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THE TREASURE HOUSE OF CANADIAN PLACE NAMES*

Every now and then you will meet someone who will look a little sheepish when you ask where he is from. "Aw," he will bridle, "It's just a little wee place — you've never even heard of it." So you press on, "Well where?" "What's it called?" "Oh, it's just a spot on the map," he'll mutter apologetically. But when you do manage to pry the name of his hometown from him, it turns out to be Ashuapmouchouan! The little "spot on the map" in the Lake St. John district of Quebec is plunged into shadow by its huge name. Your new friend, by this time, has thrown out all thirty-one inches of his mighty chest to proclaim: "That's Indian for 'where we watch for deer'! And we DO TOO!!" he will proclaim to all Canadians within earshot.

The Indians gave title to many a Canadian locality. The fact is, that an examination of place names of Canada makes one wonder how any pioneer liquor traders ever managed to lure the Indians into the orbit of alcohol, such was the tribal preoccupation with water. Take these for instance: Cobequid, at the eastern end of the Bay of Fundy in Nova



Scotia, is a translation of Micmac Indian for "the end of rushing waters". The Province of Saskatchewan is named from a pair of Cree Indian words — Kishika, meaning "rapid" and Djiwan, meaning "current". Hence, too of course, the name of the Saskatchewan town of Swift Current.

Illecillewaet, the name of a canyon, a river, and a whistle stop east of Revelstoke, British Columbia, is Indian for "swift water". Oromocto, the name denoting an island, a lake, a village, and a river in New Brunswick is Maliseet Indian for "good river". The historical name Klondyke means: "river full of fish". It is a translation of an Indian word that sounds like "throndiuk". Ontario abounds with watery Indian names: Nipigon, meaning "clear, fast water"; Kaministiquia — "twisting water"; Missanabie — "big water"; Metagama — "river that flows out of the lake"; Nemegos — "flowing water"; Biscotasing — "body of water with long

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Cf. note, p. 85.

arms" Minitaki, Manitoba, gets its name from an Indian invitation to "take a drink!" — Water, obviously.

Of course the Indians, in identifying locations in a primitive land, were not always obsessed by the water. Every now and then something else claimed their attention. One of the most logical is Malakwa, a tiny settlement in south central British Columbia. Malakwa is the Indian name for mosquito. If you have ever been there you will agree that is is a most appropriate choice! Okanagan — the name of the famous British Columbia fruit-growing valley — is Indian for "places cut through". Savanne, Ontario, means "level tract of land". The capital city of Saskatchewan, Regina, underwent a double translation. In the early days it was known as "Pile of Bones". That was a translation from the Indian word "was-cana" — for indeed there were many bleaching bison bones on the prairies as civilization spread west. Wascana is preserved in the name of a creek and a lake in the modern city. Medicine Hat, Alberta, was not always known by that name. Once upon a time its name was Saamis which means the "teepee of an Indian medicine man".

The famous Ontario name of Muskoka has nothing to do with water even though there is plenty thereabouts. Muskoka is a translation of a word meaning "treaty signer". It is named after a Chippeway chief by the name of Misquackkey, whose name was affixed to several treaties signed in that region. Chipewyan, Alberta, is another far cry from the forever water of the Indians. It denotes a Cree tribe "wearers of pointed skins".



Keewatin, Ontario, is the Ojibway name of "home of the northwest wind" — another most appropriate title. Bears figured largely in Indian life, so it is not surprising to find reference to bears in such modern place names as Antigonish, Nova Scotia, that means "broken branches" — broken because of the bears hunting beech nuts. Shubenacadie, in the same province, is a place where the Indians found bears because the nuts grew in abundance. Anticosti Island is said by some to be named because in Indian tongue it was known as "Natiscotec", a Montagnais Indian word meaning "where bears are hunted in abundance". Another school of thought, however, places the origin of Anticosti as Spanish, taken from the word Anti — beyond, and Costa — coast — for indeed the island is beyond the coast.

This multiple origin business can be expanded upon in all parts of the country, though usually an Indian name figures in its formation. For example, Mortlach, Saskatchewan, is said to have received its name from a combination of the French word "mort", and the Indian word "lach". Bearing this out is the nearby body of water bearing the name Death Lake. Canso, Nova Scotia, is another place name of alleged mixed origin. Some

say it comes from the Spanish word "Ganso" meaning goose. Others claim the French named it Campseau, because it was a safe retreat for ships. Indians knew it as a "place of lofty hills". Here you can take your pick, particularly as the Scots of the region have named the Canso Causeway the "Road to the Isles!"

