

Cottage Grove from Coast to Coast: The Genealogy of a Place Name

AUDREY R. DUCKERT

ONCE A COLLEAGUE ASKED ME: "What was the name of that place you came from in Wisconsin?" and when I answered, "Cottage Grove," all he said was, "you made it up."

Well, I didn't, of course, and the true village is more amusing and more interesting than anything I could make up. Besides, ever since fourth grade, I had known that the town was given its rustic name back in 1840 by its second settler, William C. Wells, who built his cottage — a log cabin — in a natural grove of the big burr oaks that are so much a part of the landscape of southern Wisconsin. And I had been aware, chiefly through missent mail, that there were other Cottage Groves in the country; after being accused of fabricating my own, I grew more curious about them.

My collection now numbers eleven, including "home," which is ten miles east of Madison, Wisconsin. The name quite literally spans the country, from Connecticut to California and Oregon and from Wisconsin to Texas. There are others in Minnesota, Alabama, Tennessee, Illinois, Michigan, and Indiana. Where did Cottage Grove begin? The presence of one in New England would, on the surface, invite conjecture that this name, like so many others, had moved westward with the migrating yankees in the mid-19th century. On the other hand, the desire to put a cozy complexion on a drafty log house sheltered by a few oak trees may have led to a series of on-the-spot coinages.

The first problem, then, in tracing the name, becomes one of chronology. The dean of Connecticut place name collecting, Professor Morse Allen of Trinity College, says that our eastern cousin appears first on an 1892 United States Geological Survey topographic map; later it is listed on a Central New England Railway timetable as a station 4.1 miles northwest of Hartford. Earlier maps and histories

of the area do not show it, and considering the number of localities that *were* thus named, I am much inclined to accept Professor Allen's suggestion that a pleasant name was arbitrarily assigned by the railroad, which came to that region in the 1870's. So the notion that Cottage Grove was a yankee migrant should probably be abandoned for lack of evidence.

Queries addressed to local postmasters (or to the nearest town that had one), and other information gained chiefly by rummaging in works on local history showed that most of the Cottage Groves were begun in the middle decades of the last century. It was not possible to establish a specific christening date for each one; (anyone who has researched through the rare Victorian rhetoric of the "subscribed" county histories will understand why); but all of the areas concerned fit into a mid-century settlement pattern. No Cottage Groves were recorded anywhere before 1840; thus Wisconsin's founded that year, appears to be the oldest of them all.

The next question is this: When eleven towns in the country have the same name, is there a tie between them — perhaps one of common origin? My answer, after considerable research and even some creative imagination has to be "no." I am unable to demonstrate a single consistent thread in their settlement histories — apart from the time element, or to turn up one possible onomastic Johnny Applesed who might have spread the name across the country because he liked it.

It makes interesting speculation to consider how the name originated, and probably re-originated, in eleven different places during a 50-year period. Raymond Johnson, postmaster at Cottage Grove, Minnesota, says his town was named in 1850 by J. W. Furber, whose brother set up the first post office in his cottage in the grove. Five years later, G. C. Pierce (or Pearce) repeated the same performance in Oregon; and once more it was a grove of oak trees where the cottage stood. Mrs. Verda Hampton, former postmaster at the Indiana office (now consolidated with Liberty), and a keen local historian, says the town in Union County, Indiana was settled 100 years ago and named because a whole grove of cottages — all alike — was built in the early years of its settlement. The origins of the other Cottage Groves remain obscure; the Cottage Grove Primitive Baptist Church in Saline County, Illinois was using the name in 1849, apparently before there was a formal village by that name.

Its postoffice-hood was brief; from 1898–1909. Illinois had another Cottage Grove once, but it changed its name to Hugo.

The English Place Name Society Publications seemed the logical place to look for the oldest Cottage Grove of the English-speaking world, and it is in the Essex volume that the oldest possible relative, *Cowches Grove*, is recorded from 1544. *Grove Cottage*, in Devonshire, was the home of Edward de la Grove in 1299. Both elements are popular in the place-names of rural England; *Grove Ho*, *Grove Spinney*, and *The Cottages* are a sampling.

But whether we construe the apposition in the name to mean a cottage in a grove, a grove of cottages, or cottages on Mr. Grove's land, we are dealing with a name that seems to have moved about and sprung up without the force of any concerted tradition behind it; a name, in short, that *everybody* made up.

Curiosity about coincidences in nomenclature is one of the most natural things in the world; people are always amused to hear of others with the same name and to find out what they are like. And so we are bound to ask whether the Cottage Groves of the country have anything in common besides a name.

Some amusing coincidences in name as well as circumstance came out during my inquiry; Raymond Johnson, a carpenter in Wisconsin, was amused to hear that he had a homonym in the postmaster of Minnesota's Cottage Grove; a striking parallel in a father-daughter succession to the postoffice and general store appeared between Wisconsin's Ruth Graves and Indiana's Verda Hampton. Adjoining the township of Cottage Grove, Wisconsin is the township of *Blooming Grove*; in Indiana there is a similar pair, almost as close together. An even less likely name, *Equality*, is shared by towns near the Cottage Groves in Coosa County, Alabama and in Saline County, Illinois. There are probably many more such coincidences, and it might be great fun to collect them, though they would perhaps be more at home in the transactions of the Fortean Society.

And what do the towns themselves have in common? We might put it this way: There is Cottage Grove, Oregon – a busy lumbering town with a Chamber of Commerce, 4100 people within its limits and another 2000 just outside – there is this one bustling Cottage Grove, and then there are the other ten.

In California, as in Illinois, the name has occurred twice; one of them has been absorbed into San Jose; the other, in Siskiyou

County, has a population of 10 (you send the mail to Clear Creek.) Other Cottage Groves have become parts of Houston, Texas and Detroit, Michigan; one in Oklahoma never made a major league atlas or the *United States Postal Guide*; and there are no longer post offices at Cottage Grove in Indiana, Illinois, or Connecticut. In fact, the great unifying factor among these towns is size — or, more precisely, lack of it. Cottage Grove, Wisconsin had 372 people last census and ranks second to the one in Oregon; Cottage Grove, Illinois, according to Rand-McNally's 1957 figures, has 4; and Hugo, Illinois (see Cottage Grove) has 25. Minnesota reports an unofficial 240 in its Cottage Grove; the 1950 census allows them 160. None of the others even reach 200.

Students of personal names have noticed that many people have a rather definite concept of what sort of person the wearer of a name is, even though he had nothing to say about its becoming his. Percy has to prove himself *not* to be a sissy; Otto has to convince a girl that he can be as attractive as if he were named Craig; Lavinia is expected to be an old maid, and Gertie a giggler. Perhaps here we have a similar situation in place names; there is no doubt that many of the pretentious names given to marshy subdivisions today and to the numerous "paper towns" during the era of westward expansion involved a good bit of wishful thinking. They were given because they carried the proper connotations.

And so it seems quite possible that the very name Cottage Grove has been a considerable factor in keeping its towns small, to be sure, there are many more vital factors that determine the size and destiny of any community; but look through the index of the big Rand-McNally sometime: *Cottage Hill*, *Cottage Farms*, *Cottage Place*, even *Cottage City* — and none of them amounts to a hill of beans as far as population figures are concerned. I wouldn't contend that changing the name of a Cottage Grove anywhere on the face of the earth to *Busy Bee City* or *Atomicville* could make it appreciably different from what it is today; but I do submit that over the years, the rural overtones of the name have had their effect. The places that wear it pride themselves — even as their city cousin from Oregon does — on being friendly residential communities; on being, to put it plain, small towns.