

Pedro, Livengood, and Tanana¹

A Study of Place-Names Near Fairbanks, Alaska

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IN THE EARLY HOURS OF MARCH 30, 1867, Secretary of State William H. Seward completed the purchase of the remote and unexplored land known as Russian America, or Alaska. Discovered in 1741 by Vitus Bering, Alaska progressed from a Czarist colony to a territory of the United States, and finally, to its present status as the largest of the 50 States. As part of the commemoration of the centennial of Alaska's purchase, the U.S. Geological Survey published the *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names*.² This paper is an outgrowth of my opportunity to participate in the compilation of the Dictionary. It presents a comparative study of the geographic names of a relatively small area comprising 11,000 square miles in the central part of Alaska lying between the Tanana and Yukon Rivers. The area studied was generally confined to the Fairbanks and Livengood 1:250,000-scale maps, which are centered around Fairbanks, the supply center for interior and northern Alaska.

Indian names

Central Alaska was and is inhabited by Indians speaking languages classed as Athapascan. Indian names comprise less than ten per cent of the total names found on the maps of the area studied. With the exception of a few Kutchin Indian names in the Yukon drainage, most of these names were derived from the Tanana Indians.

The Indians had no written language, and the only knowledge we have of their place-names is that recorded since the entry of the white man. Most Indian names surviving today, like Chena, Chatanika, Nenana, Kantishna, Teklanika, Sushana, or Tatlina,

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² Donald J. Orth, *Dictionary of Alaska Place Names*, U. S. Geological Survey Professional Paper 567, U. S. Government Printing Office, 1967.

have been reshaped to fit the spelling and naming habits of the English language.

The little information that we have about the native names shows that they were similar in pattern to those found elsewhere in the United States. The majority were common descriptive names like "little river," "big bluff," or "clear lake." The Indian had a name for many small landmark features like rocks, rapids, or bluffs along trails and streams. Large, vague features, such as mountains and hills, he left unnamed. One exception to this was Mt. McKinley, which, even though located about 80 miles from the Fairbanks area, is seen as an awe-inspiring white mass rising above the flat Tanana River valley. The Tanana Indian named this one mountain Denali, meaning "the big (or high) one."

The endings *-na* and *-nika* found on most stream names in central Alaska served as generics meaning "river" and "creek." The tributaries of well-traveled rivers were used as landmarks and were often named for their mouths. The names of these tributaries were given endings recorded as *-kaket*, *-chaket*, or *-charget*, as in Salchaket, meaning "mouth of the Sal," now shortened to Salcha River. Lake names in this area were generally prefixed by *min-*, meaning "lake," as in Minto (originally recorded by the Russians in the 1840's as Mintokh).

Influence of explorers

Although there was an occasional trader in the area during the mid-nineteenth century, official exploration of central Alaska began with Lt. Henry T. Allen, U.S.A., in 1885. Today, most of the major streams in the area studied bear Indian names which Lt. Allen adopted. These names were subsequently published on government maps and thus became well established. He is responsible for preserving the Indian name of the Tanana River, the largest tributary of the Yukon. It was known by the Hudson's Bay Co. traders in the French form, *Gens des Buttes*, meaning "mountain people," which they called the Indians living at its source. Indians at the upper reaches of the stream used the name Nabesna, which is now restricted to a tributary of the Tanana River.

Other explorers, however, did not report as many Indian names as Lt. Allen, apparently due to a lack of discourse with the native

people. It was common to name newly mapped features for other explorers and officials. For example, Mount Schwatka, located north of Fairbanks, was named in 1902 by Lt. Hjalmar Erickson, U.S.A., for Lt. Frederick Schwatka, U.S.A., who had explored the Yukon River region in 1883. Unlike explorers of the coastal area of Alaska, early explorers of the interior contributed only a small percentage to the total number of names.

The gold-mining era

It was the sudden inrush of men seeking gold at the beginning of the twentieth century that introduced a new source of names for features large and small. Over 80 per cent of the names found on maps of the area under consideration were applied between 1902 and 1918.

