

Geographical Names of Amerindian Origin in Canada

(concluded from September, 1967 issue)

J. A. RAYBURN

Part II

Ontario

In Ontario south of the Canadian Shield the dominant languages when the Europeans arrived were Iroquoian. Throughout the rest of the province the languages were the related Ojibway, Cree and Algonkin. Much less research on the names of Indian origin has been done in Ontario than in Quebec and the Maritime Provinces, so that the origins of many of the prominent names are in doubt. For example, Toronto has been assigned four meanings, and two others might be possible. It may mean "place of meeting" or "the populous region" both in reference to the home area of the Hurons between Lake Simcoe and Georgian Bay. Lake Simcoe was once called Lac Taronto, and "Taronto" was applied to various adjacent lakes and rivers, even the Humber River, which enters Lake Ontario at Toronto. It is also said that the name is derived from Mohawk *deondo*, "trees in water." Another suggestion is Huron *kanitareonto*, "a bay in the lake." Sagard wrote in 1636 about *otoronton*, "a vegetable oil,"⁸ and a Huron chief of the same period was *Taratouan* (1577?–1637).

The name of the province is derived from Lake Ontario; it is generally agreed that the name, derived from Mohawk *kanyatariiya*, means "handsome lake." Lake Erie is named for the nation of Indians whose name means "people of the panther." The Niagara River joins the two lakes, and is said to be Mohawk "bisected bottomland," although other references give "thundering water," which may only be folk etymology.

In southwestern Ontario, only two of the major rivers have Indian names: Saugeen River, Ojib. "river mouth" (cf. R. Saguenay

⁸ Sagard, Gabriel, *Histoire du Canada et Voyages*, pt. 3 (originally published in Paris, 1636), Arras, H. Schoutheer, 1866, p. 810.

in Quebec), and Nottawasaga River, Ojib. "Mohawk outlet," possibly in reference to a massacre at the river's mouth. In central and eastern Ontario are the following physical features: Lake Scugog, "shallow lake"; Kawartha Lakes, "bright waters"; Lake Couchiching, "lake of the fish weirs"; Bay of Quinte, "field" or "the whole water"; Catarauqui River, "rock rising out of the water"; Gananoque River, "the way to the flint at the mountain" (the Mohawks called themselves *Kaniengehaga*, "people of the place of the flint"); and Opinicon Lake, "place of potatoes."⁹

In the Shield south of Lake Nipissing, "at the little water," are several hydrographic features with Indian names. Among them are Muskoka Lakes, designated for a chief whose name meant "red ground" or "not easily turned back in day of battle"; Magnetawan River, "long open channel"; Kashagawigamog Lake, "long and narrow"; Mazinaw Lake, "painted"; Mississippi River, "big river"; Madawaska River, poss. "around the river forks"; Petawawa River, "a noise is heard far away"; Kamanisseg Lake, "lake of many islands"; Kawagama Lake, "lake that seems to return"; Opeongo Lake, origin unknown, poss. Ojib. *opwaganassin*, "pipestone"; Washigomog Lake, "bright lake"; Wahwashkesh Lake, "deer"; and Ahmic Lake, "beaver."

In northeastern Ontario are Lake Timagami, "deep lake" (cf. Lac Témiscamingue noted in Quebec, which is approved as Lake Timiskaming in Ontario); Wanapitei Lake, "a row of teeth in semi-circular shape"; Onaping Lake, "vermillion" or "gooseberries"; Biskotasi Lake, "at the little prairie"; Mississagi River, "at the outlets"; Lake Abitibi, "halfway water"; Mattagami River, "lake at river forks"; Kapuskasing River, "branch" of the Mattagami River; Opasatika River, "surrounded by poplar"; Missinaibi Lake, "pictures in the water"; Mattawitchewan River, "flowing quickly at the forks"; Mattawishkwia River, poss. "broad river at the forks"; and Wabatongushi Lake, poss. "enclosed by sand and rushes."

Adjacent to and north of Lake Superior are Batchawana Bay, poss. "flowing at the narrows"; Michipicoten Bay, poss. "place of bold promontories"; Kabinakagami River, poss. "the lake is

⁹ For the abbreviations which Mr. Rayburn uses in referring to the various Amerindian languages, readers may consult Part I of his article, *Names*, 15: 3 (1967), 203 [Ed. note].

obstructed"; Nagagami River, "the lake is obstructed"; Lake Nipigon, "deep clear water"; Ogoki River, "swift river"; Onaman Lake, "vermilion"; and Kagianagami Lake, poss. "clear lake."

