

Generic Place-Names and the Northern-Midland Dialect Boundary in the Midwest

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WITHIN THE EASTERN UNITED STATES there is a close association between the separate patterns of distribution of New England and Middle Atlantic generic place-names and the position of the Northern-Midland dialect boundary.¹ The purpose of this paper is to determine whether that close relationship continues in the Midwest. In their respective studies, Kurath terminated his analysis of dialect areas in eastern Ohio, while Zelinsky's survey of the distribution of generic place-names stopped at the Ohio-Indiana boundary (Kurath, Fig. 3 and Zelinsky, p. 321). More recent investigations by linguists have established the position of the Northern-Midland dialect boundary within the central United States.² Geographers, however, have shown little inclination to follow Zelinsky's example and have generally ignored generic place-names in areas outside of the northeastern United States.

This study involves a survey of generic place-names within a portion of the interior United States which the author refers to as the Midwest. As defined in this paper, the Midwest extends from the Pennsylvania-Ohio boundary to the western borders of the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas. It also reaches from the United States boundary with Canada to the Ohio River and the southern borders of Missouri and Kansas. Kentucky was added to this survey area for the sake of geographical continuity. This makes the area nearly conterminous with the combined territory of the two districts that linguists have labeled the North Central States and the Upper Midwest (Marckwardt, p. 3 and Allen, p. 1).

In this study, a less detailed source of data has been used than that employed by Zelinsky. He surveyed generic place-names on topographic maps drawn at a scale of one mile to the inch or larger (Zelinsky, p. 320). For this investigation of

1. Hans Kurath, *A Word Geography of the Eastern United States* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 1949), Figures 3 and 93. Wilbur Zelinsky, "Some Problems in the Distribution of Generic Terms in the Place-Names of the Northeastern United States," *Annals of the Association of American Geographers*, 45 (1955), 322-46.

2. Albert H. Marckwardt, "Principal and Subsidiary Dialect Areas in the North Central States," *Publications of the American Dialect Society*, no. 27 (1957), p. 3. Harold B. Allen, *The Linguistic Atlas of the Upper Midwest*, 1 (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1973), p. 1. Roger W. Shuy, "The Northern-Midland Dialect Boundary in Illinois," *Publications of the American Dialect Society*, no. 38 (1962), p. 73.

the Midwest, topographic sheets with a scale of four miles to the inch were utilized (Appendix). Fewer generic place-names are found on these smaller scale maps, but there appears to be little difference in the patterns of distribution of generic terms on topographic sheets printed at either scale. This was determined by reexamining Ohio place-names on the smaller scale maps.

Only the two major categories of generic place-names surveyed by Zelinsky were included in this study. These are generic terms used for small streams and communities.³ Among the stream terms surveyed were *brook* and *flowage*, common in New England and upper New York state, *run* which prevails in the Middle Atlantic area, and *branch*, *fork*, *lick*, and *prong*, associated with all or parts of the Chesapeake lowlands and the Appalachian area to the west.⁴ The community generics surveyed in this study include *center*, *corner(s)*, and *village*, concentrated in New England, and *-burg*, *city*, and *-town*, most common in the Middle Atlantic area.

Within the Midwest a portion of the Northern-Midland dialect boundary, between eastern Ohio and eastern Illinois, is tentative and incomplete. To the west of the Chicago metropolitan area it has been more firmly established. In the northwestern corner of Illinois a fork in this boundary isolates an island of speech that is characteristically Midland. To the immediate south of this island of Midland speech there is a zone of transition between the Northern and Midland dialect areas. West of the Mississippi River, the Northern-Midland dialect boundary runs directly across northern Iowa and then follows a diagonal course between the southeastern and northwestern corners of South Dakota (Shuy, p. 73).

Dot maps were prepared which indicate the range of each of the selected generic terms. These maps revealed that the distributions of several generics bear no relationship to the Northern-Midland dialect boundary in the Midwest. A few of the selected terms have either too broad or too narrow a range or occur with insufficient frequency. Three stream and four community generics were retained and subjected to further analysis. The stream generics placed in sharper focus include *brook*, *run*, and *branch*.⁵ Community terms that were examined more closely include *center*, *corner(s)*, *-burg*, and *-town*.

