

Place Nicknames*

AUDREY R. DUCKERT

THERE IS, OR PERHAPS THERE WAS – urban sprawl takes its yearly toll – a place in southern Wisconsin between Cottage Grove and Sun Prairie and Madison that appeared on the United States Geological Survey topographic maps as Seminary Springs. In the 1930's, it was a country crossroads settlement of a kind then common in the region: a one-room school, a store and tavern, and a couple of houses. Seminary Springs was its melioristic, optimistic late Victorian name, known and used in the area; but its everyday local name was Starvation Corners. It is a name well-earned, for the place has been attended by abiding bad luck of all kinds, and the seminary that was to be built there never materialized either.

Starvation Corners, not a lovely name, was applied with a combination of ironic humor and disparagement, mostly by those who lived elsewhere, but occasionally by its own inhabitants. It never found its way to a map, never achieved legal entity, and was probably not commonly recognized outside a radius of 15 miles. It is (or was), then, a place nickname, part of a genre whose numbers may be greater than the sanctioned names-of-places we recognize or have used. It is possible that further consideration of place nicknames may offer a kind of insight into the humor, spirit, lifestyle, temper, and attitudes of a locality that all the surveys and questionnaires in Christendom would not reveal so tellingly.

Nicknames are neither coined nor used by the indifferent; whether they are affectionate or derogatory or merely convenient, their making and application speak involvement. Those who do not care do not bother. The same, of course, can be said of teasing – and some aspects of place-nicknaming are certainly just that. This will be a brief look at nicknames, and specifically at those applied to places. Going over the assembled bits of information is a little like cleaning out a very interesting attic: the sorting could take forever, and it will never satisfy the truly tidy, but the contents may prove diverting and even informative...¹

* Kemp Malone, gentleman and scholar, was a man who knew well to enjoy the life that branched epithet implies. His physical presence was imposing and his mien was ever dignified, but there was often laughter in his eyes, and his chuckle was a joy to hear. He understood the need for even the most serious scholar to keep his balance by having a good time. It is in that spirit that this essay, which has been fun to put together and fun to write, is offered in his memory.

¹ My thanks to the many who have given evidence from their own times and places, helping to put life into a collection that could never have been made from printed sources or from the experience of only one person.

A nickname is, etymologically speaking, a by-name.² Its reasons for being are as complex and elusive as the reasons for teasing, making puns, asking riddles, or playing jokes. Nicknames cannot exist in or arise from a vacuum. They are by nature social; they must be shared to endure, and their origin is often communal. Sometimes it is a community of enthusiasm and the name is given to a popular person, place, or institution as a token of familiarity and affection (“Ike” Eisenhower, “St. Joe” Missouri, The “Met” [ropolitan Opera]).

Some nicknames originate or are widely used in a community of frustration or despair, whether real or fancied. This is probably why students have been nicknaming teachers since education began; why, for instance, a dedicated pince-nez-wearing music teacher of long ago was called “Ol’ Pinch-Goggles Menaul”; why a German reconnaissance plane that flew over American troops in Northern Europe late in the evening was “Bed Check Charlie”; why Alcatraz was “The Rock” in its days as a prison. But these are not all of the whys. Nicknames are as complicated psychologically as they are linguistically, their motivation as enigmatic as their forms. They can be sorted and arranged in many ways; the following discussion is only a sampling of the possibilities.

It is important to distinguish between synthetic (or store-bought) nicknames and spontaneous (home-made) ones. The former are quite dull, really; they are likely to be the result of wishful or super-positive thinking by Chambers of Commerce or hired advertising experts who come from outside. “America’s Home Town” (Plymouth, Mass.), “The City of Homes” (Springfield), and “The Cream City” (Milwaukee) are examples. Once, Milwaukee did have many buildings made of a cream-colored brick, but that time is gone. Names of this sort are almost always used self-consciously and are likely to occur in writing, especially in promotional matter or brandnames, rather than in speech. They are definitely not conversational. Synthetic nicknames are singularly lifeless and uninteresting, perhaps because they are so contrived and self-serving. They are faithfully used by the press – sometimes because they make headline writing easier – and they get adopted by athletic organizations. “Gateway City” has been used by La Crosse, Wis., and St. Louis, to name only two, but the designation is hardly in the common speech. A semi-official name that does get used is “Twin Cities,” most commonly taken to mean Minneapolis and St. Paul, though for some years the Greyhound that left Madison marked “Twin Cities” went to Duluth and Superior. (Twin or otherwise paired cities and their identity struggles, onomastic

