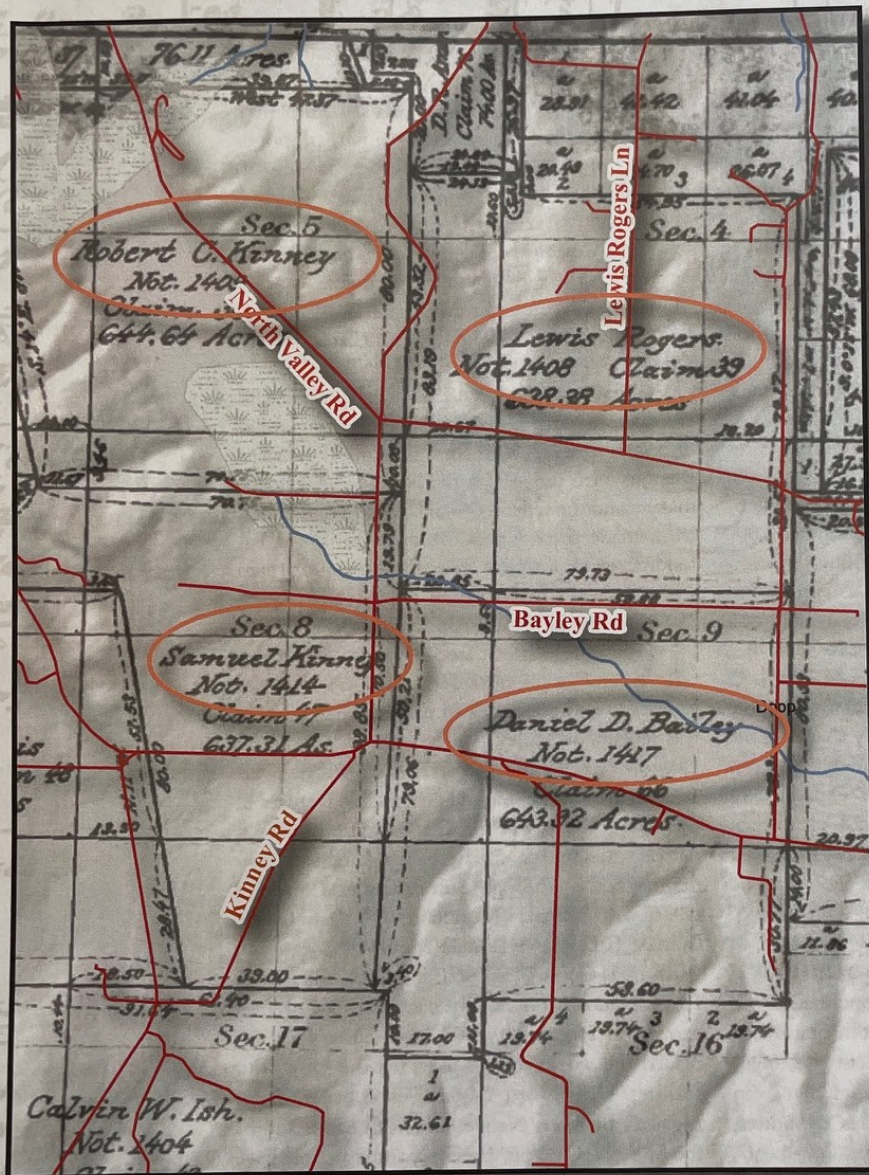


Name that Town

Why we call places what we call them

by Rachel White



Names on the land in Yamhill County. The first claimants in Yamhill County, as in many places in Oregon, are preserved in road names running through or adjacent to their land.

Drive through a new suburban development and you are likely to see signs evoking vaguely pastoral images—Walnut Ridge, Willow Creek, or Sunset Meadows, for example. Places like this seem washed of identity, engendering a sense of being both everywhere and nowhere. One reason such neighborhoods lack a sense of place is the blandness of their names, which don't reflect any relationship with the landscape or the people who were there before. Place names matter.

Place names, the non-generic ones, help situate us in a specific point in space. They reflect the interactions between landscape and stories, the past and the present, and the physical and the social, all of which color our cultural landscape. While the trend toward cultural homogenization continues across the globe, the specificity of names and their histories can help places retain their unique significance and help us remember our local roots. Furthermore, place names unite us as a community with common social meanings and memory. For example, names and their pronunciation are probably our most effective shibboleths – tests distinguishing insiders from outsiders. If you have lived here for awhile, you know that Willamette rhymes with dammit, and that Aloha is pronounced without the “h” sound. Tigard is TIE-gird, not tiggerd, and Tualatin is tu-AH-la-tin, not tu-a-LAT-in. Even our state name weeds out those straight off the plane (“Or-a-GONE”) with those who live here (“OR-eh-gun”).