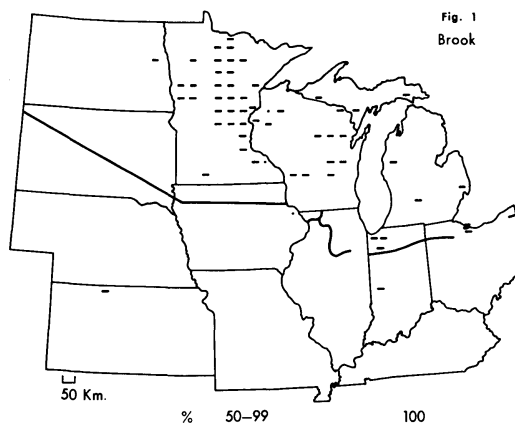
3. Zelinsky, pp. 322-346. Zelinsky emphasized stream and community generics and gave only limited attention to terms attached to lakes, types of upland and lowland surfaces, vegetational features, and highways.

4. *Creek* was omitted from this survey because of its ubiquitous occurrence outside of New England. Stream terms associated with the Chesapeake area and the adjacent section of the Appalachians were included since *branch*, the primary generic among them, is classified as a South Midland as well as a Southern vocabulary element. Cf. Raven I. McDavid, Jr., "The Principal Dialect Areas of the United States," in *Contemporary English: Change and Variation*, ed. David L. Shores (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott Company, 1972), p. 40.

5. The stream terms emphasized in this study belong to a hierarchy of designations for water courses of varying magnitude used within the greater part of the United States. There is some

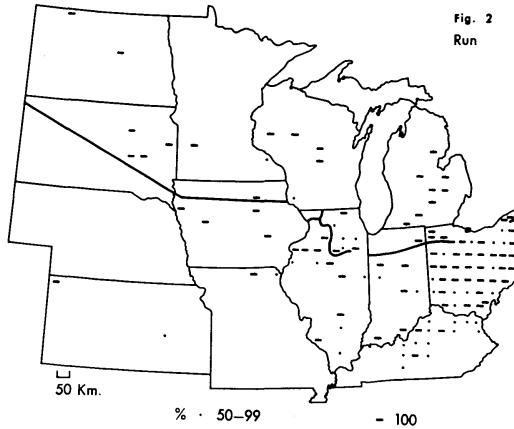
In order to delimit the respective areas in which these terms prevail, their frequencies of occurrence were calculated as percentages and mapped again. Percentage calculations were based upon counts of each term within units of an overlay grid attached to the original dot distribution maps. Counts of the New England community terms *center* and *corner(s)* were combined. The Middle Atlantic community generics *-burg* and *-town* were also counted together. Because of the nearly exclusive occurrence of specific generics within the grid units, which measured 50 kilometers on a side, only two categories of frequency were plotted on the revised maps. These include 1) instances where specific generics comprised 50-99 percent of the total, and 2) instances where specific generics comprised 100 percent of the total. In the cases of each of the generic terms, the higher level of frequency was found to occur far more commonly than the lower level.

Among the selected stream generics, *brook* generally prevails in areas well to the north of the Northern-Midland dialect boundary, except in northwestern Indiana. While common in central and northern Minnesota, it occurs with a lower than expected frequency in Michigan and Wisconsin and is almost completely absent from the Dakotas (Figure 1). *Run* is the dominant stream term throughout Ohio and crosses the dialect boundary in the northwestern corner of the state. Beyond this point it penetrates deeply into Michigan

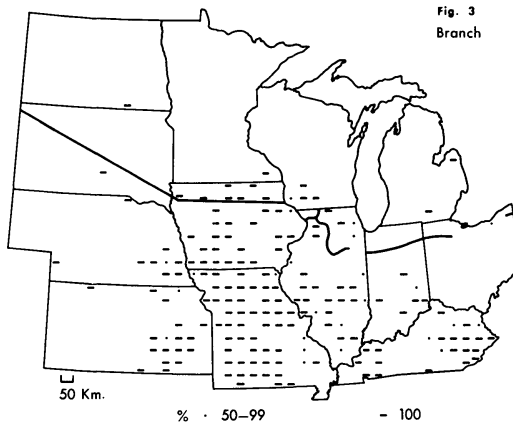


ambivalence concerning the level to which these terms are assigned in this hierarchy. *River* is the common designation for water courses of the greatest magnitude and *creek* is a term widely used for medium-sized streams. *Brook* and *run* generally apply to streams of smaller magnitude, but in some areas these terms compete with *creek* as designations for streams of medium size. *Branch*, on the other hand, is thought to apply primarily to smaller streams. Cf. Allen, p. 236. Kurath, pp. 13, 61. Zelinsky, pp. 332, 324-325.

reaching as far north as Saginaw Bay. South of *Ohio run* occurs with moderate frequency in the Blue Grass region of Kentucky. To the west of *Ohio run* is generally a much less common generic, but is found in scattered locations along and far to the north and south of the dialect boundary. While occurring astride this boundary in northern Illinois, it is absent from the island of Midland speech in the northwestern corner of the state (Figure 2).

