

## Names in American Limericks

C. GRANT LOOMIS

AN IMPORTANT SEGMENT of American limerick lore has particular concern with the use of names, particularly with place names and with specific given names and surnames. The original pattern of the limerick, as fostered by Edward Lear in his *Book of Nonsense* (1846), calls for a who and a where in the first line, goes on in the next three lines to explain strange and preposterous activities, adventures, and curious happenings, and concludes with a reference usually to both person and place again in the last line.<sup>1</sup> The American form of the limerick prefers two rhymes to the name given in the first line; hence, we have a double check upon the way the name is to be pronounced. Part of the fun of the pattern is to select unusual names. Frequently, these selections are American jibes at curiosities of English origin, wherein the pronunciation varies radically from the spelling. The town of *Alnwick* rhymes with *panic* and *satanic*, and, accordingly, is pronounced *Anic* (*P*, 10.235.5.81).<sup>2</sup> Other English place names were used similarly for humorous effect, especially in the year 1881, when nearly every possible variation of the limerick found place in American journals.<sup>3</sup>

Some English surnames offered similar difficulties between appearance and expression, although, in these instances, the pronunciations may have maintained themselves in the United States, as, indeed, some still do. Note the rhyming of *Beauchamp* with *reach 'em* and *preach 'em* (*P*, 9.230.369.81); *Cholmondely* with *rumly* and *glumly* (*L*, 9.234.354.87); *Taliaferro* with *Oliver* and *Boliver* (*P*, 9.232.401.81); and *St. John* with *Bingen* (pronounced *Binge-en*) and *injun* (*P*, 9.230.369.81).<sup>4</sup>

Both confirmations of current pronunciation and some surprises appear in the sounding of American names to the ears of the

rhymesters of five to seven decades ago, prior, in other words to phonographic records and tape recordings. *Albuquerque*—*clerk*—*work* (*A*, 61.1662.77.09) I have heard, as is common, only in four syllables instead of three. *Chaumont* (a suburb of New York City)—*slow*—*hoe* (*P*, 9.232.401.81) was not Americanized apparently. *Chicago* in 1880 rhymed with *paw go* and *claw go* and in 1904, probably to an Easterner's ears as pairing with *largo*—*Fargo* (*L*, 43.1118.312.04). *Cohoes*, a city in New York State, rhymes with *rose* and *those* (*L*, 45.1167.275.05). *Delhi*, a village in the same state falls in with *pie* and *by* (*A*, 6.14.11.80). *Des Moines* had lost its French sounding by rhyming with *joins* and *coins* (*L*, 37.967.422.01). Two pronunciations for *Dubuque* were apparently possible in 1881: *Luke*—*duke* (*P*, 10.245.164.81) and *took*—*shook* (*P*, 10.241.99.81). *Galveston* tuned to *best on* and *rest on* (*A*, 61.1601.307.07), accenting the second syllable instead of the first. *Greenwich* (N.Y.) matches *spinach* and the poor rhyme *scrimage* (*P*, 10.236.19.81). *Hawarden* (Iowa) falls in with *garden* and *pardon* (*P*, 10.238.58.81). The local pronunciation persists for *Iowa*—*sigh away*—*die away* (*L*, 37.969.466.01). Of three Ottawas (Ill. Kans. and Ohio), one at least rhymed with *shot away* and *got away* (*A*, 8.20.14.81), thereby following *I-o-way*. *Mankato* (Minn.) joins with *potato* and *gate o* (*P*, 9.216.129.81). One limerick poked fun at Bostonians for maintaining that the famous island resort off the Maine coast should be pronounced in the French fashion: *Mt. Désert*, rhyming with *there* and *care* (*P*, 10.238.58.81). Actually four other pronunciations have been used at one time or another (de-zurt'; dez' art; de-sert'; des'-ert). *Nashville*, written *Nashv'll*, and rhyming with *bashful* and *dash fool* (*W*, 5.210.13.80) suggests the native sounding. *Passaic* (N.J.) with rhymes *Hebraic* and *Mosaic* (*L*, 61.1579.1107.13) is the only pronunciation which I have ever heard for this city. One limerick, using rhymes *cake* and *awake* suggests that somebody had formerly a different conception (*E*, 29.39.4.81). *Pekin* (Ill.) combines with *seekin'* and *deacon* to reveal its Americanization (*W*, 6.243.203.81). *Quogue* (Long Island, N.Y.) links to *frog* and *jog* (*P*, 10.245.164.81). *St. Croix* (Wisc.?) couples with *boy* and *soy* (*P*, 9.234.433.81). *Terre Haute* (Ind.) rhymes ordinarily with *coat* and *oat*, but according to a limerick maker in 1914 the rhymes should be *caught* and *bought* (*A*, 75.1959.-

