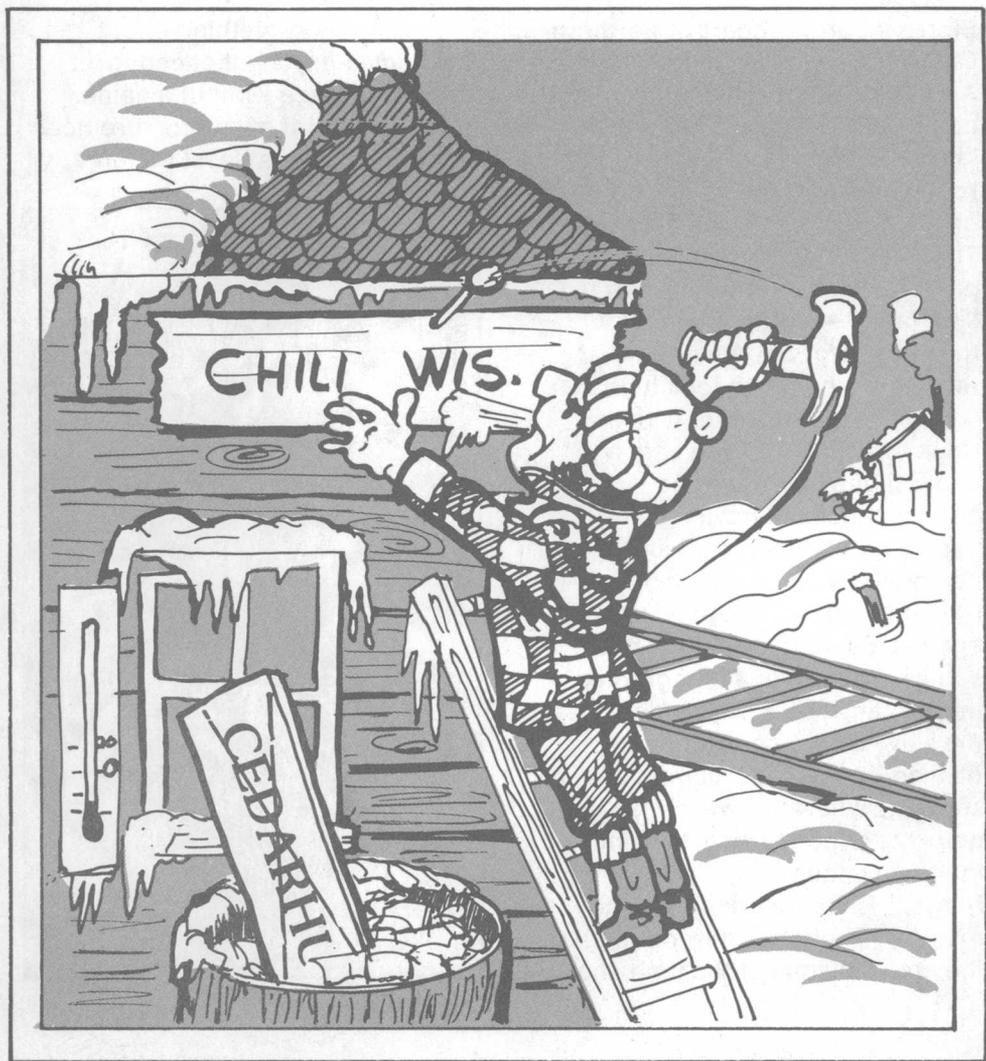


The Naming (and misnaming) of America



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by Mark Wexler

Jim Jam Ridge winds for several hundred feet along a spectacular section of the High Sierra, near the heart of northern California's Mother Lode country. According to local historians, its name dates back to a night in the late 1800s when a drunk prospector rolled into a campfire, exploding a handful of rifle shells in his pocket. The fatal incident left his two partners with a severe case of the "jim jams"—a common term in those days for the "shakes"—and that's how the name took hold.

