

The Lash-horn Tree

CHARLES EDGAR GILLIAM

IN NATURE MAGAZINE, December, 1952, W. L. McAtee suggests that this colloquial term for the *Abies fraseri*, surviving in a relatively small area co-terminous with the mountain habitat of this species of pine, originated as 'lesion balsam'—*lesion*→*lashun*→*lash-horn*. He and his informants cite three dialectic terms from the area as analogies supporting the theory. In the last paragraph of his interesting and informative paper, Mr. McAtee invites criticism and suggestions about the origin of the term.

For seven years prior to the publication of this paper I had been conducting a similar quest through correspondents with negative results. This convinces me there has been a loss of cultural memory as to the original significance of this tree-name.

Often, where there has been such a loss of cultural memory, inquiries stir interest and result in associating the name with something retained in the cultural complex, but not necessarily related to the origin sought. Thus, unconsciously fictional origins are created. In time they become so well-grounded and integrated in the folk-complex as to appear culturally ancient and be classed literally as such. Though it is evident neither Mr. McAtee nor his informants intended any such thing, his theory in time may become so integrated and accepted.

Historical usages of terms, where available, always furnish more reliable solutions to problems of this kind than traditions. For, without records, no one can be certain when the acculturation of a specific trait, such as the traditional origin of a name, takes place. In this case remembered use of the term at the most goes back to 1800 and the earliest reported recording of *lash-horn tree* is around 1830.¹ Such considerations, in view of the patent loss of cultural memory, belatedly prompted me to investigate the common uses of *lash* and *horn* in close association prior to and immediately after

the seating of the folk area among the forebears of those who settled it. This was concluded with definitive results.

The only habitat of this species of pine is co-terminous with the relatively isolated South Carolina, North Carolina, Virginia and Tennessee mountains, first settled in the last half of the 17th and first half of the 18th centuries by English, Scotch and Palatine Germans.² They came down the valleys from the north, up them from the south and overland through tidewater and piedmont. Many of the latter were second and third generation colonials, who brought late 16th and early 17th century old world culture modified by colonial experiences with them. Elizabethan English predominated the linguistics brought in and still does to a large extent.

For upwards of two centuries these peoples were largely isolated from the many cultural influences that swept around them to create modern America. In adapting their several original cultures to their environment they created a distinct mountain culture, retaining with only slight changes many original traits. Until around 1900 illiteracy was high among them. But they have always been noted for their native intelligence and incidence of apt—and often poetic—similies in their every day speech.

Prior to and at the time the area was settled, in England, Scotland and Germany a new hair style was developed under the Italian influence, where in formal attire more lady's hair had long been visible than in the rest of Europe. Variations of this new style became popular at all social levels around the end of the 16th century. Characteristic of them were two 'horns' of hair twisted so as to stand up like horns over each eye. No lace is shown binding either. But some similar horns of hair had lace loosely about them. In common speech and literature by 1600 such hair-does were described as lace horns of hair, or in terms of lace and lash and horn closely associated.³

Perhaps the most common connotation of *lash* has always been 'to tie or lace.' Not only did *horn* and *lash* have the same or closely similar forms in English, Scotch and Palatine German around 1600, but the pronunciations in all three languages were so close as to assure anyone speaking only one of the three understanding what any other meant by *lash* and *horn*. The combination of these two terms for the more common English use of *lace* and *horn* is what

one would expect to result from integration of linguistic traits in the isolated American area discussed.⁴

Thus, *lash-horn tree* appears as an apt and readily understood simile for 'a mountain tree, like a high-born lady with lace horns of hair.' No one, who has seen the *Abies fraseri* silhouetted against the sky, can doubt the validity of such a simile. It is a name, that all familiar with the appearance of such hair-does would instantly understand and appreciate, whether English, Scotch or German.

Lace horns of hair—save highly specialized ones still worn as parts of native costumes on special occasions—more or less completely disappeared from the Old World by 1750. They were never suited for life in a wild mountain area. The inference is they ceased to be affected here earlier. No doubt these mountain folk soon forgot all about such hair-does and with them the original significance of the name *lash-horn tree* was lost.

NOTES

¹ One of my correspondents reports seeing *lash-horn tree* (sic) in a letter written by W. C. Rives in the 1830's. Since he was not able to give specific details it is reported as hearsay possible of verification.

² Commonly called *Pennsylvania Dutch*.

³ *Purchase Pilgrimage* (1614) 536; *Moryson, Itin.* iii, 172. *The Oxford Dictionary*: lash and horn.

⁴ A study of pictures and text in *Western European Culture I*, Iris Brooke, gives many variations of what might be *horns of hair* from the 15th century down to the 18th. The earlier ones were highly stylized—some completely wound in cloth. Though the term *lace-horn hair* does not appear in text, c. 1600–1700, p. 191, Fig. 95, shows two styles of hair-does each with two peaks of hair resembling horns. In neither does lace appear bound around them. One head has no lace at all; the other has lace extending behind horns over head backward almost to shoulders. These in my judgment represent the type of lace-horn hair from which this name is derived.



I like the native names, as Parramatta,
And Illawarra, and Woolloomooloo,
Nandowra, Woogarora, Bulkomatta,
Tomah, Toongabbie, Mittagong, Meroo;
Buckobble, Cumleroy, and Coolangatta,
The Warragumby, Bargo, Burradoo;
Cookbundoon, Carrabaiga, Wingecarribee,
The Wollondilly, Yurumbon, Bungarribee.

—J. D. Lang (1824)