesota	Business	2	66.67	Corn Belt Testing, Inc.
	Not for Profit	1	33.33	Corn Belt Minnesota Baseball Association
Missouri	Business	1	50.00	Cornbelt Trail Farms, LLC
	Not for Profit	1	50.00	CornBelt Regional RNA Meeting
Nebraska	Business	1	20.00	Cornbelt Investments
	Not for Profit	4	80.00	Western Cornbelt Water Utilization Co-op
Ohio	Business	1	50.00	Corn Belt Ag, LLC
	Not for Profit	1	50.00	Corn Belt Top Farmers
South Dakota	Business	2	40.00	Cornbelt Capital, LLC
	Not for Profit	3	60.00	Cornbelt Educational Cooperative
Wisconsin	Business	0	0.00	None applicable
	Not for Profit	1	100.00	Cornbelt Marketing Cooperative

Of the 80 national enterprises (Table 2), 33.75 percent (27 of 80) had a clear agricultural connection, while others (such as those on the financial and investment side) may have dealt indirectly by providing services to the industry. Clearly in the agricultural realm were businesses like Illinois's *Corn Belt Ag Products, LLC*; two (unrelated) *Corn Belt Ag, LLC*, enterprises (one in Iowa and the other in Ohio); Illinois's *Corn Belt Livestock Services*; and Iowa's *Cornbelt Cattle Company*. On the not-for-profit side were agriculturally focused organizations like Illinois's *Cornbelt Chapter of the Grain Elevator and Processing Society* and Iowa's *Cornbelt Chapter of the National Agri-Marketing Association* as well as clubs like the *Iowa Cornbelt Oliver Collectors Association* (tractors) and Illinois's *Corn Belt Kids 4-H Club*.

Figure 2 shows a Corn Belt that the distribution of the 2020 enterprises defined, a pattern that is fairly true to statistically derived versions, such as those that I discussed above. Scattered in Ohio and eastern Indiana, enterprises began to cluster in western Indiana's portion of the Grand Prairie. That concentration intensified in a southeast-to-northwest swath through Illinois toward Iowa and the Mississippi River, reaching a peak in Bloomington-Normal with nine (seven in Bloomington and two in Normal). Once across the Mississippi, enterprises fanned out widely through Iowa, until clustering again near the western border of Iowa, with four in Omaha; Nebraska; one across the Missouri River from Omaha in Council Bluffs, Iowa; three farther up the Missouri in Sioux City, Iowa; and two up the tributary Sioux River in Sioux Falls, South Dakota. Mitchell, South Dakota, site of what I have identified as the first *Corn Belt* enterprise, had just one in 2020. Outliers in southern Florida and Colorado did not spoil the overall dominance of the traditional vernacular *Corn Belt*. Personal inquiries that I directed to these outlier enterprises—Florida's *Corn Belt Foods, LLC*, and Colorado's *Cornbelt Financial, LLC*—failed to yield information about why their names include *Corn Belt*.