My only encounter with the ridge took place a few years ago under much less dramatic circumstances. A novice backpacker at the time, I had just completed my first day of mountain trekking and was propped up against a boulder, trying to make some sense out of a topographic map of the area. I was baffled by the wavy brown lines and black dashes, and asked a companion to show me where we were. He quickly pointed to a curved line, marked by the words: "Jim Jam Ridge." It was an enlightening moment. Though I knew nothing of the area's history at the time, the

ridge immediately took on a personality for me merely because it had a name.

There is something about the human psyche that cannot tolerate a place without a name. It is almost as if a land feature does not exist at all—at least not on a



"Jim Jam Ridge," California

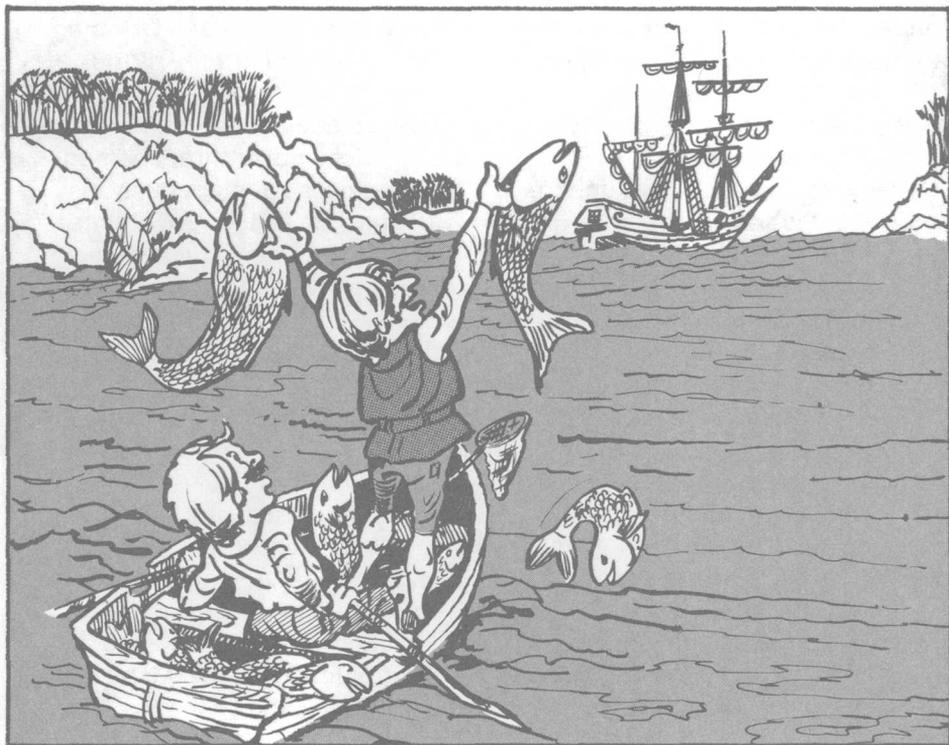
map or in the mind—until it bears a proper (or improper) sobriquet. It isn't just a matter of getting from one place to another, though God knows it's easier to get from Atchison to Topeka with names than it would be without them. Geographical labels are also necessary because they affect the way we perceive the world around us. If it weren't for its name, most of us might never know that Pikes Peak even exists.

In the U.S., the greatest collection of geographical names—some three million of them in all—are found on the more than 30,000 topographic maps published by the U.S. Geological Survey (USGS). The most familiar “topos” are the 7½-minute series used by backpackers, hunters and fishermen. On these maps, one inch equals 2,000 feet in the field. Each map covers roughly 50 to 75 square miles of the earth's surface. Whereas most road maps and family atlases designate man-made places and only the most prominent natural features, topos include the names, positions and elevations of virtually every landform in an area—no matter how small. That makes them the most detailed records available of not only the country's landscape, but its nomenclature as well.

“In a sense, the names of these maps are the language with which the nation's autobiography is written,” says Donald Orth, executive secretary of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. Indeed, behind such appellations as Shirttail Gulch, Tish-Tank-a-Tang

Creek, Hanalei Bay and Dripping Blood Mountain are the stories of hundreds of people who explored, surveyed and settled the continent. Often, these adventurers named land features spontaneously, as with Jim Jam Ridge. But at times, they chose to immortalize famous individuals, leaving us with such legacies as a city named after an Italian explorer (Columbus), a mountain named after a noted geologist (Whitney), a mining town named after a Swedish soprano (Jenny Lind) and a river named after a British sea captain (Hudson).

