

The Alleged ‘‘Hogg Sisters,’’ or Simple Ground Rules for Collectors of ‘‘Odd’’ Names

R. M. RENNICK

As a collector of curious and unusual personal names, I often receive letters from persons wishing to share with me examples of such names which they have encountered. And, like my fellow newspaper readers, I have been exposed to the lists of ‘‘odd’’ names and name combinations that occasionally appear in the feature columns of a number of publications. I am sure that I share with many persons a concern about the authenticity of these names.

Yet too many collectors today seem content to accept, at face value, lists of names acquired as hearsay and make little, if any, effort to verify them. How often do I still find, in examining such lists, some of the old familiar jokes that had long ago been fully discredited when painstaking research revealed that no persons with such names ever existed.

Not the least number of letters received or lists of names surveyed in newspapers columns have included the *two* alleged daughters of the late Governor James Stephen Hogg of Texas. There are still persons who accept the existence of Ima and Ura or think it frightfully clever to swear they knew both of them and/or that one or both are still living in, variously, Texas, Upstate New York, West Virginia, Southwestern Missouri, North Carolina, Georgia, Indiana, and several other states. It is about time someone laid to rest the myth of *Ima* and *Ura* (occasionally joined by a brother *Hesa* and another sister *Bea*) and rendered groundless all claims to their widespread existence.

The truth is that Governor Hogg (1851–1906) had only one daughter, whom he did name Ima, and three sons with the more prosaic names of William Clifford (Known as ‘‘Will’’) (1875–1930), Michael (called ‘‘Mike’’) (1885–1941), and Thomas Elisha (or ‘‘Tom’’) (1887–1949). Ima, the second of the four children, was born on July 10, 1882, and was named for the volunteer nurse-heroine of a Civil War epic entitled *The Fate of Marvin*, authored by the future governor’s older brother Thomas

Elisha Hogg (1842–1880), a newspaperman and jurist of some repute.¹ According to Robert Cotner, the governor’s biographer, brother Tom was “Jim’s . . . ideal in everything great and good,”² and his book, published in Houston by E.H. Cushing in 1873, was of no little significance in Jim’s life. Cotner says it was “one of the first stories to treat (the Civil War) with candor and yet make for better feeling between recent foes (and was) . . . significant (as) an early landmark along the road to reunion.”³ These conciliatory sentiments were to be those of the governor throughout his public and private life.

Why he specifically chose “Ima” for his daughter is not known. Biographer Cotner tells us that she had received her name at least by the 13th of July for her father, then District Attorney for the 7th District of Texas, in a letter to his brother John, wrote, “Our cup of joy is now overflowing! We have a daughter of as fine proportions and of as angelic view as ever gracious nature favored a man with, and her name is Ima”⁴ For the remaining 24 years of his life, James Hogg and his daughter were very close. Ima often accompanied him on his trips out of the state and kept house for him and cared for her younger brothers after the untimely death of their mother.

In time she was to become an important figure in Houston society for, though reared in Austin, she moved with her father to the Houston area in 1904 following his successful venture into the oil business. There she established a secure place for herself as a pianist and music teacher of no mean accomplishment, meanwhile helping to found the Houston Symphony Orchestra, supporting the Houston Museum of Fine Arts, and serving with distinction as a member of the local School Board.⁵ With her brothers she helped organize and sponsor a mental health foundation at the University of Texas. According to another Texas writer, “her devotion to Texas has been a motivating force throughout her life,”⁶ culminating in the now prestigious Varner-Bayou Bend Heritage Fund of Houston (established in 1956) whose avowed purpose is “to advance the appreciation of the arts, establish public museums and similar facilities, and promote public knowledge of health, science, and education.” She died on August 19, 1975.

¹Robert C. Cotner, *James Stephen Hogg: (A Biography)* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1959), p. 90; and a letter to the writer from Miss Ima Hogg, July 14, 1969.

²Cotner, p. 21.

³Cotner, p. 63.

⁴Cotner, p. 89.

⁵Cotner, p. 582.

⁶Alice Winchester, “Early America in Texas,” *Antiques* 80 (1961); 236.

So, whence the myth of Ima and Ura? Again, we must draw a blank. Perhaps, as Elsdon Smith has suggested,⁷ daughter "Ura" was the result of a contemporary writer's desire to "make a good story better." A Texas newspaperman has put the blame on the governor's enemies, of which he had many. Texas historian, T.R. Fehrenbach, feels that Ura "was either the spontaneous creation of some barroom wit" or, more likely, "a politically-inspired joke." Texas "politicking" was pretty violent and often "below the belt" in those days and this kind of defamation was not uncommon.⁸

A contemporary Texas newsman has candidly admitted that "I have always felt that the pun names created by the good governor's political detractors served him right for his utter thoughtlessness in imposing such a ridiculous name upon his daughter." Not a few Texans are certain that he must have been impelled by the inherent possibilities in the name to satisfy a penchant for practical joking. But those who knew him have little reason to suspect that he would ever have given his children names they could be ashamed of, or that would, in any way, be detrimental to them. He was not the perpetrator of cruel, practical jokes. Nor is it suspected that he would even have preferred a son to a daughter, as still others have maintained. In all probability, he simply liked the name and, in his lack of guile, had no doubts that it was a perfectly suitable name for a daughter, and the oddity in the combined form of the given name and surname is simply coincidental rather than deliberate. Or, possibly, he had originally intended it to be pronounced ['im] and this may well have been the pronunciation of the name of the nurse prototype in Uncle Thomas' epic, for *Emā*, in Hebrew, is "mother" and often connotes the helping or supportive role.

