

Comment by the Editor

THE ORIGIN OF NAMES

Henry Clay Dean. How many American statesmen have, like Henry Clay, left a record of their popularity in the names of the youth of their generation! A horde of namesakes is the fate of all who achieve public notice. The patronymic of every President from George Washington to Calvin Coolidge has been exploited by political adherents in quest of suitable names for their sons, while the fame of military heroes, great writers, and even notorious prize fighters is likewise perpetuated. Most of the Deweys finished college two or three years ago, and the sons of baseball fans will soon be explaining that Ruth has changed its gender. Since mothers vote it is quite likely that many a boy will bear the anomalous name of Calvin Woodrow.

Historically, given names preceded surnames. Men were called Erik or John or Harry, and only the need of distinguishing between generations gave rise to the surnames of Eriksson, Johnson, and Harrison. Some Scandinavians still preserve the old custom of christening their sons according to the root of the family cognomen. Thus Erik Eriksson's sons may all be named Erik. This sys-

tem worked very well in the old days before the law took notice of a man's every act and possession — when the business of living was simple. But later the need of precision demanded that the records should distinguish Sam on the hill or John the smith from the other Sams or Johns thereabout. So it came to pass that geographical features and the prevalent trades became the surnames of people.

Place names, in turn, are often derived from the names of prominent people. Take the counties of Iowa for instance. More than two-thirds of them bear the name of some notable personage, while the same would probably be true of the cities and towns. The ninety-nine counties had all been created before 1860, and the memory of every President up to that time, except Tyler, Fillmore, and Pierce, has been perpetuated in the name of an Iowa county. Statesmen, early settlers, and Indians seem to have been the most popular source of place names in Iowa.

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