² First attested in Middle English as *nekename*, having acquired the initial *n*- as the result of a junctural accident in transferring the spoken *an eke name* “an also-name” into writing.

and otherwise, are grist for a future turn.) The synthetic nickname is occasionally adopted as a tongue-in-cheek name – thus with Leominster, Mass., “The Plastic City” or Melrose, “The Spotless Town.”

The liveliest place nicknames are the spontaneous ones, expressing as they do affection, exasperation, economy of utterance, even ridicule. Ideally, what follows should be printed with large blank spaces for readers to fill in their own examples. It is not intended to be anything more than a sampling, and examples will be taken chiefly from the Midwest and New England.

I. Shortenings

Simple Shortenings, achieved by apocope, syncope, blends, or use of initials:

Hamp	Northampton, Mass.
Frisco	San Francisco
P-Town	Provincetown, Mass.
San Antone	San Antonio
L. A.	Los Angeles
Jo(e)burg	Johannesburg, S. A.
Walwood	Walpole and Norwood, Mass.

The [replacing specific] + *generic*, in local shortenings for double names:

The Falls	Cedar, Chippewa, Chippewa, Glens, Millers, Sioux, Turners
The Point	Mineral, Stevens, West
The Grove	Cottage
The Neck	Marblehead, Rocky
The Bay	Green, San Francisco

(Much to the vexation of Essex County and the *Cape Ann* area in Massachusetts, “The Cape” means *Cape Cod* in wide usage, even outside of New England.)

Contrariwise, the generic, e. g., *Falls*, may be omitted, but not if conflict with an already established name arises. Thus Chippewa, Millers, and Turners are heard, but not Chippewa, since the simplex is already a town name. The generic *Falls* is often omitted where there are several neighboring towns that share it.

Shortenings by diminutives or other means:

Philly	Philadelphia
Indy	Indianapolis
The Hut	Terre Haute
La X	La Crosse (not in speech)
Burgy	Williamsburg, Mass. (even as local history buffs are seeking to revive the old spelling Williamsburgh.)

Written shortenings, sometimes facetiously imitated in speech:

Mpls	Minneapolis	[mʊpəlz]
Spfld	Springfield	[spʊfld]
Nfls	Niagara Falls	[nʊfɪlz] or [nɪfɪlz]

or, again contrariwise, [mwəki], the commonest local pronunciation, gets facetiously written as Mwawky.

II. Shibboleths

While perhaps not strictly eligible for the status of nicknames, there are those forms current within a community which outsiders are not expected to know – or to use if they do. As with personal nicknames, there seems to be an unspoken code regarding the degree of intimacy required. The newcomer who adopts them too soon will probably not be directly reproved, but the “residents” may prolong his probationary period, or at least exchange amused looks. Examples from Massachusetts: Woburn [wubən], Chelmsford [čɛmzɸəd], Padanaram [pɛd'nærəm], and Marblehead [mɑ·bəl'hɛd]. On the other hand, Amherst [æməst] is eager to instruct: the *h* is silent; and residents of Holyoke are willing to tell the uninitiate that the city is to be pronounced like the entire center of an egg rather than a sacred tree.

III. Deprecation

Affectionate deprecation is also the prerogative of natives and old residents. Dartmouth and Westport in southeastern Massachusetts may become, by the familiar t/k alternation, *Darkmouth* and *Westportk*; but these do not bear repetition by outsiders, any more than Cold Rain for Colrain, Mass., or Cottage Cheese or Cottage Grave for Cottage Grove, Wis.

Determined deprecation is generally employed by outsiders or by residents who wish they were not. Thus Grahamstown, South Africa is Grimtown to some of the boys at boarding school there; Somerville, Mass., becomes Slumville, and the town of Sunderland, immediately north of Amherst, has become Slumberland as its apartment complexes have grown. Developers in South Amherst cut the trees but named their creation Orchard Valley anyway, and Torture Valley followed as the night the day. Elsewhere, Pinehurst became Crimehurst as the rate rose, and Sun Village became Sin Village. A more generalized discontent is probably expressed by Mudhole for Ludlow and Louseville for Louisville.