When the first European explorers ventured into the New World, they encountered a wide assortment of Indian names for geographical features. Many of those early explorers were either French or Spanish, and in recording the native terms in their own languages, they invariably changed them. In the Great Lakes region, for example, the Frenchmen Marquette and Joliet traveled through a vast scenic territory that the local Indians called “Mesconsing,” a word meaning “the long river.” In their diaries, the two men spelled it out as “Quisconsing.” Years later, the name was further changed to “Wisconsin.” In time, thousands of other Indian words were similarly adapted, leaving a heritage that today includes the names of 26 states (among them Alabama, Connecticut, Kentucky), 18 major cities (Chicago, Kansas City, Seattle), most of our largest lakes and rivers (Ontario, Tahoe, Mississippi), and thousands of small communities,



"Cape Cod," Massachusetts

from Apache Junction, Arizona, to Zilwaukee, Michigan.

While the French were exploring the interior, the English were getting established along the Atlantic Seaboard. On a spring day in 1602, a British sea captain named Bartholomew Gosnold anchored his ship off the coast of what would later become Massachusetts. That day, his crew "took great stores of codfish," causing the clever captain to name an adjacent point "Cape Cod." It was the first time an Englishman would name a North American landform for some member of the animal kingdom.

Feeling a bit homesick, the early British colonists christened

most of their coastal settlements not for animals but for their own hometowns. In New England, the Massachusetts Bay Company set up a court that, among other things, dictatorially decreed the name for each new township in the colony. As a result, the region became dotted with English names like Roxbury, Newberry, Dorchester and Plymouth. Apparently, however, the English were less loyal to their homeland when naming natural features. One of their first New World surveyors, William Byrd, named a small Virginia stream "Buffalo Creek" because of the "frequent tokens" he found there on the ground. During the same early eighteenth century expedition,



"Willamette River," Oregon

Byrd gave one North Carolina peak a title that would eventually spread throughout the entire continent: "Lover's Leap." Today, no state is without at least one.

After the Revolutionary War, Americans no longer wanted to name places for their European origins. Instead they turned to heroes of the war. Soon, a number of communities were named for such leaders as Franklin, Adams, Lafayette and Pulaski. Needless to say, however, the most popular name of the period was that of the new nation's first president. The first places to be named for him were on Manhattan Island: Fort Washington and Washington Heights. "After that, there was no ending, for the name of the man had come to stand for the hopes of

the people," observes researcher George R. Stewart. According to Stewart, the list of places named after the father of our country today includes one state, 32 counties, 121 cities and towns, 257 smaller townships, and dozens of lakes, streams and mountains.

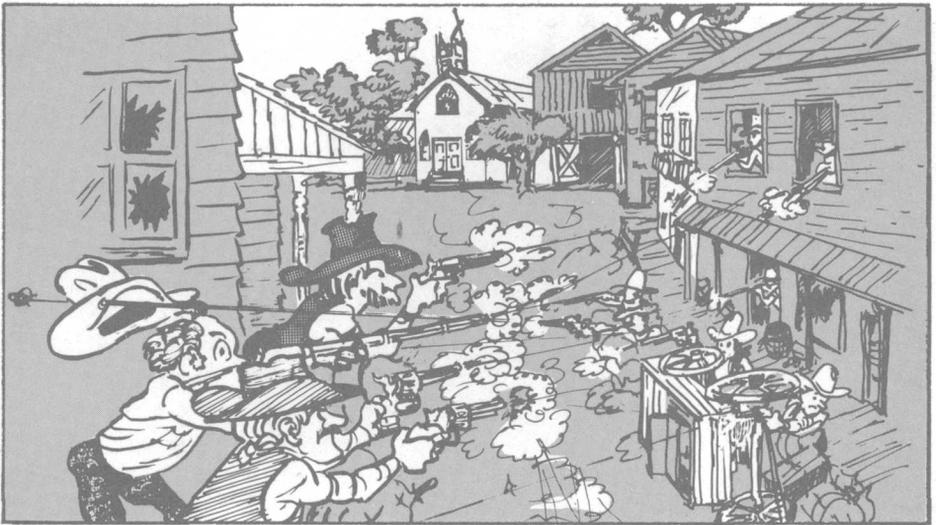
In the early days, most geographical names were chosen informally, sometimes out of anguish, sometimes out of joy, often on the spur of the moment. A case in point was an incident during the travels of Lewis and Clark. Upon seeing a body of water in the distance, according to one undoubtedly apocryphal account, Lewis said to William Clark: "Will, am it a river?" Thus, Oregon's Willamette River was said to be named.