So where do place names come from? Place names can refer to a specific incident (like Battle Ground, WA), or they can be descriptive (Table Rock), commemorative (Mount Hood, in honor of British naval officer Admiral Sir Samuel Hood), or simply manufactured (like Retlaw, named in 1914

Lewis L. McArthur seems unfazed by the daunting amount of information contained in the book, or by the countless hours put in first by his father and then himself to document the origin of each name. He modestly admitted that even though there are teeming multitudes of buttes, hills, streams, swamps, ponds, draws, and meadows in the open spaces of the West, documenting their names is simpler than in eastern states. "My dad could never have written an equivalent state place name book about Massachusetts, for

Renaming landscape features in response to objections from Native Americans and other ethnic minorities began decades ago and continues to play out, including in the Willamette Valley as recently a year ago. The Oregon Geographic Names Board, which oversees the naming of natural geographic features in the state, meets twice a year to vote on proposed names and name changes. Champ Vaughan, president of the OGNB, gave an example of a recent decision. “Tumala Mountain, Tumala Creek, Tumala Lakes, and Tumala Meadows, located in Clackamas County east of Estacada in the Mount Hood National Forest, are name changes we approved in December 2007,” he said. “They replaced the word ‘squaw’ used for the same four features.” The word “squaw” is considered derogatory by many Native American tribes and by the State of Oregon. Even so, some people have protested these types of name changes as “rewriting history.” In response, efforts are usually made to find replacement names that retain a link to cultural or historical meaning. The Washington State

Board on Geographic Names, for example, includes the requirement that new names preserve the significance, spelling, and flavor of names associated with the early history of Washington State.

The OGNB has similar rules. Sharon Nesbit has been on the Board for 25 years and currently serves as its vice president. She described the thinking process the board uses when considering naming proposals. "We hope for originality, a name that tells a story, reflects a use, or lets us know what people were at that place," she said. Regarding the replacement of "squaw" names, she emphasized the board's aim to use names that reflect the Native American heritage of the site. "Personally, I am happy to receive feminine names since it is likely that passersby, seeing women at work along the creek, applied the name 'Squaw Creek' in the first place," she said. "I don't want to lose the memory of native women on the land." In the case of the recently approved name changes in the Mount Hood National Forest, Champ Vaughan said the board chose that replacement name because of its cultural meaning for a local tribal group. "The Grand Ronde Community of Oregon proposed the replacement name 'Tumala,' meaning 'tomorrow' or 'afterlife,'" he said.

Most civic names, like parks, schools, cities, or streets, do not fall under the purview of the OGNB, but are approved by local or state governments. City governments, for example, often oversee the process for the types of commemorative renaming of civic features that have become a fundamental modern-day political device. Commemorative renaming can become highly controversial. On the positive side, it can legitimize social recognition of historically marginalized groups. Yet it often meets resistance from locals who identify with existing names. As Monmonier wrote in his book, "Renaming is always an annoyance for residents, a hassle for letter carriers and mapmakers, and a significant loss for business owners with thousands of dollars invested in stationery and advertising."

In Portland, trouble continues to brew over the proposal to name a street after labor leader and American hero Cesar Chavez. Sam Adams, now mayor of Portland, discussed the renaming proposal on his blog last year while serving as city commissioner. "Symbols, such as street names, send important signals about the community's values," he wrote. "And there is

no question in my mind that Portland will be a better community when Cesar Chavez is duly honored with a major street renaming." But the initial proposal, which recommended renaming Interstate Avenue in North Portland, met strong opposition from the people who live and work there. In response to the lack of neighborhood support, Adams began looking for other options, preferably outside of North Portland, which had recently undergone the renaming of Portland Boulevard for Rosa Parks. "City leaders need to be sensitive to how much change any one neighborhood can absorb at once," he advised. The issue has not been resolved, but it has become clear to city leadership that any new proposals, including the most recent suggestions of Broadway, Grand Avenue, or 39th Avenue, will likely require substantial evidence of neighborhood approval before they can be adopted.

Regarding the renaming, Lewis McArthur is on board with the idea, but agreed that Interstate Avenue was not the right choice. "My idea was that they should rename the Morrison Bridge after Chavez, because nobody cares about remembering old John Morrison," he said. "He was just carpenter and wasn't very important anyway." But the main point, he said, is that the city should adopt a formal procedure and just stick with it, "whether the person they want to name something after is important or not." Indeed, it isn't the importance of Chavez that is in question, but the affirmation of one political statement over another that stirs people's emotions. The storm of debate in Portland made clear the expediency of being responsive to public opinion and provided an unequivocal example of how much people care about the names of the places they live in.