The foregoing nicknames are all representative of phonetic or morphological variations on a true base name. But there are those we could more surely call by-names, i. e. artificial names or coinages, disused names, and ethnic names.

IV. Promotional Coinages and Occupation Names

These include, of course, the synthetic names mentioned earlier, and are generally intended to focus attention on a major occupation or distinction of the place. Their local use may be limited, but it may occur in newspaper names or small businesses. Changing times have given some of them a nostalgic ring: it is many years since Westfield, "The Whip City," produced a buggy whip; the manufacture of elastic webbing has all but ceased in Easthampton, "Webtown," and there is little left to justify calling Holyoke "The Paper City." Stoughton, Wis. was long known as "The Hub City," not in an effort to outdo Boston, but because Torger Mandt built his wagon works there. The name has persisted, though the wagon works have long since converted to making highway trailers.

Rural areas quite appropriately take names from their principal crops and add a land-generic. Valley names, for instance, include Onion, Cherry, Asparagus, Tobacco, and Apple – to name only a few of the available flavors. These are likely both in speech and print, though the likes of Still Corner (East Leverett) and Whiskey Point (Brookline) appeal more to the people than to the press.

V. Points of the Compass

Perhaps the only possible generalization about direction-names is that *End* seems to be more common as a generic in the Northeast and that *Side* is better liked elsewhere. Connotations and interpretations are so local as to be meaningless to most non-residents; lakes, rivers, high ground, factories, and airports are a few of the contributing factors. In Chicago, for instance, the North Side – and especially the Near North Side – is prestigious and expensive; Boston's North End is a closely-knit Italian section; in what is left of Springfield after roads and renewal, the North End connotes blacks and Puerto Ricans, with the South End the Italian section. Boston's South End is one of the few such areas likely to be known elsewhere; "Southie," as its predominantly Irish population affectionately calls it, has something of a reputation as a political proving ground, thanks in part to the novels of Edwin O'Connor.

VI. Ethnic and Economic Names

A single name from this group, depending upon who uses it and how, may be frank and friendly or cruel and offensive, apropos or unspeakable. The prerogative of use prevails, and it defies a tidy analysis.

Among the obviously ethnic nicknames – some of them very unlovely – are: Little Italy, Ginny Gardens, Ginny Italy; Limerick, Irish Hill; The P. V. (= Polish Village); Jigtown, Darktown; Jewburg, Kike's Peak;

Frenchman's Flats; Swedeville, Andersonville; Torger City. Some are only a bit more subtle. Jerusalem is the area of North Andover, Mass., where the Italian, Syrian, and Russian populations are concentrated, and Klondike is an Italian "shantytown." Nobility Hill (properly Vernon Hill) in Worcester is where the more prosperous Polish and Irish live, whereas Below-the-Hill in Fall River is where the mills and many mill-workers are. A sign at the town limits of Ware was recently modified by someone with a bias and a can of paint so that it reads *Warsaw*.

Comments on the supposed economic and assumed social character of an area are readily expressed in nicknames. Common and obvious are opposites such as The Gold Coast and The Wrong Side of the Tracks. In many Massachusetts localities, The Flats (sometimes The Plains), while topographically descriptive, also denotes the least prosperous section of a town, and Highland(s) or Hill(s) the better-off, more prestigious area. This is especially true in milltowns, where the mills and the railroads were likely to be located in the level areas, often along the river; it is likely to continue even as the mills disappear, since level land is preferred for noisy airports too.

A "poor" name that seems to have country-wide currency is Hard-scrabble. It turns up in mining, farming, and industrial areas – wherever it has been a hard go to make a living. Slab City and Shanty Town are frequent designations for rural slums.