It is suspected, though it has never been verified, that the governor was aware of the mythical Ura and may have, on occasion, helped to dispel the allusions to her. A story is told that once, when the governor had taken Ima on a trip, he was met by persons who expressed regret that he had not brought his other daughter with him. By then, according to the story, she apparently had gone, and the explanation given was that Ura had been in the green apple tree. Now she had been warned about eating the green apples but she persisted and finally she ate so many of them and popped — that was the end of Ura!⁹

However it began, the legend is an old one, going back to the days

⁷*The Story of Our Names* New York: Harper & Bros., 1950), p. 97.

⁸Personal communication, July 7, 1969.

⁹Personal communication from Robert C. Cotner, Austin, Texas, June 22, 1969.

when Hogg was governor. It's been helped along by such seemingly authoritative sources as Jack Harper and John Newborn's *Odd Texas*¹⁰ in which it is stated that "Although one of Texas' able and great men, Governor Hogg gained his greatest and undying fame in an entirely different manner. Showing a rare sense of humor, he named his daughters Ima and Ura." Unfortunately, this seems to be true for what most Americans seem to remember of Governor Hogg are not his important contributions to Texas life and well-being but that he named his daughters *Ima* and *Ura*.

The story of Ima and Ura persists. Most Texans have heard it and many probably believe it. I have been told that "it's the kind of tale that people like to believe, even when they know they are being had."¹¹ Or people think "It just has to be true" since it's so widely known." I have even received letters from persons resenting my efforts to question this and similar onomastic legends as an attack upon basic American traditions and thus doubting my patriotism, apparently considering the Hogg sisters' myth in the same light as apple pie, mom, and the American flag.

But the matter gets out of hand when the Hogg sisters' legend inspires or at least attempts to validate accounts of other mythical families or individuals named *Hogg* or something similar. Near Clinton, Missouri, around the First World War, another Mr. Hogg, this one *with* an apparent "penchant for meanness," is supposed to have named his children *Ima*, *Hesa*, and *Shesa*. Also alleged to have had a sister *Ura* was a Farmington, Missouri native, Ima June Bugg (later Mrs. Murray Malin of Omaha, Nebraska), but research revealed that the sister was actually *Eula*.¹² Virginia, the daughter of the Reverend Boyd Hamm, a Lutheran minister of Leesville, South Carolina, is not infrequently joined by a non-existent sister *Henrietta*.

Any provocative last name like *Hogg* encourages the jokesters who delight in imagining other such curious combinations as *Diane Dekay*, *Seymour Hare*, *Philip R. Graves*, *Dick Hurts*, *Icey Snow*, *Golden Gates*, *Titus Canby*, *Justin Case*, *Tim Buhr*, *Hugh Tellem*, *Mac Aroni*, *Ura Nichols Worth*, *Ima Redhead*, *Gerri Attricks*, *Lena Genster*, *Ophelia Butt*, *Ivan Affulitch*, and not the least improbable *Pearl Handle* who was married to *Jack Knife*. Of course, I can't deny that persons with such names have existed but, in the absence of verification, I must regard them

¹⁰(Dallas: Banks Shaw & Co., 1936), p. 74.

¹¹Personal communication from T. R. Fehrenbach, San Antonio, Texas, July 7, 1969.

¹²Personal communication from Doris Hawkins, Columbia, Mo., Dec. 11, 1972, and personal communication from Caroline Detring, Farmington, Mo., Jan. 5, 1973.

with skepticism. I am particularly dubious of names of this kind which appear on lists but are unaccompanied by identifying or other corroborative information. My doubts are considerably increased when I fail to receive any response to an inquiry to the source of a questionable name, or else receive one or more of the conventional or stock answers of the folklore informant: "Well, I just heard it somewhere," or "Everybody in this town knows about him" or "Oh, he's for real; just check him out in the telephone book." And when I "check him out," I usually find that no such person exists or ever did.

My advice to those who wish to share with me from their collections of unusual names, and certainly to those who hope some day to publish their lists, is to gather as much background data on the bearers of these names as they can. At the very least, information on the sex, date and place of birth, and occupation should be furnished; and, if possible, the current address of the bearer should be included so he may be contacted for verification and further particulars. By this attempt, unless someone has gone to great lengths to create a convincing identity for a fictitious name, the collector can be reasonably sure that the bearer of the name exists. A request for further particulars from the bearer or, if possible, from his parents, may elicit an explanation of the name that could divest it of its humorous or suggestive connotation, as if it could have been established that *Ima* was intended to be pronounced ['im]. It has been my experience that, if handled judiciously, such direct inquiries will yield fruitful replies from many unusual name bearers or their parents.

If names are employed solely to illustrate the range and scope of the items in one's collection — which is certainly laudable — they should at least be accompanied, if only in footnote form, by references to their sources. So often am I sent newspaper clippings on unusual names with no mention of the publication or its date of issuance, making it exceedingly difficult or even impossible to track down the name bearer.

In any event, not only can my confidence in the authenticity of these names be immeasurably increased with sufficient identifying and background data, but the usefulness of both the names and the accompanying descriptive information for scholarly purposes can be assured.

Prestonsburg, Ky.

MALEDICTA

The International Journal of Verbal Aggression

The journal specializes in uncensored studies and collections of “offensive” words and expressions, in all languages.

Published every December in one *Summer* + *Winter* volume. Regular list price: \$23.50 each + postage. Price for members and for those who prepay in full: \$20.00 + postage for non-members.

Reinhold Aman, Editor, Maledicta Press, 331 South Greenfield Avenue, Waukesha, Wisconsin 53186 U.S.A.