

# Gualala

ROBERT L. OSWALT

IN THE PAST there has been a difference of opinion as to the origin of the name, Gualala, for a small coastal town in Mendocino County, California and for the river at whose mouth the town lies. One view is that the name is of Indian provenience, the other, that it is derived from "Walhalla," the abode of fallen Teutonic warriors.<sup>1</sup>

This note is added to the many already written on the subject because it contains further information on the name of the town in the language of the local Indians,<sup>2</sup> the Southwestern Pomo, who now occupy a small reservation near Stewart's Point, but who originally ranged along the coast from the mouth of the Gualala River southwards. They have a phrase in their language, /ʔahq<sup>h</sup>a wala:li/, "place where water goes down" /ʔahq<sup>h</sup>a "water," wa "go," la "down," :li "place where"/ which is the common term for the mouth of any river, creek or freshet. In the language of the Southwestern Pomo, when a phrase is used in a particularized meaning, it is customary for it to be compounded and subjected to apheresis — i. e., a syllable is lost, usually one beginning with a glottal stop. Thus, the above phrase gives a derived form, /q<sup>h</sup>awala:li/, which was the name of an Indian village which formerly stood at the site of the town of Gualala. The name is well-attested in several of the oldest Pomo myths. In less formal speech, the Indian village was, and the modern town still is, referred to by the more abbreviated form, (wala:li).

The Southern Pomo, who formerly lived east of the village (and perhaps even occupied its site) had a name identical with the latter form, as far as can be told from the record.<sup>3</sup> The Central Pomo, who lived north of the site, had a closely similar appellation, q<sup>h</sup>ahwala:li.

<sup>1</sup> For a discussion of the divergent opinions see: Erwin G. Gudde, *California Place Names* (University of California Press, 19).

<sup>2</sup> This was collected in the summer of 1958 incidental to linguistic fieldwork supported by the Survey of California Indian Languages, University of California, Berkeley.

<sup>3</sup> S. A. Barrett, *The Ethnogeography of the Pomo and Neighboring Indians*, p. 224 (University of California Press, 1908).

The present English name is pronounced by most of the local white inhabitants as [wəlálə], which is as close an anglicized rendition of the Indian pronunciation as is normally possible, except for the final vowel. It is conceivable that the official spelling with an initial letter *G* might be derived from the first syllable of the formal Indian name, q<sup>h</sup>a- (q<sup>h</sup> is an aspirated, voiceless, post-velar stop which is somewhat similar phonetically to the English voiced velar [g]). However I believe that the initial *G* is simply a mistaken hispanicization of the spelling. Gudde states that the first record of a spelling with *Gu* instead of *W* was in 1867.<sup>4</sup>

It might be supposed that the final schwa in English is due to a weakening of the unstressed vowel such as occurs in some dialectal pronunciations of "Missouri." Or perhaps it is due to associative interference from the many California toponyms ending in -a. But I believe the most likely source of the interference is the popular association with the name, "Walhalla."

Evidence for an earlier vowel more like the Indian is the name on a Spanish diseño, Arroyo Valale.

The very close fit in the pronunciation of the official American name with the Indian name seems too great to have any explanation other than that the English term is a borrowing from the Pomo.

Those who propose Walhalla as the sole or major source of the word, Gualala, should explain the loss of the secondary stress on the first syllable and the loss of /h/.

There is no doubt that the alternate designation, Walhalla, has long existed among the local white inhabitants. This may originally have been a folk etymology of the Pomo word which has continued with a life of its own apart from the official name. However, it is very unlikely to have been the parent of that official name.

The gist of the preceding discussion is that "Gualala" [wəlálə], is a blend, with the first six phonemes from Pomo /wala:li/ and the final phoneme from some other source, possibly the term, Walhalla.

University of California,

Berkeley

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<sup>4</sup> See Gudde.