Gold had been found in 1893 at Circle, northeast of Fairbanks on the Yukon River, but few miners entered interior Alaska until the Klondike rush in Canada in 1898. The discovery of gold near Nome in 1899 also created a stampede. By the time gold was discovered in the Tanana valley, the miners were "seasoned" and knew more about the problems of seeking gold. Therefore, they did not rush into the Tanana valley in as great numbers as they had to Dawson and Nome.

In 1902, Capt. E. F. Barnette, a trader, steamed up the Tanana River and ran aground when he sought a shorter route via the Chena River and Chena Slough. He set up a trading post at the site which came to be known, temporarily, as Barnette's Cache. The same summer, after several seasons of fruitless prospecting, an Italian immigrant, Felix Pedro, struck gold along a stream 12 miles north of the trading post. As there were other prospectors in the hills to the north, it did not take long for news of Pedro's discovery to spread. Barnette's requests for additional supplies from Dawson alerted prospectors along the Yukon and drew even more men to the camps rising around Barnette's Cache and Chena Junction (or Chena), the Tanana River landing at the mouth of the Chena River.

The miners met at Pedro Creek in September 1902 and officially adopted Fairbanks as the name for the town around Barnette's Cache. They chose the name to honor Senator Charles W. Fairbanks of Indiana, who had worked in Congress in the interest of Alaska. Later, he was to become Vice President of the United States under

Theodore Roosevelt. Of the two settlements, Fairbanks grew to a city of 15,000, while Chena waned and died.

The large number of names given by miners found on present-day maps can be ascribed to the need of the prospectors officially to file and locate a mining claim. Although these names were given in haste and often borrowed from other mining areas, they acquired an official status, thus becoming well documented.

Approximately 25 per cent of the names in the Fairbanks area are names of local miners and other men of the mining era. Many streams were named in honor of the men who first discovered gold along their courses. Such names include Pedro Creek for Felix Pedro, whom I mentioned earlier as the original discoverer of gold in the area. Gilmore Creek and Tom Creek were both named for Tom Gilmore, Pedro's partner. Livengood Creek was named for Jay Livengood, who discovered gold along its banks in 1915, and Cleary Creek for Frank Cleary, a former watchman turned miner. Many names were applied not only to the streams but also to the mining camps and other features. Over 150 features and places were named for men during the mining era. Lakes, railroad stations, camps, roadhouses, and islands were named for the men associated with them. The localities of Bonnifield, Berg, Scrafford, Saulich, Pedro, McNears, Martin, Mahon, Livengood, and Meehan remind us of the mining heyday.

Thirteen per cent of the names given by prospectors are descriptive of the features or the environment. The characteristics of the streams are described by names such as Flat Creek, Clear Creek, Chocolate Creek, Swanneck Slough, Long Creek, Crooked Creek, and Straight Creek. Nearby mountains have such titles as Sawtooth Mountain, Haystack Mountain, and Smoothface Mountain. Weather conditions of the day were made vivid by Blizzard Creek, Winter Creek, Windy Gap, and Snow Gulch. The various rocks that the miner found are recorded as Slate Creek, Limestone Gulch, Granite Creek, Rock Creek, and, of course, Nugget Creek.

The hopes and fortunes of the miners are revealed by First Chance, Fortune, Bonanza, Last Chance, Paystreak, Too Much Gold, Troublesome, C.O.D., and Starvation Creeks. The facets of the everyday life of the men are clearly reflected in names of creeks and gulches like Shovel, Bridge, Bellows, Cache, Camp, Trail, Sluicibox, Belt, Woodcamp, Bedrock, Flume, Grubstake, Iron, and Sawmill.

