Names in Brief

Prairie Generics in Michigan

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So FAR, NO TRUE GENERICS OF *prairie*[1] have been found on current topographical maps of Michigan.[2] Yet at one time there were a good number of named prairies in the state, and the inhabitants used the word considerably. For this information I am grateful to Professor Albert H. Marckwardt, who called my attention to Albert F. Butler's article entitled "Rediscovering Michigan's Prairies."[3]

In principle, some of Butler's observations hold true outside of Michigan, probably applying more to Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, Wisconsin, Minnesota, Iowa, Oklahoma, Kansas, Nebraska, North Dakota, and South Dakota than elsewhere. On page 268 of the September, 1947, installment Butler says, "The French fur traders and hunters ... [gave] us this heritage not only of a general topographical term, but names for specific prairie areas of Michigan — Portage Prairie, Terre Coupe Prairie, Prairie Mouillee, Prairie Ronde, Grand (Grande) Prairie, and possibly others." He goes on (*ibid.*, pp. 275–'76) to describe the conditions that affected the use of the expression in this region: "In many cases, the need for prairie names came before the need for village names and in a certain period, especially in the 1820's and 1830's, one spoke of prairies in giving directions, rather than employing the names of

[1] That is, names designating the prairies themselves, not other objects such as schools, creeks and churches which are frequently associated with prairies — *e.g.*, Bottom Prairie School (Mt. Sterling, Ill., map), Muddy Prairie Creek (Lancaster, Ohio), and Prairieville (Hastings, Mich.).

[2] Used, together with the maps of other states, as the basis of my article, "The Term *Prairie* in the United States" (*Names*, Vol. V, No. 1, March, 1957, pp. 27 to 46). A list of Ohio's obsolete true generics of *prairie* is given in footnote 2 of the article, p. 27.

[3] *Michigan History:* September, 1947, Vol. XXXI, pp. 267–'86; March, 1948, Vol. XXXII, pp. 15–36; June and September, 1949, Vol. XXXIII, pp. 117–'30 and 220–'31.

towns for that purpose, simply because prairie names often ante-
dated village names. Prairie Ronde came before Schoolcraft; Gull
Prairie, before Richland; Scales' Prairie, before Middleville, and so
on. As a matter of fact, the term 'prairie' was incorporated into
many postoffice names in early Michigan. To the frontiersman of
and newcomer to Michigan, the prairie and its often vivid and pictur-
esque name served as a device to help him find his way about.
Names on the prairies helped provide geographic orientation. It
was not long, however, before prairie names were no longer needed.
Village names supplanted them in many cases. Place names of
cities, counties, and townships, and the crosshatch of highways,
named and numbered, have all but relieved prairie names of the
need for survival. They have been lost sight of, if not completely
forgotten. If you find any of them on a map, the map must be old.
Many of them never 'made' the maps. No contemporary map of
Michigan shows the prairies, and only rarely is a prairie name pre-
served, as in the case of Prairie Ronde, where the old French
caption now serves as a township name. The most recently published
Michigan guide (*Michigan, a Guide to the Wolverine State*, in the *Ame-
rican Guide Series* (New York, 1941)) fails to mention the prairies."

Butler lists fifty-eight Michigan prairie names (all apparently
obsolete), eighteen of them without comment — namely, *Little
Prairie Ronde*, another *Prairie Ronde* (see below), *Prairie Village*,
and *Charlotte, Cook's, Edwards', Garden, Gard's, Genesee, Girard,
Goodrich, Grand, Gull, Harris, Johnnycake, LaGrange, Looking
Glass*, and *Sand Prairies*.

The following group of names includes Butler's own remarks in
the parentheses: *Aldrich's Prairie* (probably named for Isaac
Aldrich); *Allen's Prairie* (for Captain Moses Allen); *Baldwin's
Prairie* (John Baldwin); *Beardsley's* or *Four-Mile Prairie* (Ezra
Beardsley; comprised 4410 acres); *Big Prairie* (in Wayne and
Monroe Counties); *Big Prairie* (in Newaygo County; because of
the effects of wind erosion, also called "'the desert' — a miniature
Sahara"); *Bronson's Prairie* (Jabe Bronson); *Bull's Prairie*
(Albert E. Bull); *Climax Prairie* ("'Well, this is the climax!'
announced one of the prairie pioneers of this section when he saw
for the first time the matchless beauty of the place. Tradition, at
least, would have it that way."); *Coldwater Prairie* (from *Chuck-
sew-ya-bish*, "coldwater"); *Coguaiack Prairie* (perhaps related to

Goguac Prairie, "pleasant water"); *Cocoosh Prairie* ("pork, hog");
Dry Prairie (occurring three times — in Calhoun and Branch
Counties; Kalamazoo County; and St. Joseph County); *Goguac
Prairie* ("pleasant water"); *Gourdneck Prairie* (from its shape on a
map; also called East Prairie); *Grandville Prairie* (according to an
1878 source, often called "the little prairie;" linked with Grand
Rapids. "To this day [1948], one of the leading streets of Grandville
is called Prairie Street."); *Indian Prairie* (i.e., a place where
Indians used to live); *Little Sherrar Prairie* (named for an old
settler); *McCamly Prairie* (a settler); *McKenny's Prairie* (a pio-
neer); *Marengo Prairie* (?named for a song ?); *Nottawa Prairie*
(Indian: "reported to mean the river of the Ottawa, or a prairie
along the river"); *Pokagon's Prairie* (a Potawatomi chief; the word
means "rib"— "At the time of his capture he was said to have been
wearing the rib of a slain Potawatomi."); *Portage Prairie* (said
to have been named for the portage from the St. Joseph to the
Kankakee); *Prairie Mouillee* ("wet meadow" — classified as a
prairie by a 1749 cartographer); *Prairie Ronde* (called by the
Indians *Wa-we-os-co-tang-sco-tah*, "round fire plain," where much
of Cooper's *The Oak Openings* is laid); *Scales' Prairie* (Robert
Scales, pioneer); *Shavehead's Prairie* (Potawatomi Chief Shave-
head); *Shook's Prairie* (Jacob Shook, pioneer); *Snow Prairie*
(pioneer Eleazer Snow); *Stearns Prairie* (John F. Stearns); *Sturgis'
Prairie* (John Sturgis, a "Buckeye emigrant"); *Terre Coupe
Prairie* (literally, "cut land," the significance of which is unknown);
Tolland's Prairie (William Tolland, a squatter); *White Pigeon
Prairie* (Potawatomi Chief *Wah-be-me-me*, "White Pigeon," in
Hiawatha); *Wilder's Prairie* (?for Oshea Wilder, a surveyor ?);
Wolf's Prairie (?from the prevalence of wolves in the region ?);
and *Young's Prairie* (Nathan Young, "a slyper").

Evidently there are no true generics of *prairie* in Michigan at
all at the present time. Nor are there very many false generics in
the state: on the maps I found only four (including one also men-
tioned by Butler) in which the early names are preserved — *Cooks
Prairie School* (Homer map), *Grand Prairie School* (Kalamazoo),
Prairie Ronde (township on Schoolcraft map) and *Youngs Prairie
Cemetery* (Vandalia).

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