North of the Albany River are Kapiskau River, "obstructed"; Atikameg River, "whitefish"; Attawapiskat River, poss. "at the bottom of rocks"; Ekwan River, poss. "a river far up the coast"; Winisk River, "groundhog"; Shamattawa River, poss. "big branch"; Shibogama Lake, "lake of channels" (cf. Shabogama Lake in Labrador); and Wunnimmin Lake, "vermilion" (cf. Onaman Lake above).

West of Lake Superior and Lake Nipigon are Kaministikwia River, "where there are islands in the river" or "river that runs far out"; Kakabeka Falls, "steep rock where water falls straight down"; Quetico Lake, poss. "marked trail," in reference to the Dawson Trail; Muskeg Lake, "marsh"; Mameigwess Lake, poss. "inlet down river"; Dinorwic Lake, "white feather"; Minnitaki Lake, Sioux, "dirty water"; Wabigoon River, "waterlily"; and Pakwash Lake, "shallow."

Most of Ontario's counties and townships have names that commemorate people and places in Britain. Some of the names of townships are derived from Indian languages, with some of these honoring chiefs who surrendered their lands in various treaties. West of Toronto are the following townships: Etobicoke (now a municipal borough), poss. "forest of alder trees"; Chinguacousy, named for Shinguacose, a chief whose name means "small pine tree"; Nassagaweya, "river with two outlets"; Esquesing, "that which lies at the end"; and Eramosa, poss. "dead dog." Adjacent to Brantford the League of the Six Nations has been honored with five of its names appended to townships: Cayuga, Seneca, Oneida, Onondaga, and Tuscarora. Near Lake Simcoe are Tecumseth, poss. named for a vessel sunk at Penetanguishene in 1819 and which itself was likely named for Chief Tecumseh (1768-1813), killed at the Battle of Moraviantown near Chatham; Tosorontio, "beautiful mountain"; Medonte, "portage"; and Matchedash, "marshy land." In central and eastern Ontario are Otonabee "river mouth"; Tyendinaga, after Joseph Brant's Mohawk name, Thayendanagea, meaning "tied together"; Kennebec, poss. after Kinaybicoinini, a chief who signed a treaty in 1815, or from the name in Maine, which means either "serpent" or "long river"; Matawatchan, poss. "around the

forks"; and Petawawa, "the sound is coming." On Manitoulin Island, "home of the spirits," are Tehkummah and Assiginack, both named for chiefs who signed treaties, and adjacent to Sault Ste. Marie are Awenge, "in the water"; Tarentorus, "tree splitter"; and Awares, "thunder."

Populated places in Ontario with names derived from Indian languages are Chippawa, a corrupted form of Ojibway, which means "to roast till puckered up"; Oshawa, "ferry across"; Napanee, said to be from a word for flour and to refer to the grist mill established in 1786; Penetanguishene, "rolling or shining sand"; Coboconk, "a smooth rock where water falls straight down" (cf. Kakabeka Falls); Bobcaygeon, "a narrow place between rocks where the water comes through"; Waubaushene, "the place of the meeting of rocks"; Deseronto, after Captain John Deserontyou, a Mohawk chief whose name means "the lightning has struck"; Washago, "bay shore"; Powassan, poss. "sun breaking through the clouds"; Mattawa, "river forks"; Thessalon, "point of land jutting into a lake"; Gogama, poss. "leaping fish"; Gowganda, "porcupines' home"; Matachewan, poss. "current at the forks"; Manitouwadge, poss. "the mountain of the spirit"; Wawa, "wild goose"; Nakina, "first place"; Moosonee, "moose"; Atikokan, "shin bone of a deer"; Keewatin, "north wind"; and Minaki, "blueberry ground."

Manitoba

The name of the province of Manitoba is derived from the Cree and Ojibway words meaning "narrows of the spirit," in reference to waves dashing pebbles on the beach at The Narrows of Lake Manitoba. Another origin frequently found in literature is the Assiniboine *minitobow*, "lake of the prairie." Lake Winnipeg, the dominant physical feature of Manitoba, derives its name from Cree, "body of muddy water," and is also Cree for "sea." The Winnipeg River drains the Lake of the Woods into Lake Winnipeg, and Canada's fourth largest city, Winnipeg, is at the forks of the Red River and the Assiniboine River.

