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Geographical Naming in Alberta, Canada:
The mapping of cultural heritage and an emerging civilization **

Paper submitted by Canada

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GEOGRAPHICAL NAMING IN ALBERTA, CANADA:
The Mapping of Cultural Heritage and an Emerging Civilization

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Something of this subject may readily be illustrated by reference to a random selection of names which have been applied to the Alberta landscape with respect to a variety of features. It will be possible to derive two kinds of observations upon which to base a case for flexibility in coordinating the complex and culturally significant application of geographical names in a relatively modern society superimposed upon a long standing preceding culture. One concerns the rich and dynamic historical moving picture which can be projected by attention even to so small a sample of the names available, and the other recognizes a number of categories into which these culturally significant names fall, with implications for the development of naming policy.

I

The name Atimakeg was applied to a hamlet situated in the vicinity of Utikuma Lake, both approximations of the Cree utikoomak meaning whitefish. The name was recorded during the course of the fur trade early in the nineteenth century.

Bistcho Lake was the record made in 1888 by R.G. McConnell, of the Geological Survey of Canada, of the Slave Indian identification meaning big knife. Ten years earlier Father Emile Petitot, accompanying a Hudson's Bay Company fur trading party, recorded the Slave identification as Lac Bes-tchonhi, which he translated to mean the French equivalent of big stomach - and then attempted to replace the traditional name with his own.

Blériot Ferry received the name of the French immigrant who ranched and farmed the nearby land early in the twentieth century. When a railway town was established on the other side of the Red Deer River, he arranged the ferry service later taken over by the Alberta Government.

The Roumanian settlers from the Austro-Hungarian province of Bukovina who arrived in the 1890s named their community centre Boian after the village at the old country point of their departure.

Bruderheim named a Moravian settlement and town with the German word for brethren's home, a typical Moravian designation. Some twenty German-speaking Moravian families took up homesteads in the area in 1894, having previously migrated from Poland to Volynia, Russia before coming to Alberta.

Mount Chephren was first known as Pyramid Mountain, but to avoid confusion with the Mount Pyramid at Jasper, the name was changed in 1918. The term Chephren or Khafre makes a more obscure reference of the same descriptive sort by reference to the builder of the second of the great pyramids, the fourth pharaoh of the fourth dynasty of Egypt. Thus a descriptive reference was made to an element in the British imperial culture.

The Chinchaga River is a name that was reported in 1891 by Dominion Land Surveyor William Ogilvie, recognizing and transliterating Beaver Indian usage, which he understood to mean beautiful or wonderful river. But subsequent testimony revealed the meaning to be big wood, or big timber river.

The town of Coronation was named by the Canadian Pacific Railway, which established the townsite on its new railway line in eastern Alberta about the time of the coronation of the British King George V in 1911.

The Canadian Pacific Railway established the townsite of Didsbury on the new Calgary and Edmonton Railway in 1892 or 1893. Though it repeats the name of Didsbury, Manchester, England, an English tradition was never achieved there: the largest group of original settlers were Mennonite.

Mount Dungarvan and Dungarvan Creek are associated features named after a seaport and harbour in Waterford County, Ireland. It may simply have been named to reflect someone's Irish background, or it may have applied the Irish meaning, Garvan's fortress, to the mountain in a descriptive sense.

The hamlet named Etzikom bears an approximation of the Blackfoot native name for the type of western valley known as a "coulee", which is located at that place. The Blackfoot also knew this particular coulee as misloonsisco, meaning Crows' Springs Coulee, in reference to the practice of Crow Indian parties to water there.

Peter Gans, who discovered the homesteading location of Friedenstal, and the German Catholic community which established a settlement at this relatively isolated area of the Peace River region before World War I, named it after the old country place known as Friedensthal, Roumania. Its meaning, valley of peace, bore special significance for a group consciously founding a homogeneous religious farming community.

Mistatim Lakes is a name with double cultural import. The native Cree named them with their word for horse, but horses themselves were introduced to South and North America by Europeans. When wild horses began to appear in Cree territory during the eighteenth century, they are said to have reminded the Indians of deer stags without horns, but upon domestication (like the dog) they were labelled with the native name for big dog.