Throughout the 1800s, such spontaneity was often the rule. Cut and Shoot, Texas, for example, was named after a community shootout over the shape of a new church steeple. One winter in Wisconsin, a railroad crew passed through the town of Cedarhurst and stopped to put up a new sign over the depot. According to one local report, a crew member was so upset over the minus-50-degree weather that he renamed the town on the spot, putting up a sign that read: "Chili, Wisconsin." The title stuck. At about the same time, in Alabama, a logging crew reported that every time its train passed through a small village near their camp, the people standing by the tracks were scratching their ankles. Evidently, the horses and cows held in pens beside the tracks attracted a large number of biting flies. The result: Scratch Ankle, Alabama.

At times, accidental names were created by a harried country

store owner, while applying for an official U.S. Post Office listing. Clio, California, for instance, was named by a shopkeeper for a can of sardines on his shelf. Licking, Missouri, was chosen by a local clerk who hunted at a natural salt lick just outside of town, where deer were plentiful. Nearby, another store owner applied for a postal listing under the name "Excelsior," but was turned down because the title was already claimed in Missouri. In response, he wrote back saying that any name would do, as long as it was "different or peculiar." A few weeks later, federal officials notified him that he was the postmaster of Peculiar, Missouri.

Because many settlers tended to stay put once they established a home, they gave little thought to the names they chose. As a result, there are now some 40 Goose Lakes in Michigan, 75 Long Lakes and more than 250 Mud Lakes. The



"Cut and Shoot," Texas

latter appears to have been a popular term throughout the Great Lakes region, since nearly every county in both Wisconsin and Minnesota has at least one Mud Lake. In California, more than 500 geographical features are named after the bear, another 200 are named "Rattlesnake," and nearly 100 mountains are known as either "bald" or "baldy." At one time in New York, so many communities had the same names that the state legislature arbitrarily renamed 33 towns.

Even the best intentions of some individuals to avoid duplication have backfired. In the 1890s, a surveyor named Stephen Barton founded the community of Isabella in central California because, he said, "no town on the continent was named for the good queen who financed the expedition of Columbus." Barton was obviously unaware of the fact that

nearly a dozen other towns already had the name.

Among animal names, the most common by far are those that refer to birds. According to Walter Ristow, a map expert with the U.S. Library of Congress, the eagle surpasses all other species as a place-name source, followed closely by such easily observable large birds as the swan, the goose, the turkey and the duck. Not every land feature was named for a bird sighted in the wild, of course. In the 1870s, a young couple was en route to a family dinner in Lane County, Oregon, when their horse lurched while crossing a stream. The jolt caused the woman to drop a fully-dressed Thanksgiving goose into the water. Ever since, that stream has been known as "Goose Creek."

By the late 1800s, confusion over geographical names had become a serious matter. With a