Local fauna and flora are found among the names. There are at least 15 places or streams named for the moose. These include Moose Gulch, Moose Creek Bluff, and, for variety, Moose Creek Number One and Moose Creek Number Two. Other common animals, such as the bear, lynx, sheep, beaver, eagle, fox, goose, grouse, raven, wolverine, quail, and wolf, were duly recorded among the creek names. The elephant-like mastodon, whose remains were abundantly found in the frozen ground, is recalled by Mastodon Creek.

The flora of the area was used in naming to a lesser degree. Willow Creek and Alder Creek were most commonly used. Other indigenous plants used for names were moss, grass, birch, and spruce. Even deadwood was included, as it was common debris along the sandbars of the meandering rivers.

The Canadian and Alaskan gold camps always attracted a number of women who attempted to profit by non-mining pursuits. This was true also of Fairbanks. But the city was unique because it came into being later than the others at a time when transportation was more comfortable. Riverboat transportation and lodging along the trail in the roadhouses made travel easier. As a result, the miners brought their wives to Fairbanks from its beginning. In turn, the ladies provided a stabilizing influence on the community. The miners honored their wives and daughters by creeks called Eva, Isabella, Hattie, Melba, Pearl, Emma, Ruth, Olive, and Lillian. Some of the daughters so honored are still living.

As the miners were not natives of Alaska, they brought with them the names of the places where they had been. These included their hometowns or towns through which they had traveled. Around Fairbanks, there are creeks named Boston, Colorado, California, Kokomo, Seattle, Montana, Cairo, Idaho, Texas, Ohio, Washington, and Iowa. Such names as Dawson Creek, Ophir, Eldorado, Homestake, and Anaconda Creeks suggest other mining areas.

Numbers played a part in the naming process also. Often the distance from a central place was reflected in the names, as Twenty-four Mile Slough which is 24 miles from Nenana via the meanders of the Tanana River. In the same fashion, Twenty-three Mile Slough is 23 miles southeast of Fairbanks and Twentymile Creek is 20 miles upstream along the Yukon from Rampart. The lengths of streams were also used for names, as Threemile Creek, Sevenmile

Slough, and Seventeenmile Slough. Claim numbers on the maps in the recording offices served as names for a few streams and gulches, such as Forty-seven Gulch and Ninety-two Hunter Creek.

The prospector, a long way from home, displayed a certain amount of patriotism in his naming of Union Creek, Uncle Sam Creek, Fourth of July Creek and Fourth of July Hill. Apparently Dominion Creek was named in self-defense by an outnumbered Canadian. Politics also entered the picture when Theodore Roosevelt was honored by Roosevelt Creek. Another important man of the day, William Randolph Hearst, of the Hearst newspapers, was honored by Hearst Creek.

New names

Names continue to be applied to features in the Fairbanks area. Some of the new names, in a sense, reflect the past. The name Bentley's Island, in the Chena River at Fairbanks, was published locally in 1947, but Henry T. Bentley, a farmer, settled on the island in 1912. Brandt Subdivision, a part of Fairbanks, was similarly named for Miss Margaret Brandt, a waitress, who arrived in the area about 1906, and whom I remember from my childhood. Some of the new names appearing on maps are Dogpatch, Lunch Lake, Totem Park, Approach Hill, and Meridian Hill. Of these, Approach Hill was named for the line of approach to the airfield at Fort Wainwright, and Meridian Hill was so named because of its location on the Fairbanks meridian of the public land surveys. Finally, there is the North Pole. Located southeast of Fairbanks, it processes thousands of Christmas cards and presents for Santa Claus each year.

As time passes, we will see new places named for present events and people. For those who are participating in the throes of growth of the forty-ninth state, the new names will have significance. Still, for those who have tasted of the gold era, can new names like Dennis Manor, Aurora Subdivision, Hamilton Acres, or Broadmoor compare with the romance and nostalgia of Blizzard Creek, Orphan Creek, Livengood, Dome, Cleary, Pedro, and Gilmore where all the action was? Yet the Chatanika, Chena, and Tanana Rivers flow on, reminding us that they were there before place-names were recorded.