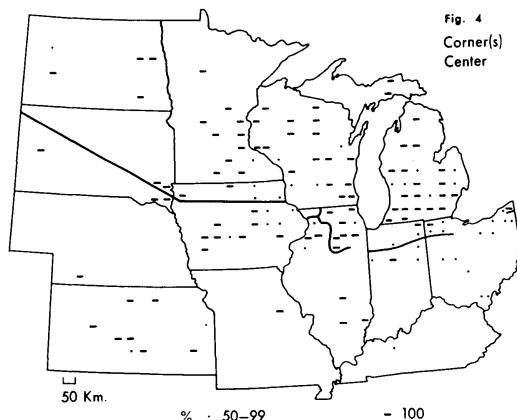


Branch is the dominant stream generic in eastern and western Kentucky, southern Illinois, throughout most of Missouri, much of Iowa, and the southeastern parts of Nebraska and Kansas. It is absent from the central prairie region in Illinois, but recurs in the northern part of the state, except within the Midland dialect island. In Illinois and Iowa *branch* continues to prevail to the north of the dialect boundary entering southwestern Wisconsin and reaching the Minnesota state line. Like *run*, it occurs infrequently as a dominant term in Indiana. This reflects the unique character of the Hoosier state where none of the stream generics prevail across extensive areas (Figure 3). When the areas where



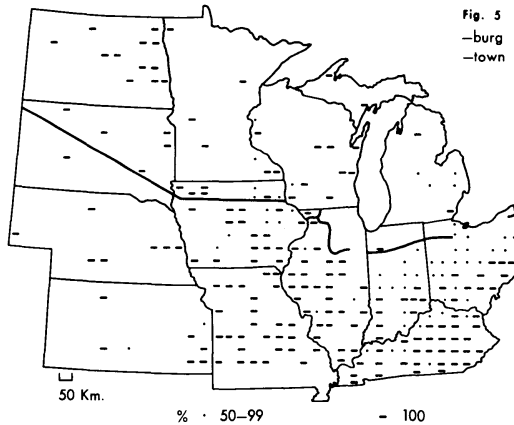
either *branch* or *run* prevail are viewed together, these terms are seen to have much greater continuity below the Northern-Midland dialect boundary than on its upper side.

The New England derived community generics, *center* and *corner(s)*, prevail in lower Michigan, northern Illinois outside of the island of Midland speech, much of Wisconsin and Iowa, and the southern one-half of Minnesota. The distribution of *center* and *corner(s)* is in approximate conformity with the Northern-Midland dialect boundary east of the Mississippi River, but this condition changes to the west. Reaching well below the dialect boundary in Iowa, these generics also occur with unexpected frequency much farther south in Kansas. The range of these terms is far more extensive than that of *brook*, but their near absence in northern Minnesota, where *brook* is a common generic, is striking (Figure 4).



The northern edge of an extensive area, in which the Middle Atlantic community generics *-burg* and *-town* prevail, conforms closely with the dialect boundary in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and the eastern one-half of Iowa. These terms are absent from northern Illinois except in the Midland dialect island. They recur in states farther to the north, but only in scattered form outside of North Dakota. West of Minnesota, Iowa, and Missouri *-burg* and *-town* display no regional tendencies and are encountered as frequently to the north of the dialect boundary as farther south (Figure 5). The overall area dominated by these terms generally resembles the combined distributions of the stream generics *run* and *branch*. Notable exceptions include the higher frequency of *-burg* and *-town* in North Dakota and their less common occurrence in southeastern Nebraska and eastern Kansas.

The relationship between patterns of distribution of generic place-names and the position of the Northern-Midland dialect boundary is weaker in the Midwest



than in the northeastern United States. Within the Midwest this relationship deteriorates in a westerly direction and disappears altogether in the Dakotas, Nebraska, and Kansas. Generic place-names appear to have value as indicators of distinctive cultural regions only as far west as Minnesota, Iowa and Missouri.