"Goose Creek," Oregon

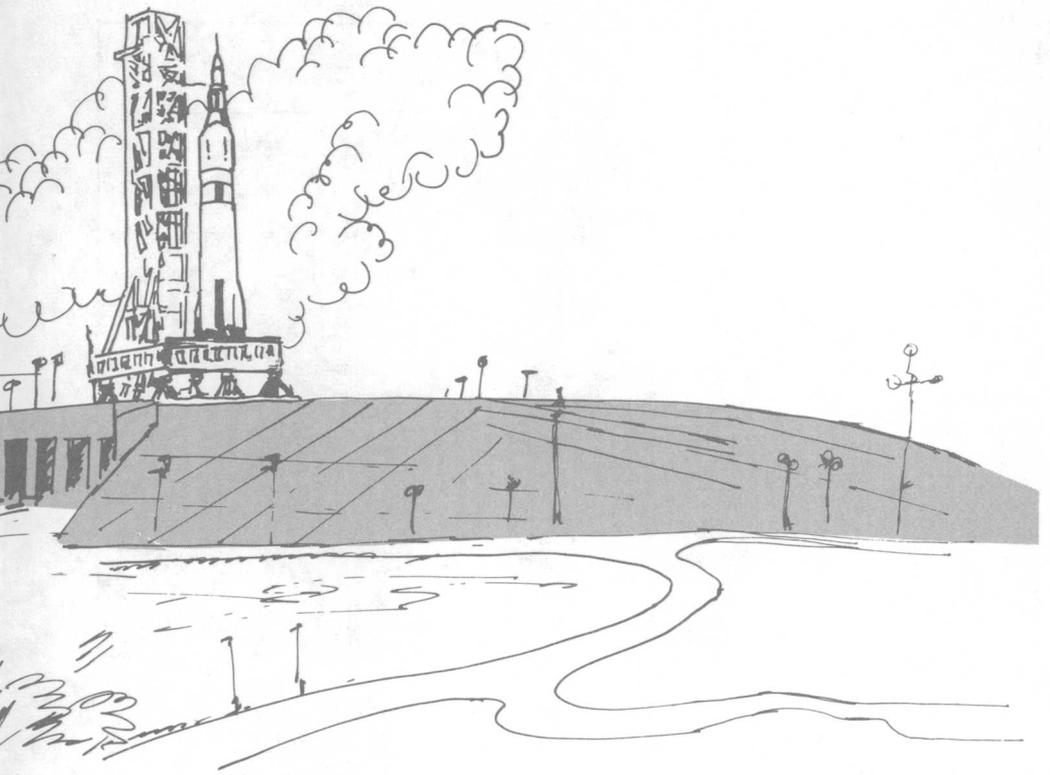


"Cape Canaveral," Florida

number of federal agencies all producing maps, some land features had several different names. To deal with this matter, the U.S. Board on Geographic Names was created, and it soon established one ironclad rule: Whenever there is a conflict, the local name and spelling win out.

Although there are few unnamed geographical features in the U.S. today, the Board's workload has not diminished. Each year, it reviews some 10,000 new

names and suggested changes. Less than a third of them are approved. Many of the turndowns are attempts to name some landform after a living person—a move that the Board will not allow. "You'd be surprised how many people want to honor themselves," muses Orth, a soft-spoken gentleman who may wield more influence on the naming process than anyone else in the country today. "Personally, I believe that some of the least interesting labels we