There is room for argument in the name of the Ontario township of Nissouri. The Indian name would be Missouri, meaning "muddy water". Some people, however, claim that it is a contraction and warping of Nigh Zorra, for nearby is Zorra township. Another contraction exists in Manitoba where there is a town called Birtle. Originally it was known to the Indians by their word for "bird tail", for it was there that they found plenty of feathers for their headdresses. Another is Blomidon, on Nova Scotia's Minas Basin. While some claim it to have Portuguese as its origin, others say it is a contraction of the old sailors' expression of "blow me down". The French and Indians had a hand in naming Baddeck, Nova Scotia. Although the French called it Bedeque, the Indians knew it as Bedek, meaning "a portion of food put aside".



One seldom thinks that the Rocky Mountains at one time were unnamed. They were, of course, until an Indian described them for James Knight, the Governor of York Factory in 1716. Knight referred to them as rocky mountains. In La Vérendrye's exploring days, he used a map of the eastern Rocky Mountains drawn for him by an Indian, and referred to them as Montagnes de Pierres Brillantes — mountains of bright stones. In 1752 they appeared on maps under the name Montagnes de Roche, and the Cree Indians knew them as Assinwati. It is interesting to note that the Micmac Indians referred to their rocky peaks as Shickshock and had their own Rocky Mountains of that name in the Gaspé region of Quebec. Names from Indian words that contain a chuckle are Hamiota and Miniota — both in Manitoba. Miniota means, in Indian, "too much water", so one can assume they were plagued by floods. Otah was the Sioux word for "too many" or "too much".

The Hamiota area, before it was named, was settled by several families bearing the name Hamilton. Because they had achieved no degree of fame, mail for the Hamiltons almost invariably went to Hamilton, Ontario. So the wily Hamiltons named their community Hamiota and that is the name of it to this day. Some much more conspicuous people than the Hamiltons have been perpetuated in Canadian place names. Take Airy township in Nipissing, Ontario, for example. It was named after George Biddell Airy, who at one time was the Astronomer Royal, and who discovered the eye ailment known as astigmatism. Moreover he found a remedy for it. Campobello, New Brunswick, where Franklin D. Roosevelt had a

summer home, is said to be a pun on the name of William Campbell, governor of the region in 1770. There were even some promoters who left their names in Canadian places — a fate more generous than that befalling many a present day promoter. Merritt, and Armstrong, both in British Columbia, were named after railway promoters around the turn of the century, and Kindersley, Saskatchewan, honors Sir Robert Kindersley who raised a good deal of money for the old Canadian Northern Railways.

Canadians have perpetuated the name of some of the Governors General, too. Byng Inlet on Lake Ontario, and Mount Byng — 9,700 feet high, in Alberta, are samples. So is the name Minto, given to a township in Ontario and a town in British Columbia. Dalhousie perpetuated the name of a Governor General with no less than a township in Ontario, a town in New Brunswick, and a village in western Quebec. Sir Robert Borden takes the cake and all the prizes, however, with no fewer than seventeen Canadian lakes, rivers, mountains, towns, and townships named in his honor. But then of course, if one gets around to Ontario, no holds whatever are barred.

Anything and everything goes. Indian names are thrown out the window in favor of such exotic locations as Sarawak, Sebastopol, Athens, and Palermo. And there are straight unblushing thefts of such names as Ballycanoe and Coleraine, from Ireland, Cargill and Culross from Scotland, Bath, Kent, Bradford, and London from England. They even went so far as to steal what may be a fine old Devonshire family name but looks a bit strange in print when they named a place Bastard.

But let's not blame Ontario when it comes to historical figures, which are as confusing in their origin as any place names we have. Emerson, Manitoba, was named after the writer, but Eyre, Ontario, was not named after Jane. Harvey, Ontario, was not named after a rabbit, but in honor of a soldier and former governor of the Maritime provinces. Eiffel, Alberta, was named after the tower, but Paris, Ontario, honors the plaster, not the city. Greely, British Columbia, was indeed named for Horace, but Horton Township, Ontario, does not commemorate the fictional elephant. Sabine, Ontario, is not in memory of the famous woman — but a little railway siding near Callander, Ontario, which is called Camey — stands for the first letters of the names of the Dionne Quintuplets — Cécile, Annette, Marie, Emilie, and Yvonne.

This is just a tiny sample of the treasurehouse of sense and nonsense in our Canadian place names. It will give you a start, though; and the next time a stranger loftily and condescendingly tells you he is from Gissinansebing, snap your fingers under his nose! You know better now — he is not fooling you for a minute, he is just a small town boy from Cold Water, Ontario!

