

Onomastic Amelioration in California Place Names

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THE CHANGES that have evolved in the place names of the State of California as a whole would occupy a volume. My intent is merely to give, in a particular region and a particular era, a sampling of the kind of onomastic phenomenon that has probably occurred throughout the whole country during the last century.

The attempt to better themselves is a widely recognized attribute of Americans, and this characteristic, while perhaps best known in its economic aspect, persists in many phases of American life. Coue's famous dictum of "Every day in every way I'm getting better and better" is of course the classic expression of an American quality that, when examined in the area of onomastics, documents and sustains the assertion that in "every way" place names get better and better, at least in the subjective view of the eyes of those immediately concerned.

The geographic limits to which this paper has been restricted make it necessary to draw the illustrative examples mostly from the region around the American River, east of Sacramento, primarily El Dorado and Placer counties, or what is termed the "Mother Lode" country, extending from the middle fork of the American River south to a point near Mariposa on a strip roughly two miles wide.

The original motivation in attributing names to places frequently was an attempt to convey some sense of 1) the geographical features peculiar to an area, as in Bald Hill, White Rock, Stoney Bar, 2) to describe the dominant activity performed in the earliest days, as in Logtown, or 3) to perpetuate the memory of a person, as in Georgetown¹ or a place, as in *African Bar*.

¹ Not King George but Geo. Phipps, first settler, or Geo. Ehercnraft. Cf. Elizabeth Enochs, *A Study of Place Names in the American River Drainage System, 1848-1854* (unpublished thesis, Sacramento State College), p. 30.

The honesty of this method of bestowing a name on a place is commendable; often the result is picturesque and the origin and derivation usually are clear; even the casual observer can gain some insight into the attitudes and mores of people who live in Piety Hill, Poor Man's Creek or Moonlight Flat. But when these original place names are changed, whatever the reason, this clarity of understanding, this ease of onomastic investigation, is interrupted and an important part of our history clouded. Particularly is this so when the motivation for change is an attempt to "better" the original place name which after a time has gathered unfavorable connotations.

Of course, there are some changes in place names which cannot fall into the category of intentional amelioration. Long Valley, for example, which originally described the dimensions of the place, was changed to Greenwood Valley in honor of John Greenwood, who opened a trading post there in 1849.² Georgia Flat was named for a group of miners from Georgia; in 1849 a large mountain slide occurred and the name since then has been Georgia Slide.

Then, too, some changes were made in place names, not so much to improve the connotations, as to describe more accurately either the whereabouts, or the people, or to avoid confusion. In 1849 at Alder Grove the miners had a party and dinner and "by acclamation and a bottle of whiskey" decided that since most of them were from Illinois, the place should be called Illinoistown.³

Pino, which originally owed its name to an attempt to distinguish it from nearby Pine Grove, was changed, in 1864, to Loomis, because both the railroad and the post office found Pino confused with Reno. The person so honored was the railroad agent, postmaster, and, in his spare time, saloon keeper. Another example of the attempt to avoid confusion is the change of Mohr Station to Bethany because of a nearby town called Moore.

However, frequently we have cases in which the original place name is colorful and revealing, but in some way offends the sensibilities of later settlers and so suffers a sea change into something that is thought to be better. For example, Slabtown of the 1860's became Cambria, when the town became more self-conscious. A

² Herman Jerrett, *California's El Dorado* (Sacramento: Jo Anderson, 1916), p. 84.

³ *Weekly Placer Herald*, Auburn, California, Sept. 18, 1952.

Welshman, Llewellyn, wanted to use this Roman name of his native land, and hung a sign outside his shop, "Cambria Carpenter Shop"; Cambria eased out Slabtown.