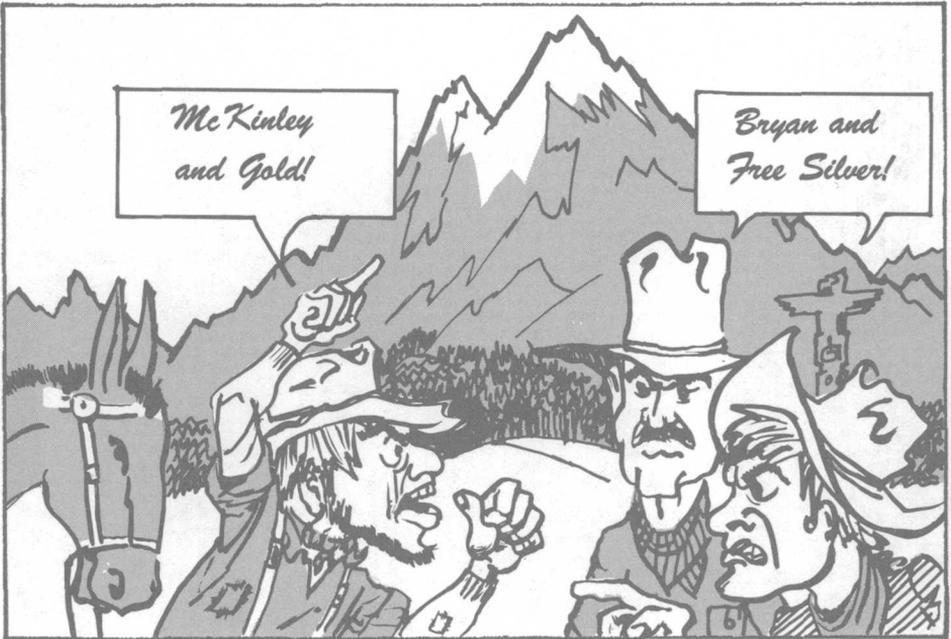


have are those named after people.” That may help explain why he personally objects to the suggestion to change Colorado’s Lone Eagle Peak to Lindbergh Peak.

In most cases, the Board never wavers from its local-usage rule. As a result, it has in recent years gone along with such local wishes as changing the name of Hot Springs, New Mexico, to “Truth or Consequences,” and with the desire of one West Virginia community to go from “Mole Hill” to “Mountain.”

Occasionally, however, the Board has not correctly assessed

local wishes. Such was the case with the hotly contested change of Cape Canaveral to Cape Kennedy in 1963. “It came during a period of emotional hysteria,” recalls Orth, “and the change should never have been made.” Canaveral, a Spanish term meaning “place of the reeds,” is one of the oldest recorded geographical names in North America, and many Florida officials vehemently objected to changing it. Finally, after ten years of debate—during which time most official Florida state maps retained the original name—the federal government dropped “Kennedy” and the Cape again became “Canaveral.”



"Mount McKinley," Alaska

"Geographic names," observes Orth, "are such an important part of our lives that there is almost always a strong emotional response to changing them." Today, emotions are running high over a suggested name change for Alaska's Mount McKinley. Centuries before the white man ever ventured into the northland, native Alaskans knew it as "Denali," or "the great one." It gained its present name in 1896 when prospector William Dickey got into an argument with two supporters of William Jennings Bryan and his free-silver movement. Dickey retaliated by writing a newspaper article in which he named the mountain for the champion of the gold standard, then presidential candidate William McKinley. From that beginning, the name eventually worked its way onto maps and into books.

Now, some people want to change the mountain's name back to "Denali," because, as one Anchorage newspaper put it, "McKinley never even got near it." "Judging from the mail we are receiving, public sentiment seems to be running two-to-one in favor of the change," says Orth. Nevertheless, a group of Congressmen from McKinley's home state of Ohio recently introduced a resolution that would make the name McKinley permanent. The matter is now in the hands of Congress.

Off-color names have presented surprisingly few problems for the Board on Geographic Names. "Private citizens are usually our best censors," notes Orth. In Oregon recently, a federal official was verifying map names and came upon a discrepancy. It seemed that local residents had changed the

name of one area from "Whorehouse Meadow" to "Naughty Girl Meadow" without notifying the government. The new name now appears on all current USGS maps.

Racist names have proven much more troublesome to the Board than vulgar ones. In earlier times, places like "Jap Creek" in Oregon and "Nigger Ben Spring" in California were actually put on government maps. Finally, in the 1960s, Secretary of Interior Stuart Udall suggested that the Board change all such names on every government topo map. Within months, the Board had made the changes, creating new names like "Japanese Hollow" and "Negro Ben Mountain" in the process. But now the term "Negro" is no longer universally acceptable and the Board is presently pondering whether to change all such names to "Black."

No matter how carefully they are concocted, some names can be deceiving. Not long ago, I was in Death Valley National Monument, camping in a barren place called Furnace Creek. I asked a park ranger where the name "Furnace" came from and he launched into a long discourse about how the heat and total lack of rainfall in the area had prompted one pioneer to choose the obviously appropriate title. That night, while my friends and I tried to sleep on the open ground, we were inundated by a torrential downpour.

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Senior Editor Mark Wexler is based in Milwaukee, a city named after the Potawatomi Indian term

meaning "gathering place of the rivers."

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