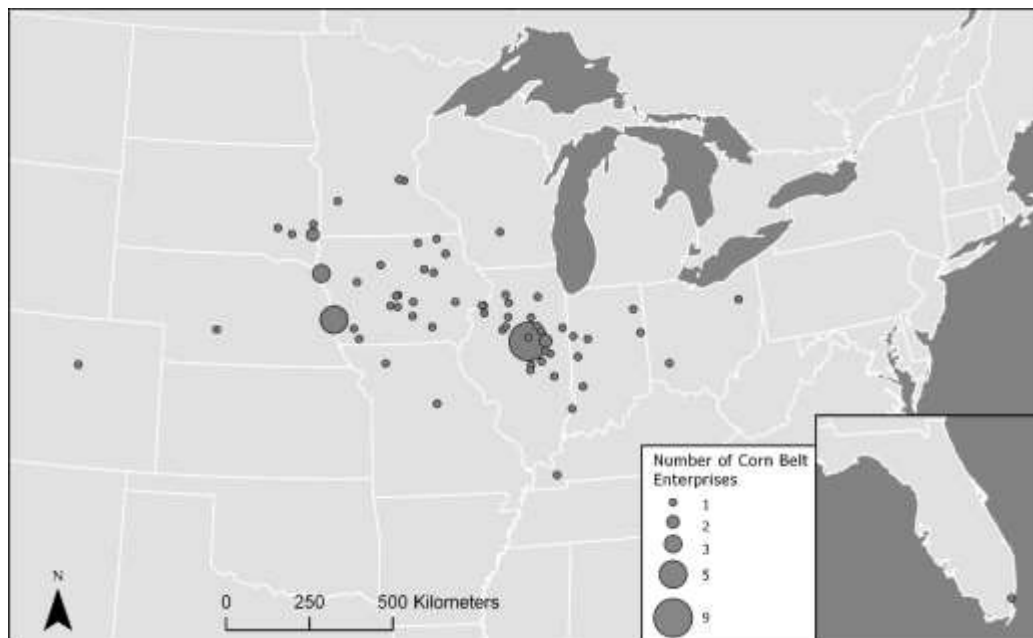


Figure 2. Distribution of Corn Belt enterprises in the United States, 2020.

Discussion and Conclusion

Of the gods that he credited for the remarkable agricultural productivity of the Corn Belt, J. Russell Smith also said, “All this is nature’s conspiracy to make man grow corn” (1925, 290). The gods may have been driving farmer decisions about what to plant; but by the time Smith published his book on North America, business owners and club organizers across the Corn Belt had already appropriated *Corn Belt* or *Cornbelt* as a way to capture the positive vibe of this dynamic agricultural region in the names of their enterprises dozens, maybe hundreds, of times. That year, 1925, in Bloomington, Illinois alone, there were six *Corn Belt* enterprises listed in the city directory and perhaps several others unlisted. And, even though the urge to choose *Corn Belt* as an enterprise nominator has waned somewhat, those who still use it seem committed to its endurance.

Naming an organization, society, or commercial enterprise after the Corn Belt reveals a sense of what Kaplan (2000, 45) called “spatial identity” in that so doing conveys a message about the region to which the name givers have a special connection. “Territory creates a collective consciousness” wrote Kaplan (2000, 45). Naming an enterprise after that territory would be a satisfying confirmation of such a connection. Boddewyn (1967), Room (1982), Walasek (1983), and Rami and Arias (2007) expressed similar ideas regarding place-inspired enterprise names. In a particularly innovative investigation, Walasek (1983, 198) even singled out electric utilities for their “common use of geographic names” such as the aforementioned *Corn Belt Electric Cooperative* (now *Corn Belt Energy*).¹

Entrepreneurs often name their businesses in the hope that the moniker itself will influence favorably potential customers of their products and services. Business owners with local roots might decide to use *Corn Belt* to identify their enterprises to suggest to the public that they have strong ties to the region. In some cases, the use of *Corn Belt* in a business name might serve to encourage positive links between their goods and services and the favorable associations customers might have with the Corn Belt region (e.g., reliability, industry, wholesomeness, patriotism). Similarly, leaders of not-for-profit organizations might pick names with *Corn Belt* to resonate favorably with founding members and help recruit new members who also have positive associations with the region. Sometimes these enterprises will have a tie with agriculture; sometimes that will not be true. In any case, as this study has shown, for more than a century a wide variety of US-based enterprises have successfully incorporated *Corn Belt* into their names.