Abbé Jean-Baptiste Morin was an Oblate missionary from Quebec who founded several French speaking settlements in Alberta and arranged for their settlement in part by nearly 500 immigrant French-speaking families, most of them from the United States. He established Morinville in 1891, but in this case, a large number of the original settlers came from French-language locations in Belgium.

One of the many Alberta names attached to mountains in the Rocky Mountain range that reflect a mountain climbing tradition, Nanga Parbat Mountain was given the same name in 1920 as a mountain in the Himalayas on which a well-known British climber, A.F. Mummery, had perished. Originally, the name had been applied there for its descriptive meaning: bare hill or mountain.

A group of Dutch settlers taking up land near Edmonton called their settlement district Neerlandia after the Netherlands from which they had come. The post office established in 1913 and the hamlet it centred also bore this name.

Nuorison Creek is a name very recently applied for its Finnish meaning of "Young People's". The creek is fed by a spring situated where a youth hall (Nuorison Sali) was erected by Finnish settlers in 1906. A community hall built in 1908 bore the same name. Neither structure remains, but the applicants wished to name the un-named creek in a conscious commemoration of the pioneer Finnish history of the community.

Before World War I, the hamlet and municipal district formerly identified by its railway station name of Debney (after an engineer), was renamed Pibroch. The new name reflected the Scottish traditions of the settlement by applying the Scottish word for bagpipe music.

The name applied to Rusylvia post office and locality in 1912 reflects both the original physical nature of the place and the learning of at least

one of its early settlers. Rusylvia combines Latin words to represent wooded country.

The rural community of Shandro was named for Andrew Shandro, a Ukrainian native of Bukovina who came with his family to Alberta as a boy. As the member of the provincial legislature for the riding of Whitford from 1913 to 1921, he was the first representative of central European origin elected to any provincial or federal legislative body in Canada.

Sitook - Spagkway Hill has legitimately been known by two separate names of distinct origin. Sitook-Spagkway was recognized by a slightly different transliteration spelling in Dr. Dawson's Geological Survey of Canada report for 1884, as the Blackfoot term meaning middle heights in reference to the hill's 3,950 foot elevation. But when the district was settled around the turn of the century, the first school was named Maple Leaf School and the farming community and the hill were known by the same name.

Carl Stettler was one of the first settlers in the area where the town of Stettler bears his name. Born near Berne, Switzerland, Stettler came to Alberta in 1903 after 16 years in the United States. The name Stettler replaced the name previously used for the settlement, Blumenau, which was derived from the name of a German colony in Brazil. The early settlement here was chiefly Swiss and German.

The locality for which the post office was named Usona in 1905 was given an American identification. Also used for a place in California, Usona is made up of the initial letters of the words, United States of North America.

Prairie de la Vache identifies a level stretch of land just east of Jasper townsite in the Rocky Mountains. Literally meaning cow prairie, the name was used in a variety of forms by early nineteenth century fur traders, some of whom also expressed it in English as Buffalo Prairie. Descriptive of

the western-most grazing place of buffalo at that latitude, the name in its various forms recalls the French and English participants in the early fur trade.

The locality of Vega received its name only because a second choice was required on application forms to name early Alberta school districts. Just to fulfill this apparently frivolous requirement, the applicants added to their first choice of Viewpoint the brand name of a cream separator standing nearby. As it turned out, another school district was already known as Viewpoint, and this one became Vega, not for its meaning of bright star, but for an element in the district's dairy industry.

It took some local persistence to establish the name Viking for the new townsite created when the Canadian Pacific Railway extended a railway line through the area before World War I. The railway passed between two previous hamlets, Viking and Harland, and CPR officials wanted to name it Meighen after a Canadian cabinet minister, but the area's largely Norwegian population petitioned successfully for Viking, a reference to Scandinavian sea rovers.

