

# They Call It Egypt

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**T**HE NICKNAME "EGYPT," for the southern portion of the state of Illinois, is now well over 100 years old. It has historical, geographical, and agricultural significance. Moreover, the soubriquet has caught the imagination of the public both inside the state and beyond its borders. Heard in everyday conversation locally and frequently seen in print, the nickname as an oddity bids fair to rival that of other states. The term "Egypt" has firmly entrenched itself in the regional idiom and is responsible for having added copiously to the ever-growing body of Illinoisiana.

Despite the popularity of the nickname, it is doubtful whether the majority of persons living in southern Illinois can explain its origin. To those who have had no contacts with the area, the term is a seeming misnomer. Newcomers to the section, travelers or otherwise, continually bombard those they meet with the query, "Why do you call it *Egypt*?" East and West, the reaction is the same. In a recent letter to the writer a Yorker posed the fantastic question, "Do Egyptians *really* live in southern Illinois?" To a Vancouver oil-station attendant, the sign "Egypt, Illinois" on an incoming car was puzzling. He went straight home to consult an atlas, but later complained he couldn't find any town in Illinois by that name.

This "name on the land" represents an area that has been compared in shape to an inverted triangle, its peak resting at Illinois' tip-city, Cairo, and its base suggested by an imaginary line drawn from Vincennes, Indiana, to East St. Louis, Illinois. This boundary as an upper limit for Egypt has been generally agreed upon by specialists in the social and political history of the area. Besides, various documentary evidence supports the placement of Egypt's northern boundary.<sup>1</sup>

"Greater Egypt" is a term frequently applied to the whole sec-

tion in question, probably entering the regional vocabulary when an effort among southern Illinoisans to promote and protect business and other interests in their midst resulted in formation of a Greater Egypt Association. The combination "*Little Egypt*" is sometimes used, originally designating a group of extreme southern counties, but to-day the usage is frowned upon, since both the regional public and the press feel that it has connotations with the exotic Syrian dancer of World's-Fair fame of half-a-century ago. For this reason and other trifling objections, purists in Egyptian terminology refuse to accept the term.

Rather than being "contemptuously" bestowed on the area, as one writer asserts,<sup>2</sup> the epithet "Egypt" as applied to southern Illinois claims respect from both history and tradition. Historians emphasize the far-sightedness of an enterprising business-man<sup>3</sup> of St. Louis, Missouri, who obtained from the Territorial Legislature in 1818 an Act incorporating the City and Bank of Cairo. This pioneer financier was so impressed with conditions at the confluence of the Mississippi and Ohio Rivers that he named the new town after the Old World city in deference to the similarities between the two sites. Later, the establishment of towns given Egyptian names (Karnak, Thebes) tended to *fix* southern Illinois' regional epithet.

A traditional as well as a popular explanation of the origin of the nickname derives from economic conditions in the upper half of the state in the first quarter of the nineteenth century. In those early years, there was a famine in northern and central Illinois. During this time many heads of families were obliged to journey southward for supplies where there were abundant yields of grain. An old-timer writes thus of these conditions:<sup>4</sup>

... In the summer of 1824, there was not a bushel of corn to be had in central Illinois. My father settled that year in Springfield. We had to live there for a time on venison, blackberries and milk while the men were gone to Egypt to harvest and procure breadstuffs.

And another reminiscence of that early day:<sup>5</sup>

Egypt, the term originated among the early settlers who were frequently obliged to come to this fertile country of southern Illinois for food as did the Israelites of old in the land of Egypt.