A logical continuation of this research would be to trace the evolution of the vernacular *Corn Belt* as defined by enterprise names. Imagine a map similar to Figure 2 but also with a closed, sinuous, smoothed polygon draped around and just beyond the outermost of the mapped enterprise communities (excluding the Florida outlier and maybe the one in Colorado). Now eliminate all the symbols marking the enterprise

communities. The remaining polygon, an isogloss actually, would denote the boundary, as dialectologists Chambers and Trudgill (1998, 89) said, “between two regions with respect to some linguistic feature.” In this instance, the isogloss would separate places within the polygon that had in 2020 enterprises named after the Corn Belt from nearby places where there were none with that name. Now imagine similar polygons to map successive Corn Belt regions in selected years over a century or more. How did the isoglosses enclosing all active *Corn Belt* enterprises compare in, say, 1900 with 1920, 1940, and so forth?

One key source for such a map series would be the SOS databases, which typically retain the inactive enterprises, giving activation and inactivation dates. Another set of sources for such a historical approach would be newspaper databases. Newspapers would allow a researcher to focus the search for *Corn Belt* enterprises, as I did in the current study, on the year in question and perhaps the two preceding years. One could also consult city directories, where they exist, especially along the margins of the region. Next would come a map for each selected year, similar to the revised Figure 2 that I suggested above. If one wrapped an isogloss around the outermost enterprise communities on each map and took care to omit obvious outliers like Florida, the resulting isoglosses might reveal how the naming public was perceiving, at different points in time, the extent of the vernacular *Corn Belt*. Finally, one could overlay all these study-year isoglosses on a single separate map. Isoglosses might form bundles (Chambers and Trudgill 1998, 94-96) in some areas, indicating a stable boundary through time. They might reveal movement inward or outward in others, indicating a drift of the naming practice toward the core or the periphery of the Corn Belt. The footprint of the polygonal isoglosses would shift to reflect state additions and subtractions as well as the coming and going of enterprises within states. These are just a few suggestions for future research that one could undertake on the term *Corn Belt* in this area. The onomastic exploration of vernacular regions can do much to enrich our understanding of the complex relationship among culture, identity, language, and geography.

As this study has shown, there seems to be something attractive about the term *Belt* to characterize vernacular regions in the US, especially ones that have an east-west orientation. Many US “belts” have an agricultural theme like *Corn Belt*, but that is not always the case. In December 2020, using Newspapers.com, I performed a series of searches to determine the gross number of hits for five agricultural “belts” (Corn, Cotton, Dairy, Tobacco, and Wheat) and three non-agricultural belts (Bible, Borscht, and Rust) to check their respective strengths. I did not attempt to eliminate duplicate hits for any of the searches. *Corn Belt* (1,107,445 hits) easily out-returned second-ranking *Cotton Belt* (681,170) by over 400,000 and left the *Wheat* (456,710), *Tobacco* (40,455), and *Dairy* (20,482) belts even farther behind. Gross returns for the *Bible* (94,934), *Rust* (74,401), and *Borscht* (28,045) belts were also well below that of the *Corn Belt*. Future researchers could compare the history and distribution of these and other US regional markers in enterprise naming.

Alternatively, building on this study’s focus upon a single regional designation, further investigations could examine other belts in depth. The *Cotton Belt* would be a good follow-up candidate, given its nineteenth-century (perhaps earlier) origins and the fact that this belt moved westward across the American South as planters sought not only suitable land but also tried to outrun the scourge of the boll weevil. One could take a look at Chicago’s *Bungalow Belt*, a name referencing street after street of detached single-family bungalows. The *Borscht Belt*, the resort-oriented vacationland in the Catskill Mountains of New York and Pennsylvania, would also be worth investigating to see if, when, and where it lent its name to local enterprises.

The potential does not end with belts, of course. How about *Silicon Valley* in California, the *Valley of the Sun* in Arizona, *Dutch Country* of Pennsylvania, the *Tidewater* area of Virginia, Florida’s *Space Coast*, Maine’s (and adjacent New Brunswick’s) *Down East*, or Ontario’s *Golden Horseshoe*? Enterprise namers may have seized on these and other regional markers for their businesses and organizations. Researchers around the globe with similar interests could also conduct analogous investigations of enterprise names that utilize designations of such regions outside of the United States. Australia’s *Sunshine Coast* in the state of Queensland, southern Spain’s *Costa del Sol*, London’s entertainment district of *Soho*, and even something as large as the *Middle East* or the *Orient* come to mind as potentially fruitful avenues of onomastic research. Vernacular regions abound.