The location that became Vilna was first labelled Mile 90 in reference to regional transportation routes and distances. When the Canadian National Railway was built thorough this place in 1919, it was renamed Vilna, recognizing the Galician origins of many of the area's settlers, though at the time it was within the reconstituted country of Poland.

When Wenkchemna Peak near the Bow River in the Rocky Mountains was named in 1894 by S.E.S. Allen, its name was meant to be descriptive and to recognize the Stoney Indian presence in the area. The name transliterates the Stoney numeral ten, the number of peaks in a group of mountains of which Wenkchemna is the tenth peak.

II

What can be learned from a brief examination of a mere 30 or so names for features scattered over Alberta's landscape? Let us see what the naming evidence turns up. To begin with, a native population preceded the European immigrations in a number of national configurations, identified in these names by references to Cree, Blackfoot, Crow, Beaver, Slave and Stoney languages and groups. References emerged to the staple wildlife of whitefish and buffalo. In certain parts of Alberta, it is clear that the fur trade was an important early occupation which conditioned the accompanying society to some degree of interdependency reflected in the newcomers' adoption of native names to facilitate mutual understanding. Further, Christian missionaries made a relatively early appearance before Canadian confederation and maintained a notable presence during the nineteenth century. The impact of newcomers on native groups began much earlier, however: for some, with the changes wrought by the appearance of horses and the development of connections to long distant fur trade centres.

In the last part of the nineteenth century, the onset of settlement on a comprehensive scale was preceded by determined and systematic official surveys conducted by the Geological Survey of Canada and Dominion Land Surveyors, indicating purposeful encouragement of western development on the part of central Canada. The agricultural settlements established largely before World War I derived their focus from such essential elements of communication and community development as post offices, railway stations and school districts. A succession of transportation systems identifies a major transition: from waterways through trails connected by ferries to railways.

During the immigration of new peoples, a distinct British imperial cultural influence was exerted both officially and through the intellectual baggage of those who named geographical features with not only old-country English, Scottish and Irish names, but also names from Egypt and the Himalayas. At the same time, a multitude of newcomers arrived from diverse

European Cultural and religious backgrounds: they included French, Belgian, Ukrainian, German, Swiss, Dutch, Finnish, Norwegian, Moravian and Roman Catholic settlers - even scanning the evidence in our short list of geographical names - and they were joined by Americans of both short-term and long-term identification.

These observations emerge from a list of names which can be categorized into revealing compartments. First of all, many are native names adopted in transliterated form. Few were translated, as they had to be usable by both fundamental parties to the fur trade, from which (for the most part) our records of them come. Almost all were applied to natural features: rivers, lakes, hills, valleys, mountains which served as landmarks. This was usually but not always the case with names translated into native form (in transliteration) by later newcomers who were thereby recognizing native traditions but engaged in no interdependent relationship. In some few cases the English or French parties to the fur trade would establish their own names, chiefly for their posts, themselves economic and cultural impositions on the landscape.

That practice on a small scale would presage the wholesale transformation of the landscape by agricultural settlement. Here a far greater proportion of the naming arrived with new cultural features: multitudes of localities, whether mere post offices, rural communities or towns, were imprinted in many cases with names from diverse homelands. Some were identified by the individual, ethnically specific names of their founders. Others attached to basically descriptive names the cultural manifestations of indirect reference to similar features elsewhere or translation of the description into European languages. Some used purely whimsical names for cultural items or practices which, though they carried no descriptive utility, would clearly establish the ethnic origin. To new functions for the land were affixed names which would announce who it was that implemented the rapid adjustments. All these aspects of Alberta development are clearly associated with our 30 name samples.

Cartography has in the past century become a most complex industry of many specialties serving a stunning array of purposes. Geographical features are named for many pragmatic reasons, and for any given purpose only the relevant fraction of names applied need be mapped. Yet naming them pre-supposes mapping them in some combination. Were we to display our 30 examples on a map, the spatial distribution would yield further insight into their significance: a concentration of native names to the north, for example, and of newcomers' names to the south where the agricultural and related development has been most intensive. Altogether, names on maps carry messages; and this exercise was intended to show that many names in combination carry many messages. Yet the very richness of the information involved seems to raise problems for the mapping which constitutes the ultimate justification for geographical naming in the first place, and some of those issues are worth exploring.

