The Prospects of a National Place-Name Survey for the United States*

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In a Number of Cases, American scholarly projects have followed in the wake of European forerunners. The linguistic atlases of Germany and France were an inspiration to Hans Kurath in the founding of our American linguistic atlas in the late 1920's. Joseph Wright's great *English Dialect Dictionary* of 1898–1905 was a model for the American Dialect Society, which made plans over many decades; but only now are we getting a tangible result in Frederic G. Cassidy's DARE (*Dictionary of American Regional English*) underway at the University of Wisconsin. England's great *Oxford English Dictionary* led John Matthews Manly at the University of Chicago to accept Sir William Craigie's plan for a similar *Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles*, fortunately completed as long ago as 1944. Another great English project, undertaken under the auspices of the British Academy, has been the *Survey of English Place-Names*, whose volumes began to appear in 1924 and have been coming out steadily ever since. American scholars have long wondered whether a similar project is feasible for the United States, and the scattered agitation is coming into focus at the present time. I think it is important that this annual linguistic conference should keep abreast of what is going on. I have a personal involvement in this, for as an officer of the American Name Society, I am anxious that the plans should go forward as expeditiously as possible.

Two main problems concern us: first, the logistics of bringing such a large project into being, and, second, the standards of scholarship that must be maintained in such a project. The second

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of these should be our main concern, but we have no project at all unless we can solve the first. Some scholars must sacrifice themselves by constructing budgets, seeking financial support, and enlisting the necessary cooperation. These are mundane matters, but the really good directors, like Sir William Craigie, Hans Kurath, and Frederic G. Cassidy, have shown their skill by whipping such problems.

A glance at the history of place-name study in this country will help to put our problems into perspective. We even have difficulty determining what field of learning American place-name studies fall in. Among Englishmen there is no question, for the answer is clearly linguistics. Their problem is to extract and analyze early forms, and they are scarcely interested in anything that has happened since the year 1500. From this point of view, American problems are very shallow, because linguistic forms here have had little opportunity to change and develop. Historians ought to be involved, but the type of history is "local history," suspiciously close to antiquarianism. Geographers have some interests here, but they are preoccupied with theories of culture and are anxious to avoid the grade-school stereotype that makes geography a matter of learning state names with their capitals. Of especial importance to be drawn upon are the cartographers (for early maps form some of the best evidence), demographers (for population migrations are involved in the transfer of names), and anthropologists (for problems of the Indian background may turn up at any time). Thus the field of place-name study is strongly inter-disciplinary, but this has often meant that it is the business of no one in particular.

The first state to be covered with any degree of comprehensiveness was Minnesota, in 1920, by Warren Upham, using the facilities of the Minnesota Historical Society, in a volume that came to 735 pages. I undertook my own study of the state of Iowa in 1925, inspired by the remarks of H. L. Mencken in the then current third edition of *The American Language*. So far as I knew, I was the first person to write an academic dissertation in the field, but I later discovered that in the preceding year there had been a dissertation on the place-names of the sister state of Nebraska. The subject had been suggested to the author, Lilian Linder Fitzpatrick, by Dr. Louise Pound, who so frequently pioneered in enlarging the area of English studies. Other states, especially in the West

and Far West, were dealt with here and there; but the best treatment of all was in the Missouri study, under the wise and scholarly direction of Professor Robert L. Ramsay. As a young instructor in his department, I gave him some advice that rose from my experience in Iowa, particularly in the matter of dividing up the state into reasonable segments for master's dissertations. Over the years he directed a series of these until the state was fully covered; then a doctoral dissertation reworked the material into a whole, and he spent the remainder of his life expanding and polishing it. At his death in 1953 he left the completed file to the State Historical Society, and it still awaits a subvention for publication in several volumes. I have thus gone into its history, because the Missouri project remains a model for what should be done for every state.

A move forward toward a place-name survey was undertaken in 1939 when Professor Harry Morgan Ayres of Columbia University was chairman of the Present-Day English section of the Modern Language Association. He sponsored the proposal to found an "American Place-Name Society," and the motion was passed by the section. In the spring of 1940, however, international affairs so deteriorated, with the likelihood that the United States would be drawn into a world war, that Professor Ayres had a change of heart, and he requested me as secretary of the section to change the minutes to read that the motion had been lost. I had misgivings about falsifying the minutes but yielded to his pressure. Probably the founding of a new society at that time would have been abortive, and our caution may have been wise.

In 1943, even though the war was going on, a very promising plan was formed. The Princeton University Press was looking for a big project that would run to many volumes, and at the suggestion of George R. Stewart it announced that it was willing to publish a series of place-name studies to cover the entire country. Some small states could be combined, but the larger states would require several volumes each, running to a total of about 50. Stewart was already at Princeton, as a Resident Fellow in Creative Writing, preparing his ground-breaking book *Names on the Land*, and a committee, which included myself, came to Princeton to lay the plans. A framework was developed of the standards to which each volume should conform. It soon turned out, however, that the California study by Erwin Gudde, nearly finished, had been prom-

ised to the University of California Press, and the absence of that important state caused the Princeton University Press to drop the plan and to turn its attention to the Jefferson Papers, which it is still publishing.

George R. Stewart did publish his *Names on the Land* in 1945 in abbreviated form, a work that brilliantly demonstrated the dynamic process of name-giving, designed to lead others to make detailed studies. As he wrote (p. 387): ". . . it is to be hoped that some survey upon a national scale may be one of the post-war undertakings of American scholarship." I might mention that at the present time he is half way through compiling a concise dictionary of American place-names, intended to include about 14,000 entries, and this should open up the field further in a productive way.