In 1851 Charles and Joseph Dornback settled in Placer County and their settlement was called Dutch Charlie's Flat, then Dutch Flat, until the 1870's when an attempt was made to change this to German Level. While this fortunately proved unsuccessful, we do now have Round Mountain instead of Hogback Mountain⁴; the euphemistic Spanish Pulga instead of Flea Valley,⁵ and Freedom instead of Whiskey Hill,⁶ after a bartender hung the American flag and a sign "Flag of Freedom" outside the saloon. We have Glencoe where once we had a Mosquito Gulch and Jackson where once was Bottileas, named for the many bottles dumped by the spring by miners.

Yet, we have more here than simply the desire for improvement. Sometimes the desire is to strike out unfavorable connotations that have developed through sudden changes in national temper. The Civil War, for example, exerted influence even on such a relatively removed area as California.⁷ Bridgeport, named for a town in Connecticut, was changed to Cordelia by Southern sympathizers. Gudde says the post office insisted on a less common name in 1869, and Capt. Waterman's wife's name was chosen.⁸

When the Confederate raider "Alabama" sank the Union ship "Hatteras" in 1863, Southern sympathizers named the range of hills north of Owens Lake the Alabama Hills. Then when the Union man of war "Kearsarge" destroyed the "Alabama" off the coast of France in 1864, Thomas May and his partners called their mining claim "Kearsarge." The Union ship had been named for Mt. Kearsarge in New Hampshire, so we find a mountain in California named after the mining camp named after a ship named after a mountain.⁹ (It is worth pointing out that four place names of Kaiser managed to survive both World Wars unchanged.) Sometimes the change was made at the personal behest of one prominent person

⁴ Erwin E. Gudde, *California Place Names* (Berkeley: University of California, 1960), p. 134.

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 108.

⁷ See also the reference on Lake Tahoe.

⁸ Gudde, *op. cit.*, p. 153.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 16.

who found the original place name objectionable. One town lost its bite of originality and become Ione because, as one version has it, a New England fiancée refused to come West to live in a town called Bedbug. Wood's Dry Diggins, known first as Rich Dry Diggings, then North Fork Dry Diggings, a center of great mining activity on the North Fork of the American River, became Auburn after Stevenson's New York Regiment had come through the region and camped there; some of his men were from Auburn, New York.

Another Dry Diggins, not far away, became Ravine City, because of its location in a narrow gorge. Then in 1849, two Frenchmen and a Spaniard committed a robbery in the camp; they were tried, found guilty and hanged to the limb of an oak tree; the town began to be referred to as "Old Hang Town" and this name sticks to the present day in the language of many people, although officially when it was incorporated into a city in 1853 it became Placerville.

One small town was originally named Spanish Corral but in 1859 it was changed to Phir, supposed to be the land of Biblical reference, from which came the gold for Solomon's Temple.

The rare presence of Negroes in the mining country probably accounted for the designation of Negro Hill to a mining camp that grew up in 1849; the name was soon changed to Granite City and then in 1855 was changed again to Folsom, for Capt. J. I. Folsom, who aided in the establishment of the first railroad in the state from Sacramento to Folsom. The appellation "Granite City" with its connotations of grandeur foreshadows what was to become the dominant motivation in place names of a later day, i.e., the attempt to lend a halo of "high-style" and "culture" to mass housing areas which in the most obvious aspects look depressingly similar and unappealing. These newly created slums, with "your built-ins" and sliding glass doors, have such names as "Foothill Farms," "College Greens" and "Swanston Estates" in an attempt to disguise the essential tract nature. While this trend is nationwide and we probably have Rolling Hill Acres in the flat lands of Nebraska, still the tendency is particularly noticeable because of the rapid growth of population in California.

This desire for amelioration extends over the years. A town called originally Clear Creek Hot Springs was changed to Hobo Hot Springs in the early 1900's after several compressor crews had camped there. In 1934 this became official as the name of the post

office. Then came the desire of public spirited citizens to improve this and it became in 1947 Miracle Hot Springs.