The Assiniboine River derives its name from the Assiniboine Indians whose name means "those who cook by placing hot stones in water." Assiniboia is a rural municipality on the west side of Winnipeg. Another major river in Manitoba, which crosses into

North Dakota, is the Pembina River, from Cree *nepemenah*, "high bush cranberry." Other rivers flowing into Lake Winnipeg are Wanipigow River, "hole"; Manigotagan River, "bad throat river"; Muskatawa River, "black"; and Gunisao River, "jackfish." In northern Manitoba are Minago River, "spruce tree" (cf. Menihék Lakes in Labrador); and Odei River, "heart." Large lakes in Manitoba with names derived from Cree are Athapapuskow Lake, "rock on both sides"; Sisipuk Lake, "ducks"; Atikameg Lake, "whitefish"; Wekusko Lake, "herb or sweetgrass"; (a community on the east shore of the lake is called Herb Lake); Kississing Lake, "cold"; Sipiwesk Lake, "lake of channels" or "light through the trees"; Utik Lake, "deer"; and Waskaiowaka Lake, poss. "it is curved around."

Populated places in Manitoba with names that are of Indian origin, mostly Cree and Ojibway, are Neepawa, "abundance"; Manitou, "spirit"; Minnedosa, Sioux "rapid water" (the first post-master's wife was Minnie, and he named a daughter Minnedosa); Waskada, "the best of everything"; Minitonas, "house of little god," applied to the adjoining hill; The Pas, Cree *opasquaow*, "narrows between wooded banks" (the name was adapted by the French to Fort du Pas, meaning "fort of the narrows" in their own language); Wasagaming, "clear water"; Kinisota, "two"; Wawanesa, poss. "wild goose nest"; Mackinak, "turtle"; and Napinka, "equal to two."

Saskatchewan

The province of Saskatchewan derives its name from Cree *Kesiskahjewun*, "rapid current." Most of the southern part of Alberta and Saskatchewan is drained by the Saskatchewan River and its main tributaries, North Saskatchewan River and South Saskatchewan River.

There are a few minor streams in the province with Indian names such as Aitkow Creek, "river that bends," Wascana Creek, "pile of bones," and Notukeu Creek, "battle." Prominent terrain features are Pasquia Hills, "narrows between wooded banks," and Wapawekka Hills, "white sand."

Saskatoon, a city of approximately 100,000 people, derives its name from Cree *misaskwutominu*, "saskatoon berries." Other places

in the province are Assiniboia, named for the District of Assiniboia, which existed from 1882 to 1905 (cf. Assiniboine River in Manitoba); Moosomin, "moose berry"; Nokomis, after Hiawatha's grandmother in Longfellow's poem, *Hiawatha*; Kinistino, Ojib. "Cree"; Kamsack, "big fellow"; Tugaske, "good land"; Nipawin, "the place where one waits"; Wakaw, "it is curved"; and Katepwa Beach, "who calls" (the river here is the Qu'Appelle River).

Alberta

A prominent hydrographic feature of Alberta is the Athabasca River, which means "where there are reeds" in Cree. It flows into Lake Athabasca. The District of Athabaska existed from 1882 to 1895. Athabasca is the name of a town in northern Alberta.

Pembina River, "high bush cranberry," is a tributary of Athabasca River (cf. Pembina River in Manitoba). Some of the tributaries of Peace River are Mikkwa River, "red," Wabiskaw River, "white," and Notikewin River, "battle." Wapiti River, "white rump," in reference to the elk known as the Wapiti, is a branch of Smoky River.

Places in Alberta with Indian names are Wetaskiwin, Cree "peace hills," where the Cree and Blackfoot made peace, 1867; Okotoks, Blft. "stony crossing"; Ponoka, Blft. "elk"; Menaik, Cree "spruce tree" (cf. Menihek Lakes in Labrador); Etzikom, Blft. "the valley"; Waskatenau, Cree "elbow-shaped hollow in a hill"; Fort Chipewyan, Cree "pointed skins," in reference to the cut of the shirts of the Chipewyan Indians; and Fort Saskatchewan.