This study extends the basic aspects of Zelinsky's work on generic place-names in the northeastern United States across a larger area in the Midwest. It illustrates where the westward extensions of important community and stream generics are found. The sparse distribution of the terms *center* and *corner(s)* which Zelinsky found in Ohio and north central Kentucky continues across western Kentucky and through Missouri. The prevalence of these generics in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota as well as in the Northern parts of Indiana and Illinois is clearly an extension of their high frequency of occurrence in New England, New York state, and northern Pennsylvania. The more frequent occurrence of the generic suffixes *-burg* and *-town* which Zelinsky encountered in Pennsylvania and Ohio as opposed to New York state is repeated in Indiana, Illinois, Iowa, and Missouri. As in the state of New York, these terms are uncommon in Michigan, Wisconsin, and Minnesota. They do occur more frequently in Kentucky than would have been expected from Zelinsky's results.

Beyond New England, in New York state and Ohio, Zelinsky encountered the stream generic *brook* with diminishing frequency. This sparser pattern of occurrence continues in Indiana, Michigan, and Wisconsin. In central and Northern Minnesota *brook* is once again as dominant a stream generic as in New England. The resurgence of *brook* in Minnesota is an aberration with respect to its general westward diminution beyond New England. The stream generic *run* which Zelinsky discovered to be prevalent in Ohio and north central Kentucky fades rapidly to the west except for a modest increase in frequency in northern Illinois. *Branch*, which Zelinsky established as a dominant water course term in eastern Kentucky, reappears and continues as a prevalent generic across western Kentucky, southern Illinois, Missouri, eastern Kansas, southeastern Nebraska,

and much of Iowa. It is clear that there is considerable continuity between Zelinsky's findings with respect to major community and stream generics and those in this study.

Kurath included stream, but not community generics, among the vocabulary items whose spatial distributions he analyzed in the eastern United States. His findings on spatial variations in informants' choices of generic designations for small streams closely resemble what Zelinsky derived from an analysis of topographic sheets. Therefore, this study can be viewed, in a sense, as an extension of Kurath's as well as Zelinsky's work. However, it is more appropriate to correlate Kurath's findings with McDavid's map of spatial variations in the terms used by North Central states' informants for water courses.⁶ A legitimate question then arises concerning a comparison between the findings in this study and those of McDavid. Does the same close relationship exist for stream generics as found in the works of Kurath and Zelinsky?

With respect to the term *brook*, there is a reasonably close correlation between McDavid's findings and those of this study in the states of Ohio, Michigan, and Wisconsin. This correlation declines in Indiana and Illinois. McDavid's pattern of distribution for the term *run* is repeated in this study in Ohio, Indiana, Illinois, and Kentucky, but not in Michigan and Wisconsin. His distribution of the generic *branch* is approximated in this study only in Illinois and Wisconsin.

A further extension of Kurath's findings, or more accurately those of McDavid, occurs in Allen's work on the upper Midwest. One of the maps in Allen's atlas portrays spatial variations in informants' usage of the stream generics *brook* and *branch* (Allen, 236). The continuity between this map and that on which McDavid portrayed the distribution of various stream generics in the North Central states is limited. What continuity that exists is basically in terms of the extension of the stream generic *branch* beyond western Illinois and into northeastern and southern Iowa. A large void on McDavid's map in western Wisconsin reduces its suitability for comparison with Allen's map of stream generics. The relationship between Allen's findings and those in this study are also limited: his informants revealed a distribution of the term *brook* in upper midwestern vocabulary that is only vaguely similar to its spatial pattern as found on topographic sheets. The same is generally true with respect to the stream generic *branch*. The close correlation between the distributions of stream generics found by Kurath and Zelinsky in the East was not repeated in the Midwest when McDavid's and Allen's findings were compared with those of this study.

A number of historical factors probably account for the westward deterioration of the geographic relationship between generic place-names and the Northern-Midland dialect boundary in the Midwest. It is likely that the same

6. Raven I. McDavid, Jr., "Linguistic Geography and Toponymic Research," *Names* 6:1 (March, 1958), 72.

factors are responsible for the midwestern decline in the relative distributions of stream generics revealed by informants on the one hand and topographic maps on the other. These include 1) cases where federal land surveyors from one dialect area attached familiar generics to the streams and subsequent settlers from another dialect area established and named the communities; 2) situations where migration routes following major rivers led groups of settlers from different dialect areas farther north or south than their original homes; 3) instances where transcontinental railroads carried groups of settlers accustomed to Middle Atlantic generics into the Dakotas and others accustomed to New England generics into Kansas, and 4) cases where groups of settlers from Northern dialect areas were attracted by free territory in Kansas at the same latitude as slave-holding Missouri.