Note

1. Russian onomastic scholars, like Pitina (2015), gravitate in discussions of enterprise naming to the term *ergonym*, which, as Kryukova (2012, 41) explained, dates from the 1980s and “means a proper name referring to any business alliance of people (organizations, societies, political parties, commercial enterprises, etc.).”

Acknowledgements

Thanks go to Alec Foster, Mark C. Jones, Bill Kemp, John Kostelnick, and Megan Maher.

Disclosure Statement

The author states that there is no conflict of interest.

Bibliography

- 2020 Polk City Directory Bloomington Area, IL. N.p.: City Directory, Inc., 2020.
- Baker, Oliver E. 1927. "Agricultural Regions of North America: Part IV—The Corn Belt." *Economic Geography* 3, no. 4: 447-65.
- Bloomington (Illinois) *Pantagraph*. 1894, December 8. No Title. Accessed December 2, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- Bloomington (Illinois) *Pantagraph*. 1895, September 5. "The Modern Woodmen." Accessed December 3, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- Bloomington (Illinois) *Pantagraph*. 1896, June 27. "The Corn Belt Printing Company." Accessed December 3, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- Bloomington-Normal and McLean County Directory for 1893. Bloomington, IL: Pantagraph Printing & Stationery Company, 1893.
- Boddewyn, J. 1967. "The Names of U.S. Industrial Corporations: A Study in Change." *Names* 15, no. 1: 39-52.
- Boston (Massachusetts) *Globe*. 1884, August 25. "William Didn't Peach." Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- Cedar Rapids (Iowa) *Gazette*. 1898, January 11. "The Exhibitors." Accessed December 23, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- Chambers, J. K, and Peter Trudgill. 1998. *Dialectology*. 2nd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Champaign (Illinois) *Daily Gazette*. 1899, January 7. "Lodge Election at Ogden." Accessed December 3, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- Chicago Daily Inter Ocean. 1891, July 18. "South Dakota is All Right." Accessed April 3, 2020. <https://go-gale.com>.
- Chicago Daily Inter Ocean. 1891, November 15. "Neighboring Cities." Accessed April 3, 2020. <https://go-gale.com>.
- Chicago Daily Inter Ocean. 1891, December 3. "Corn Belt Bank Ready for Business." Accessed March 30, 2020. <https://go-gale.com>.
- Chicago Daily Inter Ocean. 1892, December 25. "Licensed to do Business." Accessed December 2, 2020. <https://go-gale.com>.
- Chicago Tribune. 1903, May 9. "Wisconsin Defeats Iowa in the College Debate." Accessed December 2, 2020. <https://search-proquest.com>.
- Chicago Tribune. 1908, February 18. "Shippers Attack Interstate Rate." Accessed December 2, 2020. <https://search-proquest.com>.
- Davenport (Iowa) *Daily Leader*. 1893, April 30. "A Corn Belt Convention." Accessed December 9, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- Eggert, Timothy, and Kade Heather. 2021, May 28. "Twin Cities Work to Reduce Fertilizer Impact on Water Supply." *Pantagraph* (Bloomington, Illinois).
- Green, Timothy R., Holm Kipka, Olaf David, and Gregory S. McMaster. 2018. "Where is the USA Corn Belt, and How is it Changing?" *Science of the Total Environment* 618: 1613-18.
- Jordan, Terry G. 1978. "Perceptual Regions in Texas." *Geographical Review* 68, no. 3: 293-307.
- Kaplan, David H. 2000. "Conflict and Compromise among Borderland Identities in Northern Italy." *Tijdschrift voor Economische en Sociale Geografie* 91, no. 1: 44-60.