British Columbia

At the time of contact with Europeans one-third, or approximately 70,000, of the Amerindians in what is now Canada lived in the valleys of the Cordillera and along the Pacific coast. There were seven different languages with various dialects of these in the area of present British Columbia. Many Indian names occur throughout British Columbia, but very little research has been done to determine origins. Even the names of many of the tribes have meanings unknown to anthropologists and toponymists.

The province is dominated by the Cordilleran ranges and plateaus, and the names of many of them are derived from adjacent rivers and places. The Kootenay Ranges receive their name from Kootenay

River¹⁰ and Kootenay Lake, which are named for the Kutenai Indians, a distinct linguistic group whose name possibly means "mountain people." The city of Kamloops, Sal. "point between the rivers," gives its name to the Kamloops Plateau. The town of Lillooet, named for a Salish tribe whose name means "wild onions," is at the north end of the Lillooet Range. The Okanagan Plateau is adjacent to the Okanagan River¹¹ and Okanagan Lake, named for a Salish tribe; the meaning of Okanagan is unknown. The Nechako Plateau is drained by the Nechako River, poss. Car. "river of the big island." The Chilcotin River, named for an Athapaskan tribe whose name means "inhabitants of young man's river," rises in the Chilcotin Highlands. The Skeena River, which is derived from *Tsimshian*, a nation whose name may mean "out of the clouds" in reference to the source of the river, rises in the Skeena Mountains. The Nass Basin is drained by the Nass River, named for the *Niska*, a Tsimshian tribe. The Stikine Plateau is the source of the Stikine River, poss. Tahl. "great river." The Omineca River, poss. Car. "sluggish river," rises in the Omineca Mountains. The Cassiar Mountains are adjacent to Cassiar River, a name corrupted from *Nahanni kasha*, the Indian designation of McDame Creek.

Among the lakes of British Columbia are Chilko Lake, Chil. "young man's river"; Eutsuk Lake and Ootsa Lake, poss. both Carr. or Sek. "the furthest down there"; Shuswap Lake, after the largest Salish tribe, which may mean "without shirts and trousers"; Takla Lake, Car. "bottom of the lake"; Atlin Lake, Tag. "lake of storms"; and Tagish Lake, after the Tlinkit tribe of that name.

Other rivers in British Columbia that have names derived from Indians languages are Coquihalla River, poss. Sal. "greedy or hungry waters"; Illecillewaet River, poss. Sal. "swift river"; Similkameen River, poss. Sal. "swimming river"; and Kispiox River, Tsim. "place of ancestor *Piyeoux*."

Among the large number of populated places on Vancouver Island with Indian names are Nanaimo, after a Salish tribe, *Snanaimux*; Lake Cowichan, after a Salish group of tribes whose name is said to mean "people" or "warm backs"; Esquimalt, Sal. "place of gradual slope" or "place for gathering camas (hyacinths)"; and Comox, a Salish group whose name may mean "abundance." In

^{10, 11} In the United States these names are spelled Kootenai River and Okanogan River.

the Lower Mainland region are Squamish, after a Salish tribe, the meaning of the name poss. being "inland people"; Chilliwack, after a Salish tribe whose name means "valley of many waters"; Port Coquitlam, after a Salish tribe whose name means "small red salmon"; Sechelt, after a Salish tribe whose name means "step over"; and Cultus Lake, Chin. "worthless." In the interior of the province are Kelowna, Sal. "grizzly bear"; Penticton, poss. Sal. "ever" or "forever"; Keremeos, Sal. "wind channel in the mountains" or "beautiful stream crossing the flats"; Osoyoos, Sal. "where two streams come together"; and Sicamous, Sal. "in the middle" or fishing place." North of Vancouver are Kitimat, after a division of a Kwakiutl tribe whose names means "people of the snow"; Metlakatla, Tsim. "passage between two bodies of water"; Kitwanga, after a Tsimshian tribe whose name means "people of the place of plenty of rabbits"; and Skidegate, after a Haida tribe whose name means "red paint stone."

Yukon Territory

The names Yukon Territory and Yukon River are derived from the Kutchin "the greatest of great rivers." The Klondike River was made famous when gold in large quantities was discovered in 1896; the name is derived from *thron duick*, which may mean "salmon river" or "deer river." The Kluane Ranges are adjacent to Kluane Lake and Kluane River, said to mean "whitefish" in a coastal language. The Teslin Plateau adjoins Teslin Lake and Teslin River, which is Tagish for "river."

