

Comment by the Editor

THE CHARACTER OF NAMES

The name of a place, like any other noun, is a linguistic convenience. The word which denotes a country, a stream, or a town is in itself merely a symbol by which people may think in common terms. To mention Iowa is to describe the Commonwealth according to the conceptions and experiences of those who see or hear the word. One might think prairies and another tall corn, but to all it would signify the same place. Without such general usage the word which designates a particular object is meaningless. Three months ago "whoopee" was an uncommon exclamation, meaning hurrah if anything, but now it has become a noun which everybody uses accurately but no one can define precisely. It may never get into the dictionary, though for a while at least it will serve as a convenient means of expression.

Place names have much the same origin and development as other nouns. In a study of Iowa place names, Allen Walker Read has discovered that relatively few are indigenous. Creeks seem to be the most common subject of such nomenclature (Willow Creek, Catfish Creek, Big Whisky Creek), but several towns may be placed in the same category

(Eagle Grove, Wall Lake, Strawberry Point). Many of the descriptive names used by the pioneers, like Hoosier Point, Buttermilk Hollow, and Frenchtown, have been supplanted by the more artificial Urbana, Miles, and Gilbertville.

Indeed, most places in Iowa have been more or less formally christened by early settlers, leading citizens, legislators, or railroad officials. The process has been conscious and arbitrary, with the result that the names applied have usually been devoid of local significance.

Names of persons appear to have been the principle source of Iowa place names, though some towns, like Lowell, were named for older cities as an expression of hope. Occasionally a pioneer clung to the same name for the successive settlements he founded in different States during the westward course of his migration. Aaron Street, who emigrated from Salem, New Jersey, founded a town in Ohio, another in Indiana, and his son one in Iowa, each of which was named Salem. No doubt the literature familiar to the pioneers had some influence on Iowa nomenclature; while deep-seated piety may have suggested the virtues of amity, independence, gravity, tranquility, and enterprise as proper names — most of which have now disappeared in a more materialistic age. Perhaps the most peculiar Iowa place names, yet characteristic of the nonchalance of the naming methods that prevailed, are those of Delmar, Le Mars, and Primghar which were manu-

factured from the initials of members of railroad excursion parties.

EVOLUTION OF IOWA PLACE NAMES

To the student of word origins, forms, and meanings, the names of places offer a rich field for investigation. Here is language being made under known conditions: any country or community is a veritable laboratory of etymology. From the place names of Iowa a philologist may deduce various rules of word formation and discover tendencies of usage which may pervade the whole language. In the matter of suffixes, -ton seems to be the favorite in Iowa at present, with -ville second, City third, -burg fourth, -land fifth, and -grove sixth, whereas seventy years ago the order of popularity was -ville, -grove, -ton, City, Creek, and -burg. Similarly, generic names like Point, Run, Prairie, and Corners have gone out of fashion.

Probably the most conspicuous philological tendency in Iowa has been toward simplification of place names. Long, pretentious names, such as Rocksylvania (Iowa Falls), have never been popular. Efforts to change the name of the Upper Iowa River to Oneota, which is shorter and more appropriate though somewhat lofty, have been unsuccessful. In many instances, however, suffixes like City, Junction, and Center have been dropped, unnecessary letters have been omitted, particularly in substituting burg for burgh and boro for borough, apostrophes have

disappeared, and names originally in two parts have been unified as in the case of Vanhorn for Van Horne.

Of course such changes are not accomplished suddenly. Witness the evolution of Sergeant's Bluff (1854), Woodbury (1862), Sergeant Bluffs (1870), Sergeant (June, 1883), and finally Sergeant Bluff (July, 1883). For years Morningside has been the generally accepted form, yet the *Sioux City Journal* persists in the use of Morning Side. Although common usage may vary widely, the spelling of a place name adopted by the National Geographic Board or indicated in the United States Postal Guide may be regarded as official.

PHILOLOGY AND HISTORY

Philology involves history. The specific use and development of words is the story of the language, and the reliability of philological conclusions would seem to depend upon the accuracy of historical observations. Yet between the philologist and the historian a difference appears. The attention of one is directed primarily toward the variations of word forms, while the other looks first for the facts pertaining to origin and usage. The philologist is inclined to accept the sources of information at face value, but the historian insists upon appraisal and rejects the less trustworthy. The historian must know the causes, but the philologist is satisfied with effects.

One of the most fascinating but elusive phases of history is the origin of place names. The facts are usually to be found only in uncertain recollections and the truth is almost invariably obscured by a mass of conjecture. To determine the true origin of Iowa place names would require the critical technique of the historian, involve extensive correspondence, and necessitate the coöperation of many connoisseurs of local history. But until that is done the philology of Iowa place names must remain tentative.

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