

## Literary Place Names

The names of places in Iowa reflect the life of the times when they were named. Prominent men of the day were thus commemorated by the pioneers — some who are still regarded as national heroes but others like Senator R. E. Fenton, Governor J. M. Rusk of Wisconsin, or William T. Senter, a politician of Tennessee, for each of whom an Iowa town was named, have long since been forgotten. The Crimean War contributed the Russian name Sevastapol to an old town, now a part of Des Moines, while many of Iowa's Spanish-sounding place names were introduced after the Mexican War. The name of the State itself and some of the rivers, counties, and towns are, quite naturally, of Indian origin. Another group of names in Iowa is apparently derived from literature, and perhaps from them something can be learned of the character of the reading matter of the pioneer Iowan.

One author in particular seems to have been doubly popular, for we have both Irving, in Benton County, and Irvington, in Kossuth County. At the time the town of Irving was named (1854), Washington Irving was seventy-one years old. He had begun writing before the age of twenty, and already his *Rip Van Winkle* and *Legend of Sleepy Hollow* were American classics, though his *Tour of the*



*Prairies* may have been particularly interesting to the people in the West. That his works were read in Iowa is indicated by the fact that the library of the Horticultural and Literary Association at Cedar Falls, one of the early libraries in the State, had a set of his books in 1861. The town of Irvington, founded two years after Irving, was laid out by a speculative town-lot company that hoped to attract the county seat away from Algona. There is considerable, if not preponderant, evidence to indicate that this village was not named for the famous author at all, but for Irving Clarke instead, the first white child born in Kossuth County.

Two other major lights represented are Bryant and Poe. A civil engineer on the railroad, Isaac Howe, was responsible for the name of Bryant in Clinton County. The town was named toward the end of William Cullen Bryant's long career as editor of the New York *Evening Post*, while he was one of the leaders of the antislavery crusade. But there may have been another reason that had a slight influence upon the name of the town: the Midland Railroad had an alphabetical plan for its towns — Almont, Bryant, Charlotte, Delmar, and Elwood, all in a line west from Clinton — and Bryant dropped neatly into its place. Edgar Allen Poe is represented by a township in Ringgold County. Riley Township in the same county would seem promising, but the name comes from L. D. Riley, a member of the board of supervisors.



The waywardness of fame is shown strikingly by the decline in the reputation of Mrs. Lydia Sigourney. During her lifetime she was one of the most widely known and highly esteemed writers of her day. Her work was published in all kinds of magazines, from the *North American Review* to the obscurest Sunday school weekly, and at the time of her death she had half a hundred volumes to her credit, ranging from moral poetry to advice for mothers. The selection of the name Sigourney for the county seat of Keokuk County is credited to Dr. George H. Stone who was one of the commissioners to locate and name the seat of government in the new county. He was an exemplary man except that he went on a yearly spree and was fond of Mrs. Sigourney's pieces, because, it is said, of their "moral and salutary effects in his young family." Mrs. Sigourney herself evidently appreciated having an Iowa town named in her honor for she made provision for the planting of trees in a park at Sigourney. One of her poems relates to an incident which occurred in southeastern Iowa. "The Indian Girl's Burial" celebrates in sentimental rhyme the pathetic death of Kalawequois, a Sac maiden who died of consumption in 1837 and was buried on a hill near the road between Montrose and Fort Madison.

Another Iowa town commemorates the work of an author who died as recently as 1915. F. Hopkinson Smith gained wide popularity through his book *Colonel Carter of Cartersville*, which appeared in



1891. The town in Cerro Gordo County called Cartersville has the book as its namesake.

That the pioneers read history is shown by the fact that they honored the name of George Bancroft. Judge A. C. Call is generally given credit for selecting his name for the town in Kossuth County. Perhaps the name of the town was suggested by the extinct county of Bancroft whose territory now constitutes the northern part of Kossuth County. Along with Bancroft should be noted Clio (Wayne County), the name of the muse of history.

The selection of the names Audubon and Humboldt implies an interest in scientific writing. J. J. Audubon, the noted ornithologist, for whom the county was named, had made a trip through this part of the country in 1843. One section of the *Laws of Iowa*, 1850, reads, Resolved, "that the following shall be the boundaries of a new county which shall be called Audibon", but that peculiar spelling was not retained. Baron Alexander von Humboldt, the noted German scientist and traveller, for whom Humboldt County and its principal town are named, was known chiefly for his twenty-volume description of his extensive explorations in Spanish America at the beginning of the nineteenth century.