237.14), for which I have no confirmation. The local pronunciation for an Oregon river appears in the combination of *Willamette* with *slam it—damn it* (*A*, 9.19.14.81). A New Hampshire lake, currently spelled *Winnipisaukee*, but formerly, *Winnipiseoge*, is sounded with *Milwaukee* and *jocky* (*P*, 10.239.68.81), the last not being a pure rhyme as another limerick using *Milwaukee* and rhyming with *balky* and *chalky* (*P*, 9.229.351.81) shows.<sup>5</sup>

In the limerick mania of 1881, California versifiers tried their skill upon some of the local place names, especially those which were pitfalls for new arrivals who were not yet initiated into the local usage. Indeed, *Los Angeles* presented a constant problem (settled officially only recently; see *Names*, I, 35–38). One limerick maker cautioned that the city was not to be pronounced so as to rhyme with *feels* and *squeals* but rather with *strangle us—entangle us* (*A*, 9.8.14.81). However, a nice question is posed when *San Jose* (Ho-say) is rhymed with *clothes* and *hose* (*E*, 29.38.13.81). Was the city ever called *Joe's* locally, or was this sounding merely a trap for the unwary? Interesting is the hint of Yankee pronunciation in the rhymes for *Alameda: leader—feed her* (*W*, 6.252.349.81), or were the rhymes themselves pronounced *lead-ah—feed hah*? The rhymes of *Homer* and *diploma* to *Sonoma* (*A*, 8.19.14.81) partly suggest this *ah* ending in which *Homer* must have sounded like *Home-ah*. *Lagunitas* matches with *eat us* all right, but what of the pronunciation of the other rhyme: *mosquitoes* (*A*, 8.23.14.81)? Helpful are: *Bolinas* with *hyenas* and *between us* (*A*, 8.19.14.81); *San Joaquin* with *seen* and *mean* (*W*, 7.262.93.81); *San Rafael* with *hell* and *smell* (*A*, 8.19.14.81); *Suisun* with *moon* and *noon* (*E*, 29.7.13.81); and *Yuba* with *tuba* and *Cuba* (*A*, 67.1754.301.10).

Limerick rhymes offer, then, interesting speculations about yesterday's pronunciation of the more unusual names of people and places.

#### NOTES

<sup>1</sup> The limerick pattern's origin has never been established conclusively. Lear apparently knew the chapbook, *The History of Sixteen Wonderful Old Women*, which appeared in 1821. Just how much older the form is, has not been determined. Under Lear's hands, the form assumed a polish and skill which permitted the author to amuse his patron's children with fantastic and frequently delightful verses. Older persons also found the creations engaging enough to buy ten editions of

the book by 1863. At first, the verses were designated simply as "nonsense verses" or "nonsense jingles." Later, they were referred to as "nursery rhymes." The term "pentatette" likewise found use (See *The Argonaut* 9.5.11.81). These headings all anticipate the name, "limerick," which does not appear in print until 1898. Indeed, I have not seen it used before 1902 in America. The term suggests another origin in songs supposed to have been sung early in the nineteenth century in the Irish city from which the name derives. Such verses do not seem to have found their way into print. At any rate, the term "limerick," is today the most familiar appellation for this kind of persistent and popular creation. The limerick vogue in America began during the Civil War with imitations of Lear's creations, an example of which is:

There was an old man in Thermopylae,  
Who never did anything properly.  
But they said, "If you choose  
To boil eggs in your shoes  
You shall no longer stay in Thermopylae."

A certain L.L.D. wrote twenty-three "Nursery Rhymes for the Army" in *Wilkes' Spirit of the Times*, N.Y., VIII, 130 (1863), one of which may serve to illustrate:

There was a young man of Fair Oaks  
With his generals was forced to compare notes.  
He'd no musical fire  
Yet they showed him a lyre,  
This truthful young man of Fair Oaks.

The following year, there appeared in Philadelphia as a contribution to the Sanitary Commission, *The New Book Of Nonsense*, in which fifty-three limericks with illustrations are largely in the Lear pattern. However, a few represent the pattern which almost alone was to be the dominating one. One of the earliest, at any rate, is:

There was an odd man of Woonsocket,  
Who carried bomb-shells in his pocket;  
Endeavoring to cough  
One day—they went off,  
And of course up he went like a rocket.

