

The Name of Odebolt

Unique among place names is Odebolt. Several explanations have been advanced concerning the origin of the name of this Iowa town. Various stories that have gained currency may possess elements of truth, but none of them is without a flaw.

One account assumes that the name originated from a Frenchman who lived in a cabin on the bank of a small stream, now known as Odebolt Creek. There are several versions of this story. So far as can be ascertained, the first attempt to account for the origin of the name "Odebolt" in this way was in an article published in the *Sac County Herald*, February 2, 1887. The editor of this paper, Will Hubbard Kernen, was something of a poet and gifted with a vivid imagination. The article as printed arouses suspicions that the explanation was a product of Kernen's fertile imagination. Definite dates and the names of witnesses are missing—omissions which cast doubt upon the validity of the legend.

"Back in the fifties sometime," the story began, "a Frenchman named Odebolt settled on the creek north of town, built a cabin, and supported himself by hunting, trapping, fishing and cultivating a small plot of prairie.

"He was a peculiar looking man, if the old set-

tlers remember aright — tall, stoop-shouldered, spectrally slim, with long raven hair. He had a hooked nose, a large mouth with singularly thin lips and very handsome teeth. His eyes were black, piercing, brilliant and threw an intellectual light upon his whole countenance.

“He was still on the sunrise side of forty-five when he came here; but he had travelled everywhere, seen everything that was worth seeing, and finally concluded to settle down for life, far from the madding crowd. The region was an unbroken prairie in those old days, and the solitude in which he delighted remained undisturbed for long years. But finally the country began to be settled up, and he left. Pioneers who knew him and knew his history, called the creek by which he had located L'Odebolt in his honor.”

In the issue of the *Sac County Herald* a week later, on February 9, 1887, there appeared further material concerning the mysterious Odebolt. What purported to be a letter to the editor sent from Early, Iowa, was printed under the headline “Another leaf from the life of Jean Odebolt”. This letter, it is important to note, was unsigned, and it also bears evidence of having sprung from Editor Kern-en's imagination.

The first article on Odebolt in the *Herald* had prompted the writer of the second to tell a story of Odebolt alleged to have been told to him by a settler who had come to Douglas Township, Sac County, in

1859. As this settler was riding horseback one day, he came upon a cabin on the bank of a stream, later called Odebolt Creek. Hearing moans issuing from the cabin, he dismounted and went in. There he beheld a man who appeared to be in great agony though there were no visible signs of injury. Asked to explain his conduct, the man related the following weird story:

“My name is Jean Odebolt. My home was in Paris. I am a Frenchman. I had a wife and child — a lovely little boy, just three years old. She deserted me — deserted me, and took the boy with her — deserted me in the company of a rich young man named Paulin. I sought everywhere for them. In vain. Years passed. Finally I learned that Paulin was living in Lyons. I went to that city and discovered that he had tired of my wife, a year after her flight with him, and left her and my child to starve. They were dead. I swore to be avenged. I had my opportunity at last. He was sleeping in his chair at his club-house — drunk. He was alone in the room. I stole in, I drew a dagger, and stabbed him to the heart. One drop of his blood fell here — here in the centre of my palm. It stung me like a serpent. On every anniversary of his death it half maddens me with pain — with a torment that burns, stings, tortures me in body, heart, brain — aye, in my very soul of souls itself.”

At the time these two accounts were published in the *Herald* a young man by the name of W. E.

("Billy") Hamilton was living in Odebolt. In May, 1887, he left his employment in the abstract office of W. A. Helsell and began the publication of the *Odebolt Chronicle*. He evidently treasured the *Herald* stories for in 1907 he printed in the *Chronicle* his own version of the French trapper after whom the town of Odebolt was alleged to have been named. Being a man of nimble wit, Editor Hamilton modified the story somewhat to make it more plausible. A definite date for the trapper's residence on the creek was mentioned and the name "Odebolt" was spelled "Odebeau" to make it seem more like French.

Following Hamilton's account, William H. Stennett, who compiled the *History of the Origin of the Place Names Connected with the Chicago & North Western Railway* published by the railroad company in 1908, asserted that Odebolt was a name derived from the "corruption of *Odebeau*, the name of a French trapper, who in 1855 lived on the bank of the creek."

Before accepting this version, however, the discrepancies with the earlier *Herald* accounts must be explained. Was the alleged trapper named Odebolt or Odebeau? Who specifically could vouch for his presence on the creek? The records of the American Fur Company do not list any such person in Iowa nor any name that would even suggest either Odebolt or Odebeau. Had such a trapper existed, the chances are that he would have dealt with the

American Fur Company, but the records are silent regarding him. Furthermore, had the creek been named for such an individual the name would surely have appeared on a map before 1875. Yet no earlier map bearing the name "Odebolt Creek" has been found. As the knowledge about this creek in 1856 was very inaccurate, it is not likely that any one would have accurate knowledge of a Frenchman living on the banks of the creek.

Probably the most common version of the origin of the name "Odebolt" is a rather preposterous story about a German who was fording the creek when the king bolt dropped out of the wagon gear. Whereupon, it is alleged, he exclaimed, "O de bolt!" Consequently the name "Odebolt" was given to the creek and from the creek the town was named. The absence of a definite name, date, and location prevents verification of the yarn.

There is another version, however, which is worthy of consideration. According to this story, J. B. Calkins and P. K. Sanderson came to Sac County about 1874 and bought a half section of land in Richland Township. They made the purchase through Captain William Familton, the agent of the Iowa Rail Road Land Company who had his headquarters at Denison. In the creek not far from the land purchased was a ford concerning which Captain Familton related the following incident.