III

Any map is created to communicate information, even when secrecy demands devices to exclude all but those readers intended to have the required information. That objective demands a common basis of understanding, an interesting proposition if the objective is to facilitate cross-cultural communication about the distinct cultures between which the communication is to take place. In that case the answer is not simply to eliminate differences and get on with it. One expert cartographer's assessment of international mapping projects concluded that to produce an atlas of the world in detail for general access raises "a problem which almost defies solution...the rendering of place names on the maps."* Any attempt to make a faithful record of actual Alberta geographical name usage which will be universally accessible can run up against similar problems, for here is a new society in which peoples of diverse experience have only comparatively

recently outnumbered the previous inhabitants of long and utterly different tradition. On a practical level, how is an emphasis on tourism attracted by cultural diversity to be communicated effectively?

One controversial approach is to establish a dual name where that is relevant (two names recognized equally). Among our examples above is Sitook-Spagkway Hill, a Blackfoot descriptive name for a middle-sized hill. But the subsequent farming community named its district and the hill by the term Maple Leaf, and each name achieved the support of a substantial tradition. Whether or not this specific example justifies a dual name, that avenue is open, no doubt meeting considerable agitation on the part of cartographers seeking to avoid map clutter.

Such a solution will not, however, absolutely cover all bi-cultural naming situations even were it to be universally accepted. That is because it is by no means clear that all perceptions of geographical features define their separation into parts in exactly the same way. Each feature is real, but the naming exercise begins with the definition of "generic" features to be named, a process which must surely be conditioned by such considerations as purpose and, in time, engrained cultural custom. A name is a cultural imposition which reflects a particular cultural organization of our perceptions of the landscape. Theoretically, the representative of one culture may see three features in an area in which the representative of another sees eight, and none precisely overlap. Not every jurisdiction for instance, has experience with Alberta's "coulee".

A related problem concerns orthography. On the theory that it is necessary to achieve uniform access to name information, it could be argued that an excellent system of transliteration should make the standard use of Roman orthography effective in communicating diversity of expression. It is a compromise already achieved in the expression of many languages. Yet the missionaries in northern Alberta who attempted to organize native languages acknowledged the need for a unique system of expression and worked at a

separate form of Cree syllabics. Jettisoning separate renditions of languages has clearly to be recognized as an imperfect solution with a homogenizing influence even as it permits comparability. The effort to promote communication and overcome division may promote the gradual elimination of interesting cultural distinctions.

Indeed the entire official naming enterprise could easily have the tendency to freeze reality in one mold by inadvertently failing to make allowances for change over time. The recording of official names is in a sense an effort to prevent excessive fluidity in naming practices bordering on chaos. If names can change according to the whim of local residents, for example, in the extreme extension of that possibility, no record or map would be trustworthy. It is true that one objective is certainly to place limits on name changeability, but any standard naming system should make provision for orderly adjustments that really do reflect cultural changes in the dynamic society being mapped.

From the example of Alberta's naming traditions, it is the purpose of this paper to argue against naming policies so systematic as to curtail the dynamic cultural process by which names have emerged; against anything so rigid as to impose order at the expense of evolving social reality. It is no doubt comforting to realize that, in the end, no mere naming authority is likely in any case to be permitted to impede what influential groups wish to do about naming. Naming authorities can, however, develop processes which combine protection for legitimate names with the flexibility to deal with legitimate adjustments. Perhaps dual naming deserves serious consideration in some sophisticated application; perhaps alternative orthographies merit consideration in particular cases. Perhaps there are better solutions to both problems which do not carry standardization to a stultifying extreme. For our cultural integrity, they are worth the attempt to develop them.

*Norman J.W. Maps and Man: An Examination of Cartography in Relation to Culture and Circulation (Englewood Cliff, N.J.: Prentice - Hall Inc., 1972), 151.