It should be noted that the picture is not all black. Several times changes were suggested or attempted and the original place name had enough virility to drive off the invader; e.g., John Muir, the famous naturalist, tried to change Bullfrog Lake in Kings Canyon to *Bryanthus* but local custom prevailed, even after planting with trout did away with the bullfrogs.

In another variant, the name of Fort Dick was changed by the four Bertsch brothers to Newburg, in 1888, but in 1896, when the post office was established, the older name was revived. A similar process was at work for Lake Tahoe. The lake was discovered by Fremont in 1844 and on some of the maps in early editions of his report the name is Mountain Lake. Later, Fremont named it Lake Bonpland for the French botanist who had accompanied Humboldt on his journey to South America. This name might have stuck, had not friends of John Bigler, governor of California from 1852 to 1856, succeeded in naming it Lake Bigler by legislative act. One version has it that during the Civil War Unionists objected to this name because Bigler was an outspoken secessionist, and a movement was started to restore the Washoe Indian name understood to be Tahoe, meaning "big water"; this was the name on Bancroft's map of the Pacific states in 1862.

But an act of the Democratic legislature in February, 1870, declared "that the lake shall be known as Lake Bigler and the same is hereby declared to be the official name of said lake . . ." This "official" name was so forgotten that most Californians heard it for the first time when in 1945 the legislature declared that the lake "designated as Lake Bigler by Chapter 58 of Statutes of 1869-70 is hereby designated and shall be known as Lake Tahoe" (Statutes 1945, p. 2777).

Another resurrection, although perhaps with a different motivation, is seen in Fiddletown, in Amador County. A large number of miners from Missouri had brought their fiddles with them. One miner would fiddle while his partner worked their claim. In 1878, the name was changed to Oleta, but on July 1, 1932, the old name was restored. The reason given by informants in the area is that the people believed the original name might attract more tourists than the less colorful Oleta.

So in some isolated cases the original place name has survived, despite the efforts of purists and politicians. We gain perhaps some information about the kind of people who have preceded us, but we lose much in the way of folklore and history, when, as is so often the case, the original name has been improved upon.

Thus we see the landscape of America constantly undergoing a sea change and names like Gladstone Acres and Sierra Oaks Vista become part of our children's heritage instead of such names as Moonlight Flat, Jackass Gulch, Piety Hill, Shirt-Tail Canyon, Greenhorn Bar, Red Dog, Dead Horse, Dirty Bar and Poor Man's Creek.

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| <i>Los Angeles Free Press</i> (Los Angeles) | <i>Open City</i> (Los Angeles) |
| <i>Peace Brain</i> (Chicago) | <i>The Rag</i> (Austin) |
| <i>Provo</i> (Los Angeles) | <i>Sanity</i> (Montreal) |
| <i>Guerilla</i> (Detroit) | <i>The Illustrated Paper</i>
(Mendocino, California) |
| <i>San Francisco Oracle</i> (San Francisco) | <i>Oberlin Other</i> (Oberlin, Ohio) |
| <i>Underground</i> (Arlington, Virginia) | <i>Mon Cul</i> (Seattle) |
| <i>Canadian Free Press</i> (Ottawa) | <i>Art and Artists</i> (London) |
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| <i>Peace News</i> (London) | <i>Crocodile</i> (Gainesville, Florida) |
| <i>The Fifth Estate</i> (Detroit) | <i>Riptide</i> (Los Angeles) |
| <i>The East Village Other</i> (New York) | <i>Punch</i> (Worcester, Massachusetts) |
| <i>Oracle of Southern California</i>
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| <i>The Berkeley Barb</i> (Berkeley) | <i>The Eagle</i> (Washington, D.C.) |
| <i>Modern Utopian</i>
(Medford, Massachusetts) | <i>WIN</i> (New York) |
| <i>The Promethean</i>
(Eggertsville, New York) | <i>The Paper</i> (East Lansing) |
| | <i>The International Times</i> (London) |

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