At last in 1953 came an important step forward, in the founding of the American Name Society, which could be a fostering organization for a place-name survey. Its quarterly journal *Names* has kept interest alive, with fresh explorations of aspects of the field; but not until 1966 was a concrete proposal set forth. A scholar of German origin, Dr. W. F. H. Nicolaisen, who is now engaged in directing the Scottish place-name survey in Edinburgh, read a paper on the need for an American survey, and the project was taken up by the then president, Professor Francis Lee Utley of Ohio State University. The Society at its annual meeting on December 30, 1966, in New York, adopted the proposal for an American Place-Name Survey, with a plan in some detail and an itemized budget. Professor Utley assembled a committee drawn from various professional societies and institutions, and at its meetings a definite plan has been hammered out. This is the furthest along we have ever got, and the plan deserves our careful attention.

It is visualized that the Survey will be centered at some university not yet specified and that it will take 15 years, in three phases of five years each, to be budgeted separately. According to the plan, the procedure is "to build up a central archive of all American place-names together with records of their pronunciation, information from local oral sources, and all relevant early spellings from printed books and manuscripts." In financial support it is hoped that a third might come from the host university, especially

in the salary of a director who might do some teaching, and two thirds might come from a federal grant. Perhaps the National Foundation for the Humanities will come to our rescue, or perhaps the Office of Education can be persuaded, as it was for DARE.

It is to be hoped that some dynamic young research worker will be found for Director. The spokesmen of the American Name Society (including Professor Utley and myself) are already committed to other projects, so this is a case of "let's you and him do a place-name survey"; but we have reason to believe that a Director can be found.

In considering this plan, we should ask some searching questions. Most important of all would be this: Can the covering of the entire United States be carried on from one center? Is this not a field of study where decentralization is desirable? My answer would be that we must always enlist the local historian and the dissertation writer who has access to local records, but at the same time we should have a national archive in one center, where the material can be assembled and organized for easy reference. One precedent that we might look to is the "poetry consultant" at the Library of Congress. Might we not have also a "place-name consultant"? I have discussed this matter with the former Librarian of Congress, Dr. Luther Evans, now at Columbia University, and he feels sanguine about it, and I am now entering into correspondence with the present Librarian of Congress. A noted scholar, a different one each year, would be invited to be the "consultant"; but provision for a permanent staff, to take care of the archiving, would have to be made.

It is in this archiving that the latest methods in the use of computers must be utilized. As Professor Utley's prospectus states, "The survey will make full use of the most advanced electronic aids wherever possible, especially for alphabetization, sorting and distributional analysis of names, name types, and name elements." How this can be done is gradually being worked out, as technological devices are improved. The method becomes much simpler with the development of an "optical character scanner," so that punched cards are no longer needed. What becomes all-important is the coding by means of relevant descriptors, so that at the retrieval stage a print-out could be made on the basis of various categories. The most obvious descriptors would yield a geographical print-out,

but others would permit classification by kind of feature named, by formative elements, by language of origin, by dated era, etc., as many as one's ingenuity might devise.

Whether a computer can be used for a project of this size will have to be determined, for the expense might be staggering. In a paper that I gave in 1941 before the American Dialect Society, I estimated that the place-names in the United States were "well over a million," on the basis of extrapolation from the place-name cover of Missouri; but in 1958 George R. Stewart took me to task for the lowness of my estimate (Revised ed., p. 444) and said that his own was "... say, three million, with another million of obsolete names." The Utley prospectus declares, "the number of names involved has been estimated at 4–5 million." We must find out whether electronic magic will be adequate for this at a reasonable price.

It remains to consider briefly our second main problem – the standards of scholarship in a place-name survey. The great bane of writings on American place-names has been that they so often have consisted of idle lucubrations over a railway time-table or a *Postal Guide*. To be sure, the oddities are funny, but one soon tires of them. Genuine significance can be found when place-naming is regarded as a dynamic process, growing out of the characteristics of a particular culture.

In order to draw sound conclusions, it is necessary to establish the authenticated facts of naming. For this we must seek the most unimpeachable documentation. An area is not adequately covered unless a monograph is prepared in which the sources are given. This makes for dull reading, but it cannot be avoided. The deft worker can find neat and unobtrusive ways of abbreviating his source references.

Especially important, in my opinion, is the requirement of accurate dating. This matter was a stumbling-block in the setting up of criteria for the Princeton project of 1943. One faction felt that dates are often misleading, especially among traditional Indian names, which may have been handed down for generations before any records were available. Allowances must be made for such a situation, but a date is an ineluctable point of reference. In this regard, early cartographic evidence is often the best sort.

The student of place-names must decide the degree to which he can make use of folklore. From one point of view, all place-naming is folkloristic in nature, for names are handed down primarily in a folk transmission process. Even the explanations constructed after the fact (the so-called "aetiological" stories) have some value: they are an attempt to make a person feel more at home in his linguistic environment. However, some stories are too crude and artificial to have much value, and the research worker must use his best judgment.

As my final point, a place-name worker on any project must decide the degree of minuteness of his coverage. Should he deal with names of crossroads, of country school houses, of farms, of city and town streets? Somewhere he will find a point of diminishing returns, although it is a matter of prudence to take pains with all early documentation. Some of the most interesting names from a linguistic or cultural point of view refer to very minor places. In the degree of coverage we are back among administrative problems, which so often get intertwined with scholarship.

Problems large and small face the place-name worker. Can a full-fledged survey get off the ground? Perhaps every project has its appointed time, when conditions are ripe. Yet we may help to ripen conditions by an awareness of the possibilities. The aim of this paper has been to spread such awareness.

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