VII. Ruralalia

As the world grows more crowded, country-living grows more desirable, but joking names and nicknames for small places and rural areas are still going strong, along with the attendant folk-jokes – e. g., the town is so small they have to throw a bone out in the street to get the Greyhound to stop. The proverbial Wide Spot in the middle of the road is widening, and so is the road; let us cherish its names while the cherishing is good. The funny papers have contributed two of the best known in Dogpatch (*Li'l Abner*) and Hootin' Holler (*Snuffy Smif*); other popular fabrications are the likes of East Penwiper and West Overshoe. Some that sound like humorous coinages are demonstrably genuine, and better than the coinages. Angela Thirkell fans who have enjoyed the likes of High Rising and Little Misfit can continue the fun on an English Ordnance map. Sixty seconds with the Chilterns map (chosen at random) produced Fawley Bottom, Hurley Bottom, Nettlebed, Nippers Grove, Play Hatch, Crazies Hill, Maidensgrove Scrubs, and Maidenhead. With real names like these, one may ask, who needs nicknames?

American names generally supposed to be fictitious symbols of the haysed way of life turn out to be real, too. Podunk is alive and well near

the Brookfields in central Massachusetts; but Pumpkin Hollow, Wis., is threatened if not already absorbed by the northeastward spread of Madison. Baptist Corner, Smoky Hollow, Hog Hollow, Mormon Hollow, Rattlesnake Gutter, Huckle Hill, Buckeye Station, Pratt Corner, Mount Ida – all are real even if rural, though perhaps not all properly classifiable as nicknames.

VIII. Puns to Pollution

Among names that are vulnerable to jest and play are those that are phonetically treacherous or paranomastically tempting. Kalamazoo and Kankakee and Okefenokee and Oshkosh have been punished enough; the variants *Darkmouth* and *Westpork* were noted earlier, yet Ipswich gets metathesized to *Swichup* and Kansas City has been *Sandy Kitty* for years. Obvious vulgarities are latent in the pronunciations of *Chicopee*, *Athol*, and Massachusetts itself, though there are those who choose to call it *Taxachusetts* and declare it to be run from the city of *Bosstown*, not *Beantown*. Soberly named for an ancient governor, *Belchertown* is changed by the irreverent to *Burpsville* or *Burp City*. The location of the Digital Equipment Company on the western outskirts of Boston is called, naturally, *Digitalis*; and *Dedham*, not so far to the south, has been pronounced with emphatic stress on both syllables by some of its younger citizens. Shopping centers and discount stores would make an excursion in themselves, involving, as they seem to, a kind of love-hate-cum-convenience relationship, since they are supported by the people who claim to deplore them. The Artery Arcade in Williamstown is called *Pulmonary Plaza*, and the beamishly named *Treasure Island* near Madison, Wis., became *Trash Island* in no time.

An observation from which no conclusions emerge is that nicknames reflecting concern or disgust with the quality of the environment are almost all based on word-play. Boston radio station *WBZ*, in an effort to help commuting motorists and to make sure they are listening to *BZ*, sends a helicopter up during peak traffic periods to report on the chaos below and suggest alternate routes around tie-ups. Joe Green, the traffic reporter, can be cheerful because he is above it all; the nicknames he has provided for some of the major landmarks of the area have found ready acceptance among those who drive the obstacle course, and are now used by many who are unaware of their origin. Some examples: *Sorrow* (*Storrow*) *Drive*, *Misery* (*Mystic*) *River Bridge*, the *McGrath-O'Brien Cryway* (*Highway*), and the *Southeast Distressway* (*Expressway*).

Pollution makes itself known readily enough, invading as it does each and every of man's senses. Place nicknames begin to reflect that awareness. *Item*: A sign marking the Nashua River where it flows near Fort Devens

was changed to read Nausea River. *Item:* Lake Nasworthy, near San Angelo, Texas, is called Lake Nastywater. *Item:* The Merrimack River, canoed and loved by Henry David Thoreau is now, where it flows the thickest, called the Merrimuck. *Item:* Lake Quanapowitt in Wakefield becomes Lake Quana-polluted, and a few miles to the south the town of Melrose, which is dry and adheres strictly to the blue laws, has been called Smelrose.

Somewhere between the dismal, ruthless cacophemism of the Nausea River and the dogged, truthless euphemism of the Rolling Green apartments clustered within smelling distance of the town dump must lie the true genius of the place nickname. A quiet, sometimes rather private name, a play form, a pet form, a quick form, a cuss form; invariably it is a name that binds a place and its people in ways most likely never intended and perhaps largely unsuspected.

University of Massachusetts