<sup>2</sup> The references to various sources are as follows: *P-Puck*, New York, 1877-1905, vols. 1-48; *L-Life*, New York, 1883-1936, vols. 1-103; *HW-Harper's Weekly*, New York, 1857-1916, vols. 1-62; *A-The Argonaut*, San Francisco, 1877- , vols. 1-132; *E-The California Golden Era*, San Francisco, 1852-1893; *W-The Wasp*, San Francisco, 1876- ; and *B-The Bellman*, Minneapolis, 1906-1919. The numbers in sequence refer to volume, running number, page and year. Thus, *P*, 10.235.5.81 means: *Puck*, tenth volume, number 235, page 5, 1881.

<sup>3</sup> See also: Ayscough—few—do (*P*, 10.245.163.81); Bicester—kissed her—sister (*HW*, 10.522.823.66); Brompton—thumped on—pumped on (*HW*, 17.873.827.73); Chertsey—Bessy—dressy (*P*, 9.232.401.81); Cirencester—soliciter—visit her (*P*, 9.232.401.81); Leicester—fester—caressed her (*P*, 9.230.369.81); Pall Mall—fell—hell (*P*, 9.234.434.81); but also: Pall Mall—ball—hall (*A*, 69.1790.45.11); and St. Christopher—mits—hits (*P*, 10.239.68.81).

<sup>4</sup> Compare also the following names and rhymes: Abergavenny—many—penny (*P*, 10.249.229.81); Bethune—sweeten—caten (*L*, 66.1709.214.15); Brougham—room—flume (*P*, 10.244.150.81); Cockburn—Holburn—Woburn (*P*, 4.98.2.79); Clerke—dark—bark (*P*, 10.236.21.81); Clough—enough—rebuff (*A*, 9.5.11.81); Guise—pies—size (*P*, 10.238.58.81); Majoribanks—larch planks—starch, thanks (*P*, 9.233.417.81); Meagher—far—car (*P*, 10.244.150.81); Mohuns—tunes—balloons (*P*, 10.245.196.81);

Ruthven—given—driven (*P*, 10.249.229.81); Seixas—audacious—gracious (*P*, 10.238.54.81); and Steynes—pains—remains (*L*, 35.897.76.00).

Other foreign names appear in at least one version, apparently American adaptations, pronounced as follows: Belleville—level—devil (*L*, 66.1709.214.15); De Veau—true—adieu (adieux) (*P*, 10.240.87.81); Göthe (Goethe)—purty—dirty (*P*, 10.243.134.81); Kearny (famous street name in San Francisco)—blarny—Killarny (*A*, 1.34.5.77); McLeod—proud—shroud (*P*, 9.232.401.81); Provost—beau—know (*P*, 10.235.3.81); St. Cyr—dear—queer (*P*, 10.235.5.81); St. Denis—Jenny—any (*P*, 10.235.5.81). Double possibility is suggested by Strahan—pan—tan (*P*, 10.237.36.81); and Strahan—long—gong (*P*, 10.236.21.81). A touch of Yankee-ism seems to appear in Lincoln—thinkin'—shrinkin' (*B*, 1.1.21.06) and in Palmer—farmer—harm her (*P*, 10.243.134.81).

<sup>5</sup> Other place names, not all identifiable, are as follows: Beaulieu—truly—unduly (*P*, 10.243.131.81); Belvoir—deceiver—leave her (*P*, 10.243.131.81); Biloxi (Miss.)—foxy—heterodoxy (*A*, 65.169.125.09); Butte (Mont.)—shoot—cute (*L*, 43.1123.438.04); Cadiz—ladies—Hades (*P*, 10.244.150.81); Cohansie—tanzy—pansy (*P*, 10.239.67.81); Lehaught—can't—shan't (*P*, 10.237.35.81); Mobile (Ala.)—eel—squeal (*A*, 8.13.14.81); Moline (Ill.)—sheen—scene (*A*, 7.21.11.80); Monee—he—D (*A*, 8.14.11.81); Shawangunk—among 'em—wrong 'em (*P*, 9.232.401.81); and Winago—saw go—jaw go (*A*, 8.20.5.81).



*We should give dogs short names, that it may be easy to call them. The names should be such as these: Spirit, Courage, Shield-hasp, Spike, Lance, Ambush, Guard, Keeper, Order, Darter, Barker, Fiery, Strength, Active, Search-wood, Plotter, Ravager, Speed, Passion, Roarer, Bold, Cheerful, Might, Flowery, Youth, Joyous, Gladness, Viewer, Bright-eyes, Big-boy, Force, Traveler, Swift, Lively, Reveler, Stubborn, Yelper, Killer, Bustler, Strong, Sky, Sun-beam, Spear, Marker, Prudence, Tracker, Eager. [From Xenophon's *On Hunting*, fourth century, B. C.]*



Jennie Tourel, the opera singer, believed that Kalamazoo and Oshkosh were just funny connotations until she was booked for concerts in these places.