Place names are powerful. They honor remarkable people, recollect the past, and describe our topography. With their capacity to spark imagination and imagery, names can occasionally have a material influence on a place, drawing attention or even encouraging visitation. Oregon has at least one place name that achieves this by tickling people's funny bones. Who hasn't snickered at the Boring, Oregon road sign?

Named for early resident W.H. Boring, the Clackamas County community gets plenty of good-natured teasing from outsiders. Googling "Boring, Oregon" reveals its place on "top ten worst city names" lists, its inclusion in coffee table books about Americana, and the fact that a substantial handful of people just can't resist

Then there's Bridal Veil, a tiny town in the Columbia River Gorge. Not much stands in the town's 20-acre footprint except a church, a cemetery, and a post office. In fact, one of the biggest features of the town, at least in terms of attention from outsiders, is its name. Lured by the charm of a postmark saying "Bridal Veil," each year thousands of people send wedding invitations from the town's post office. According to the postmaster, who happens to be the post office's only full-time employee, she handles over 200,000 invitations a year. This is no small matter for one of the smallest post offices in the country. "We're about 100 square feet total, and that includes the lobby and the office," she said. "We can only fit three brides in here at a time." Over the years, downsizing efforts have threatened the post office with closure, but public outcry always deflects such threats. The U.S. Postal Service needs little convincing, since the Bridal Veil Post Office is so profitable. "I ask that people buy their stamps here," said the postmaster. "Postage is what keeps us open." She offers no special cancellations, intertwined hearts, or a dove, and she cancels every envelope by hand. As far as the U.S. Postal Service is concerned, they are happy with us," she said. "What we give people creates such goodwill for the community." In the case of tiny Bridal Veil, the goodwill of the postmaster goes a long way; but without the name, the post office—and the town itself—might have ceased to exist years ago.

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Beaver Creek (Clackamas County)—From Oregon Geographic Names: "There are streams called Beaver Creek in almost every county in the state. The beaver were very numerous through the early days in Oregon . . . In 1827, Peter Skene Ogden mentioned in his diary that . . . 735 beaver and otter skins [were taken] on two small streams discharging into the Clammitte (Klamath) River in about three weeks. No wonder we have so many Beaver Creeks and so few beaver."

Orchards (Clark County)—This town was originally known as Fourth Plain because when the Hudson's Bay Company first occupied Fort Vancouver, they numbered their grazing pastures, or plains, consecutively one through six. Seeking a more unique name, residents selected "Orchards" in the early 1900s in recognition of the many fruit trees there.

Orengo (Washington County)—The Oregon Nursery Company, which operated large plantations in the Hillsboro area, founded this community in 1905. The name is a composite of the company's initials. Scappoose (Columbia County)—Originally called Columbia, the town was renamed in 1872 to the current name, of Native American origin, meaning "gravelly plain."

Vernonia (Columbia County)—A founding member of the community, Ozias Cherrington, suggested the name of Vernonia after his daughter who lived in Ohio. Interestingly, Miss Cherrington's name was not Vernonia at all, but Vernona. She never set foot in Oregon.

Willamina (Yamhill County)—This community was named for Willamina Creek, which was named after Willamina Williams, who was known as the first white woman to ride a horse across it.



Bridal Veil falls in the Multnomah River Gorge, the Bridal Veil Post Office, and the Bridal Veil Bed & Breakfast in Bridal Veil, Oregon.

Kearns Goodwin talk about how you go about telling a good story. You don't jump right to the end. Well, place names can be those stepping stones that lead you through the story. Without them you lose so much wonderful color."

Sharon Nesbit added her perspective on the importance of place names. "I like to think that when people drive on Indian Mary or Indian John Street in Troutdale that it is a reminder that they are not the first folks there," she said. "When you go to Corbett, the street names are a family tree of the community, and there are still Mershons from Mershon Road, Wands from Wand Road. Conversely, I see red when a developer comes to town, is allowed to name the streets in a new subdivision, then leaves town leaving us with a meaningless heritage."

Globalization and cultural homogenization may seem to be shrinking the world, or rinsing it of color, especially in strip malls and generic subdivisions. As an antidote to this, place names continually re-inscribe a social memory to a place, infusing it with a richness of meaning drawn from the people who were here before us, the landscape around us, and the history of how we ended up here. Place names help locate us in space and provide flavor, color, stories, and uniqueness. Through place names we have stepping stones to our past. They make the world seem a little bigger. **M**

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