One day, shortly after he had come to Denison as the land agent in 1871, he was out with a party of

six men, including a Frenchman. Toward the close of the day they arrived at the ford which was wider than usual because of rain that had fallen during the day. When about half way across, the Frenchman, who was seated on the front seat of the wagon, happened to lean forward. He noticed that the bolt fastening the doubletree to the wagon tongue was about to fall out, so in excitement he shouted, "O de bolt!" After the bolt had been put in place, the party continued on their way, and thereafter the ford was called the Odebolt Ford and from it the creek was named Odebolt.

This is a plausible story but unfortunately it rests upon the unsupported testimony of Captain Familton. Mrs. Lelia Smith Wolf of Odebolt heard it second-hand from her uncle, Mr. Calkins, and her cousin, Mr. Sanderson. And Ed Marsh, who corroborates Mrs. Wolf's statement, came to Sac County in 1876 to work for P. K. Sanderson. His source of information is the same as hers.

Certain it is that the creek had been named by the time Calkins and Sanderson came, for a map published in 1875 in Andreas's *Illustrated Historical Atlas of the State of Iowa* shows the creek labelled "Odebott" — probably meant to be "Odebolt". On the other hand, a map in Hair's *Iowa State Gazetteer*, published in 1865, shows the creek but gives no name for it. From this it might be deduced that the creek was named between 1865 and 1875.

J. N. Newhall's *New Map of Iowa* for 1848 does

not show the creek, nor even the Maple River. The Boyer River is made to flow from the rather large Lake Boyer. Evidently this is intended to be what is now known as Wall Lake, but the Boyer River does not rise in Wall Lake. This map is evidence of the ignorance which prevailed regarding the geography of western Iowa only eighty years ago. By 1856, about the time Jean Odebeau or Odebolt is alleged to have been living on the creek, knowledge of the streams in that region was not much more accurate, for Charles W. Morse's *Cerographic Map of Iowa* shows the Soldier River rising in Sac County where Odebolt Creek is located.

If Familton's account was authentic, the naming of the creek must have occurred in 1871, for there is evidence to show that the word "Odebolt" was in use that early. C. J. Deacon of Cedar Rapids, who was connected with the Iowa Rail Road Land Company, has a distinct recollection that Hiram Wheeler called his land "L'Odebolt Grange". He also remembers hearing John B. Calhoun, the land commissioner of the company, frequently refer to "L'Odebolt Grange". When it is recalled that Mr. Wheeler made his purchase in the fall of 1871, and that Captain Familton had not come to Denison until the previous spring, it is evident that the incident related by Familton must have happened, if at all, during the few months intervening.

It would be presumptuous to say that the Familton account is not true. The place is definitely

located a short distance east of the present town of Arthur, and an approximate date is available. There is no authentic record of the name Odebolt being used prior to 1871, but, as has been shown, it was in use about that time. It is therefore possible that Odebolt is a name derived from a Frenchman's exclamation "O de bolt!"—except that he would probably have said "O ze bolt".

Pending further proof, the presentation of other theories will not be amiss. It has been suggested that the name Odebolt is of Spanish origin. This is not altogether impossible since Iowa, as a part of Louisiana, was under Spanish control from 1762 to 1803. Records of Spanish activity in the region are almost altogether missing but it would have been possible, though not probable, for a Spanish name to have been assigned to the creek. Had this been done the name should have appeared on early maps, but none has been found prior to 1875 bearing the name.

Another comparatively simple explanation never seems to have occurred to any one. Why not explain Odebolt as a name derived by corrupting the French words *eau de beau*? Literally, the words would be translated "water of beauty" or more freely "beautiful water". Such a use of the French words would not be proper usage but it would have been possible for a French half-breed trapper or even any uneducated Frenchman to have used them in the way mentioned. Certainly in the early days the creek had much more water in it than at present

and, flowing through the green unbroken prairie, might have inspired some one to call it "beautiful water" in faulty French. The expression *eau de beau* could easily have been corrupted into Odebolt, for *eau*, meaning water, is pronounced "O" and the phonetics of *beau* and bolt are sufficiently similar to account for the anglicized form.

While there are several suppositions regarding the origin of the name Odebolt, there is no dispute as to the source of the name of the town. All accounts agree that the town was named after the creek. But why should the town have been called Odebolt instead of Wheeler which would seem to have been equally appropriate?

In 1877, while the Maple River Railroad was being constructed, those engaged in the work made their headquarters at the Sanderson house which had purposely been built large enough to serve as a sort of wayside inn. Similarly, when the town of Odebolt was being platted, officials of the Blair Town Lot and Land Company stayed there.

One evening while the land company officials were eating supper and discussing matters of common interest, Sparks was suggested as a name for the new town, but there seemed to be a general feeling that the place should be called Wheeler. Whereupon Mrs. Sanderson, who was waiting on the table, felt called upon to interrupt.

"Is there a county in the United States which does not have a town called Wheeler?" she inquired.

“Madam, you don’t seem to like the name Wheeler”, remarked one of the men.

“I respect Mr. Wheeler very much,” she replied, “but the name is too common to apply to our town.”

“Well in that case we’ll allow you to name the town,” suggested one of the officials.

Taking him at his word, she responded at once. “Since you are allowing me to name the town, I’ll name it after the creek. Call the town Odebolt.”

ERIK MCKINLEY ERIKSSON