The place-name under discussion is defined in dictionaries, gazetteers, and other sources of information. Few of these definitions give the corn-story, referring rather to the influence of the christening of Cairo in spreading the use of the epithet "Egypt" for southern Illinois. Such is the gist of Stewart's definition<sup>5</sup> and that of Shankle, who remarks in addition, ". . . and on account of the fact that the people of southern Illinois are dark-complexioned, thus resembling the inhabitants of Egypt."<sup>6</sup> Other proposals crop up from time to time to explain the origin of the nickname. Its use is by no means confined to present-day vocabulary. It was used by Lincoln during the Third Lincoln-Douglas Debate;<sup>7</sup> a "splendid horse" presented by the citizens of several southern Illinois counties to General Grant as he was sojourning in Cairo in 1861 was christened "Egypt." Many more examples attest the popularity of this nickname.

What this name hath wrought may be appreciated by referring to some of the various ways it is used in local and regional life of the area: bricks in down-town Carbondale are frequently stamped "Egyptian." Southern Illinois University in Carbondale has played on the nickname to the full. From time to time, it has issued annuals, brochures, and the like with such titles as *The Egyptian*, *The Mummy-box*, *Scarab*, *Obelisk*, *Sphinx*, and others with appropriate hieroglyphics and exotic designs for cover-decoration. Latest of symbolic usage is the adoption of "Saluki," Royal Dog of ancient Egypt to indicate the prowess of Southern's athletic teams. A specimen of this breed named "King Tut" serves as their mascot.

In business, the regional epithet is a handy term for the exploitation of corporations in the area. Examples are common in every southern Illinois town. In our midst, we have such business enterprises as Egyptian Iron Works, Egyptian Sales Agency, Pyramid Roofing and Lumber Company, Greater Egypt Association, Mail-Me-Monday of Little Egypt, and many other combinations. Chicago has its Egyptian Club and no doubt southern Illinois groups elsewhere play on the name.

In spite of the certainty that the popular epithet that has designated southern Illinois for over a century does not hark back for its origin to activities of Egyptian colonists in the New World, it is of interest to follow a discussion of these early adventurers in America by James Rendel Harris, eminent English philologist and

paleographer.<sup>9</sup> This author claims that a number of states in the middle-west were exposed in pre-Columbian days to Egyptian civilization. Arkansas, Kansas, Kentucky, Missouri, and Tennessee were, he states, originally Egyptian settlements. From his arguments, he may have thought to include Illinois in the list.<sup>10</sup> However this may be, in the light of these surmises, the epithet chosen for their area by southern Illinoisans appears peculiarly apt.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> Statements in the *Transactions of the Illinois State Historical Society* (1911-1917) define this boundary.

<sup>2</sup> Captain Willard Glazier in *Down the Great River*. 2 vols., Philadelphia, 1892. Vol. I, p. 339.

<sup>3</sup> John G. Comegys. Cf. *The Illinois Guide* (rev. ed., 1947), p. 171.

<sup>4</sup> A correspondent (Roberson of Arnzville) in the *Chicago Journal*, February 8, 1872.

<sup>5</sup> John Letham. *A Historical and Descriptive Review of Illinois—the Southern Section*. Chicago and St. Louis, 1894, p. 9.

<sup>6</sup> George R. Stewart. *Names on the Land*, New York, 1945, pp. 238-239.

<sup>7</sup> George Earle Shankle, *American Nicknames*, New York, 1937, p. 260.

<sup>8</sup> The Third Joint Debate was held at Jonesboro, Union County, Illinois on September 15, 1858.

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Harris' *After-Glow Essays*, No. 7 ("A Temple in Tennessee"), London, 1935, *passim*.

<sup>10</sup> The list of five states touched by Egyptian civilization is, says Harris, incomplete. Since he mentions a town, Amboy, "in one of the western states," it is possible he had Illinois in mind. Amboy, Illinois, is near the Mississippi River, not too far afield for adventurers.



*Brand Names of Liquors*—Mr. I. Warshaw of New York, who owns a voluminous collection of business americana, has begun research on the wine and liquor industry of pre-prohibition days, going back as far as 1800. His work will include the names and locations of distilleries and wineries, their brand names, trade marks, slogans, and family ownership.