Northwest Territories

Names in the Northwest Territories derived from Amerindian languages are principally Chipewyan, an Athapaskan tribe, and Eskimo.

Adjacent to the Mackenzie Delta are Aklavik, Esk. "place of the brown bear," Inuvik, an Eskimo word meaning "place of man," which was introduced in 1958 as the name of a new administrative center near Aklavik; and Tuktoyaktuk, Esk. "reindeer that look like caribou." Northeast of Great Bear Lake is Contwoyto Lake, poss. Chip. "rum lake," where Samuel Hearne gave his guides some rum. West of the Mackenzie River are Carcajou River, Mont.

“wolverine”; Dahadinni River, after a Nahanni band whose name means “people in the air”; and South Nahanni River, named for the Athapaskan tribe whose name means “people over there far away.” Flowing into Great Slave Lake is the Taltson River, from a contraction of the name of the Yellowknife Indians, *Tatsanottine*, which means “people of the scum of water,” scum being a figurative expression for copper.

In the southern part of the District of Keewatin, “north wind,” are the following names said to be derived from Chipewyan: Nuel-tin Lake, “sleeping island lake”; Kasba Lake, “small ptarmigan”; Wholdaia Lake, “jackfish”; Dubawnt Lake, “round”; Yathkyed Lake, “white snow”; Thelon River and Thlewiaza River, both poss. “whitefish”; Kazan River, “ptarmigan”; Tha-anne River, “rocky bank”; South Henik Lake and North Henik Lake, poss. contractions of *henningyouyouak*, “the large lake that lies over to one side”; and Ennadai Lake, poss. “the detected ambush.”

The only prominent names in the Arctic Archipelago that are of Eskimo origin are in the area of Baffin Island. Among these are Koukdjuak River, poss. “big river” (cf. R. Koksoak in Quebec); Nettilling Lake, “seal”; Isortoq Fiord, “muddy banks”; Inugsuin Fiord, “cairns”; and Igloolik, “there are some houses.”

CONCLUSION

The probable meanings of 450 discrete geographical names are given in this paper, each of which has one or more associative names with the same specific term. *Muskoka*, for example, occurs in at least 18 approved names and *Kootenay* in at least 14 names. Thus the derivations noted apply to thousands of geographical names in Canada. Moreover, the origins of prominent names only are discussed. West of Cobalt, Ont., in a 400 sq. mi. area (41 P/SE map sheet) 23 names of Indian origin are approved for use on maps; the origins of only two of these are discussed in this paper.

This résumé of Amerindian names in Canada indicates that the French were probably more receptive to native nomenclature before Canada became British in 1763 in that there would appear to be a proportionately larger number of Indian names in those areas of eastern Canada (e.g., Quebec, Maritime Provinces) settled by the French than in areas occupied by other cultural groups. There also

appears to be a relatively larger number of native names in the sparsely settled areas of Canada such as the Canadian Shield where the Amerindian population is proportionately more numerous. The small number of major features with Amerindian names in Alberta, Saskatchewan, and the northern territories possibly reflects the attitudes of administrators and explorers toward native nomenclature, particularly during the latter half of the nineteenth century, when Indians names were regarded frequently as unsuitable or vulgar.

Most of the Amerindian names in Canada are derived from one of the languages of the Algonkian linguistic group. The distribution of this group in the country is best illustrated by three names in widely separated areas with the similar meaning of "spruce tree": Menihek Lakes in Labrador, Minago Lake in Manitoba and Menaik in Alberta. It is also in these languages, principally Micmac and Cree, where the most research has been done on names and where the best dictionaries exist for toponymic analysis. A lexicon of the words in these Algonkian languages used to describe flora, fauna and landscape features would be an asset in understanding names derived from them.

The contributions of the other language groups in Canada have been significant, particularly Iroquoian in southern Ontario, Athapaskan in the northern territories, Eskimo along the Arctic littoral and the several languages in British Columbia. The understanding of these languages is imperfect and dictionaries are inadequate, so that the analysis of geographical names derived from them is hampered. Much of the research in these languages remains in manuscript form, such as Marius Barbeau's analysis of Huron-Wyandot words.

The varied Amerindian languages have given Canadian toponymy an especial distinctiveness and rustic beauty. Increased knowledge of these languages and an appreciation of the nomenclature derived from them are elements in the understanding of Canadian history and geography.