APPENDIX

Source of Data

The topographic sheets utilized as a source of data in this study were generally compiled and field annotated or field checked during the 1950's. A small minority of the sheets were prepared during either the late 1940's or early 1960's. Many of these maps underwent limited revision during the 1960's and early 1970's. The majority of the sheets were published by the United States Geological Survey. In a few instances, where this agency's sheets were not available to the author, topographic maps printed by the Army Map Service were utilized instead. In the following list the dates associated with the United States Geological Survey sheets represent the years during which each was field annotated or field checked. On the Army Map Service sheets, dates later than 1951 also refer to the years of field annotation and field checking. On sheets printed by this agency before 1952, dates represent the years of data compilation. In this list the topographic sheets are placed under the headings of the states in which they occur and in alphabetical order. Individual sheets are assigned to those states in which a majority of the territory they depict is found. In some cases it was necessary to list sheets under two state headings.

States	Topographic Sheets Publishing Agencies, and Dates
North Dakota:	Bismark U-54, Devils Lake U-53, Dickinson A-53, Fargo U-53, Grand Forks U-52, Jamestown A-53, McClusky U-54, Minot U-54, New Rockford U-52, Watford City U-53, Williston U-53.
South Dakota:	Aberdeen U-54, Hot Springs U-55, Huron U-53, Lemmon U-54, Martin U-55, McIntosh U-53, Milbank U-53, Mitchell U-55, Pierre U-54, Rapid City U-53, Sioux Falls U-55, Watertown U-53.
Nebraska:	Alliance U-55, Broken Bow A-55, Fremont U-55, Grand Island U-55, Lincoln U-55, McCook U-54, North Platte U-54, O'Neill U-55, Scotts Bluff U-54, Sioux City U-55, Valentine U-57.
Kansas:	Beloit U-55, Dodge City U-55, Goodland A-54, Great Bend U-55, Hutchinson U-55, Joplin A-47, Kansas City A-56, Lawrence A-56, Manhattan U-55, Pratt U-55, Scott City U-55, Wichita U-55.

- Minnesota: Bemidji U-54, Brainerd U-53, Duluth U-53, Fairmont U-54, Hibbing U-54, International Falls U-54, Kenora U-63, Mason City U-54, New Ulm U-53, Quetico U-57, Roseau A-54, St. Cloud U-53, St. Paul U-53, Stillwater U-53, Thief River Falls U-52, Two Harbors U-54.
Davenport U-58, Des Moines U-54, Dubuque U-58, Fairmont U-54, Fort Dodge A-54, Mason City U-54, Omaha U-54, Waterloo U-54.
- Missouri: Centerville U-54, Harrison U-58, Jefferson City U-55, Kansas City A-56, Moberly U-54, Nebraska City U-55, Poplar Bluff U-57, Rolla U-54, St. Louis U-63, Springfield U-54, Tulsa A-48.
- Wisconsin: Ashland U-53, Eau Claire U-53, Green Bay U-55, Iron Mountain U-54, La Crosse U-58, Madison U-57, Manitowoc U-54, Rice Lake U-53, Rockford A-51,
- Illinois: Aurora U-58, Belleville U-58, Burlington U-58, Decatur U-58, Paducah U-49, Peoria U-58, Quincy U-56, Rockford A-51.
- Michigan: Alpena U-54, Blind River U-61, Cheboygan U-55, Detroit U-61, Escanaba U-54, Flint U-54, Grand Rapids U-58, Hancock U-58, Iron River U-58, Marquette U-58, Midland U-54, Milwaukee U-54, Racine U-58, Sault Ste. Marie U-56, Tawas City U-54, Traverse City U-54.
- Indiana: Chicago U-53, Cincinnati U-53, Danville U-53, Fort Wayne A-53, Indianapolis U-53, Muncie U-53, Vincennes U-56.
- Ohio: Canton A-49, Charleston U-57, Clarksburg A-47, Cleveland A-49, Columbus U-67, Marion U-66, Toledo U-56.
- Kentucky: Corbin U-56, Dyersburg U-56, Evansville U-57, Huntington U-57, Jenkins U-57, Johnson City U-57, Louisville U-56, Nashville U-56, Winchester U-57.
- U - United States Geological Survey
A - Army Map Service
51 - 1951