- Kryukova, Irina. 2012. "Rebranding in Russian Ergonymy as a Matter of Sociolinguistics." In *Names as Language and Capital*, edited by Reina Boerrigter and Harm Nijboer, 41–47. Amsterdam: Meertens Instituut.
- Laingen, Chris. 2012. "Delineating the 2007 Corn Belt Region." *Papers of the Applied Geography Conferences* 35: 173–81.
- Lancaster (Pennsylvania) *Daily Evening Express*. 1868, June 23. "The Crops." Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- McHenry (Illinois) *Plaindealer*. 1892, September 14. "Corn Belt Exposition." Accessed December 2, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- Mitchell (South Dakota) *Capital*. 1889, December 7. "The Corn Belt Investment Co." Accessed July 6, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- Mitchell (South Dakota) *Capital*. 1890, July 25. "Corn Belt Investment Co." Accessed July 6, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- Mitchell (South Dakota) *Capital*. 1891, July 17. "Corn Belt Development." Accessed July 6, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- Mitchell (Dakota Territory) *Daily Republican*. 1889, January 31. "Personal." Accessed July 6, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- New Orleans *Times-Picayune*. 1871, March 26. "Commercial and Financial Review." Accessed June 10, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- The New York *Times*. 1873, September 7. "The Corn Crop." Accessed March 30, 2020. <https://search-proquest.com>.
- OED. 2021. *Oxford English Dictionary*. Accessed January 14, 2021. <https://www.oed.com>.
- Pitina, Svetlana. 2015. "English Language Influence on Russian Commercial Names." *US-China Foreign Language* 13, no. 12: 869–74.
- Rami, José Antonio Saura, and Xavier Tomàs Arias. 2007. "Ergonymy in Northern Aragon (Spain)." In *Names in Commerce and Industry: Past and Present*, edited by Ludger Kremer and Elke Ronneberger-Sibold, 302–16. Berlin: Logos Verlag.
- Room, Adrian. 1982. *Dictionary of Trade Name Origins*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
- Scioto (Ohio) *Gazette*. 1847, June 16. No Title. Accessed April 2, 2020. <https://go-gale.com>.
- Sioux City (Iowa) *Journal*. 1890, February 6. No Title. Accessed July 6, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- Sioux City (Iowa) *Journal*. 1898, August 15. "Jottings about Town." Accessed December 23, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- Sioux City (Iowa) *Journal*. 1903, December 24. "Jottings about Town." Accessed December 23, 2020. <https://www.newspapers.com>.
- Smith, J. Russell. 1925. *North America: Its People and the Resources, Development, and Prospects of the Continent as an Agricultural, Industrial, and Commercial Area*. New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company.
- US Department of Agriculture. Bureau of Agricultural Economics. 1950. "Generalized Types of Farming in the United States." *Agricultural Information Bulletin* 3. Washington, DC: GPO.
- Walasek, Richard A. 1983. "The Nature of Electric Utility Company Names." *Names* 31, no. 3: 197–206.
- Warntz, William. 1957. "An Historical Consideration of the Terms 'Corn' and 'Corn Belt' in the United States." *Agricultural History* 31, no. 1: 40–45.
- Zelinsky, Wilbur. 1980. "North America's Vernacular Regions." *Annals of the Association of American Geographers* 70, no. 1: 1–16.

Notes on the Contributor

Professor Emeritus of Geography **Michael D. Sublett** served on the faculty at Illinois State University from 1970 to 2015 and chaired the Department of Geography-Geology from 1978 to 1988. His research in recent years has dealt with place names and the naming of place-based entities in the United States.

Correspondence to: Michael D. Sublett, Department of Geography, Geology, and the Environment, Illinois State University, Campus Box 4400, Normal IL 61790-4400, USA. E-mail: mdsuble@ilstu.edu