Turning now to British authors, the name Avoca appears to be a tribute to Tom Moore's "Sweet Vale of Avoca". The town had first been called Pacific and later Botna, but the change is attributed to a railway excursion party. The group walked out



to a hill overlooking the town, and one of the gentlemen, inspired by the quiet valley before him, repeated several lines of the "Sweet Vale of Avoca". One of the ladies then clapped her hands and exclaimed, "That should be the name of the town!" Her suggestion was later accepted.

Two other poems that are favorites even now were evidently read then. H. D. Rice in 1868 named his new town in Lyon County, Doon. He is said to have received the suggestion from a friend, Mr. L. F. Knight, who settled with him on the Rock River. In the fall Mr. Rice returned to Clay County for his family. Thus left in the loneliness of his solitude on the banks of the Rock River, Mr. Knight recalled Burns's poem:

Ye banks and braes o' bonnie Doon,  
How can ye bloom sae fresh and fair?  
How can ye chant, ye little birds,  
And I sae weary, fu' o' care!

Mr. Knight had the name Doon ready, then, when Rice returned. Auburn, in Sac County, attests to the popularity of Goldsmith's "Deserted Village", although the name was borrowed from the city in New York.

Lord Bulwer-Lytton, whose novel *The Last Days of Pompeii* (1843) is still recommended on most school lists, is remembered in the town of Lytton in Sac County. Stanhope in Hamilton County was named, according to some authorities, for Lady Hester Stanhope, who travelled in the Near East



for many years, and then, having adopted Eastern costume and manners, settled on Mount Lebanon as a seeress whom the natives held in great awe. Ossian in Winneshiek County, it is true, gets its name from the middle name of its founder, John Ossian Porter. But in it perhaps is reflected also the great popularity of James MacPherson's famous poems of Ossian, so highly praised by Byron, Goethe, and others of the romantic school.

It has frequently been remarked that nowhere in the United States does the word Shakespeare occur as a geographic name, and yet there are a great many Avons and Stratfords, and even a Romeo and a Juliet. In Iowa, Avon appears as a country village in Polk County southeast of Des Moines. An Avon was also once a rival of Mt. Ayr for the county seat of Ringgold County, but it never rose above the status of a "paper town". Stratford, a name borrowed from the English town, is found in Hamilton County. Although there is no positive proof, the town name Waverly is generally thought to commemorate the notable series of Sir Walter Scott's Waverley novels. The name is used extensively in the United States, but in every instance except the town in Kansas the *e* is omitted from the last syllable.

Adolph Benson, a professor at Yale University, has written of Frederika Bremer: "It is no exaggeration to say that Frederika Bremer was one of the most celebrated and influential Swedish women that



ever lived." Her most notable works were her letters of travel, among which were several concerning Iowa which she wrote while on a boat trip down the Mississippi in 1850. Four names in Iowa record the impression that her visit made. Bremer County, for one, bears her name, at the suggestion of General A. K. Eaton, then a member of the legislature from Delaware County. A postoffice in Bremer County with the name Bremer was established in 1858, and the town and township of Frederika in Bremer County are memorials of her first name. The former name of Lovilia in Monroe County was also Bremer.

Even some of the ephemeral literature has been signalized. A railroad official happened to be reading a book containing the name Carnforth, which appealed to him so much that he applied it to the town of that name in Poweshiek County. The now defunct town of Simoda, a mile and a half east of Harlan in Shelby County, is reputed to have got its name from a character in a novel which one of the first settlers happened to be reading at the time. The town in Jones County once called Blue Cut adopted the name Amber at the suggestion of one of the founders, J. C. Ramsey, for a prominent character in a novel then running serially in the *New York Tribune*. A celebrated old novel, *The Heir of Radcliffe*, is remembered in the town Radcliffe in Hardin County.

But not all towns that bear authors' names were



named for the authors. Thomas Hardy, for instance, had almost no fame in 1881 when the town of Hardy was laid out. Mark Twain was very popular with the pioneers, for they reprinted his work frequently in their newspapers, and yet the town of Clemens was named for a local hotel-keeper. The name Dickens comes from a member of a railroad construction company. Although no information is available relating to Milton in Van Buren County, the Milton of Mills County (now Malvern) was named for Lieutenant Milton Summers, and the Milton of Pocahontas County (now Rolfe) had its name borrowed from Milton, New York. The origin of the name of Emerson in Mills County is not known, but Ralph Waldo Emerson had lectured in Iowa only a few years before the town was founded.

No doubt there are other places in Iowa whose names may be traced to a literary origin, but this selection will suffice to demonstrate one of the influences of pioneer reading and at the same time afford a clue to what was most admired in literature by various influential citizens at different periods. Although our town names may not represent a wide selection in literature, it is usually said that the pioneers knew a few books well. Irving, Scott, Burns, Shakespeare, and the others — these surely represent a worthy literary taste and cultural standing.

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