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FEATURES BEYOND A SINGLE SOVEREIGNTY

FEATURES COMMON TO TWO OR MORE NATIONS

Geographical naming in Alberta, Canada:
Transboundary names and the case against cultural standardization *

Paper submitted by Canada

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GEOGRAPHICAL NAMING IN ALBERTA, CANADA:
Transboundary Names and the Case Against Cultural Standardization

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Traditionally and historically, the study of toponymy has been defined by cartographers and geographers. Their spheres of influence have necessarily, therefore, limited the scope of examination to the questions of where topographical features exist and what they are called. Increasingly, however, a new breed of toponymists is emerging which is becoming more and more concerned with not just the mere existence of place-names on maps for geographical or navigational purposes, but why these names exist and from whence they have emerged. This type of study, then, leads to an examination of toponymy to an even greater depth: the study of developmental toponymy as a process and later to the study of differences in toponymy.

Dissimilarities in the names of single features that straddle boundary and/or border lines, (that is, a single feature has one name on one side of the line and another name on the other side) are of especial interest to the student of what we can loosely term the emerging neo-toponymy. To proffer that these types of toponymic anomalies merely exist is insufficient, for they provide excellent empirical tools toward an explanation of why these dissimilarities

exist. It becomes necessary, therefore, to examine the reasons behind these differences and to determine whether they are cultural, procedural or philosophical. This paper is an attempt to examine the differences in the names of features common to both Alberta and Montana at the border between the United States and Canada.

I

An examination of all National Topographical System 1:50,000 scale map sheets and all United States Geological Survey (Quadrangle) 1:24,000 scale map sheets bordering on the 49th parallel between 110^o and 114^o 05' has revealed a total of 31 differences between Alberta and Montana names for the same features. Due to the particular topography of the region, all the features are of a type: they are either creeks, coulees or rivers. The vast majority of these differences are attributable to the mere existence of an official name on one side of the border and the lack of an official name on the other side. But at least 25% of these names are different on one side of the border than on the other (see Chart #1).

Name differences may occur because of procedural discrepancies, cultural or philosophical dissimilarities or some mixture of all. This appears to account for name differences between Alberta and Montana. An examination, at the outset, of the policies, procedures and philosophical bases for the naming of geographical features in both the Montana and Alberta becomes necessary.

II

Policy and procedural dissimilarities occur at many levels. The membership composition of the United States Board on Geographic

Names consists of Federal Civil Servants from a wide spectrum of most Federal programs concerned with the use of geographical names. All members of the Board, therefore, are in some way connected with the actual use of geographical names and the expediency required of them to provide some form of spatial orientation. The Board's decisions on submissions are then forwarded to the Secretary of the Interior for review and approval. By its nature, this process is completed at the Federal level although, "all problems and proposals submitted to the Board are researched individually by the Geological Survey support staff for all factors that may affect the decision process."¹

The procedure of geographical naming in Canada, however, is much different. Fundamentally, geographical naming occurs at the provincial and/or territorial level and these decisions are forwarded to the Canadian Permanent Committee on Geographical Names (CPCGN), the federal co-ordinating agency. The Historic Sites Board, the body which is by law responsible for geographical naming in Alberta, is composed of members of the general population from various Alberta locations. They are appointed, on recommendation, by the Minister of Culture and Multiculturalism to terms of office that range from one to three years. Those who are appointed have generally exhibited, through public associations, their interest in the preservation and protection of historical resources, of which geographical naming is only one part. Naming submissions to the Historic Sites Board emanate from two sources: first, the general public, government departments or interested parties who require them; and secondly, the Geographical Names Programme which actively submits name proposals garnered from field studies. Each and every name submission, regardless of its source, is subjected to two forms of research. The first is documentary, to gather information from both published and primary documents. The second, and most

important, is field research. Since it is amply recognized that the principle of local usage maintains paramountcy in geographical naming generally, the determination of local usage for a geographical name is most effectively established through interviewing local residents, former local residents, and others expert in the immediate area of the feature being researched.

But are these differences of Board composition and submission procedure sufficient to warrant differences in names of single features that straddle artificially imposed border lines? In the case of Alberta and Montana, this appears to be so. One geographical feature, located at 113⁰ 45' 20" W is known officially in Alberta as North Belly River. In Montana, it is denoted as North Fork Belly River. Field research studies of the area, conducted by Geographical Names Programme staff, have revealed that the local population, even at the low densities exhibited in this area, do actually call the feature "North Belly River." It is obvious when one peruses a map that the feature is actually the northernmost of the forks which stem from the Belly River. But, at least on the Canadian side of the border, the local name associated with the feature has not had the inclusion of the term "fork," a phenomenon of the naming of water features more generally in Alberta. It appears, then, that since the term "fork" is more a geographical term than a cultural one, the inclusion of it in the United States is understood. Several other features that straddle the border also exhibit this peculiar difference.

III

Perhaps the greatest difference in procedural terms, and therefore in cultural terms, is a difference in the philosophical approach to geographical naming as an exercise. The United States Board on Geographic Names' position with respect to naming is

explicitly and succinctly stated:

Standardization is particularly important for map and chart production; land, air, water, and mineral surveys; postal and shipping deliveries; land and water transportation safety; and demographic and other social and cultural studies.²

It is natural that standardization should be the critical factor defining the existence of the Board on Geographic Names: the Board acts under the auspices of the Department of the Interior and support is provided by the United States Geological Survey agency. In other words, the aim of the Board is to provide standardization of geographical names to increase efficiency in their use.

Standardization, then:

eliminates the problems caused by different people trying to determine proper name usage with widely varying results, and most importantly, it helps prevent misunderstanding in communications related to places and features.³

The situation and conditions under which the Historic Sites Board operates, however, are quite different. The Board exists under the auspices of the Ministry of Culture and Multiculturalism and its mandate is prescribed by the Historical Resources Act (RSA 1980) as "the preservation and protection of Historical Resources in Alberta." The retention, through official channels, of geographical names which have enjoyed decades of well-established local usage becomes almost axiomatic. What is of particular interest, however, is the rubric under which this "officialization" or "standardization" is conducted. Increasingly, toponomists and historians are recognizing the importance of geographical names as not only studies in the changing face of established or emerging

civilizations, but rather as cultural processes that require especial examination and attention. There exists no other means so indicative of an area's culture than what the people who live in the area choose to call the features extant in their environment. Therefore, while dealing with geographical names is often a technical, scientific and practical endeavour, it is also a social, political and diplomatic activity as well. In short, the application of geographical names to maps for purposes of orientation reflects the cultural reality of an area as surely as the facade of a building reflects its era.

It has become necessary, therefore, to expand the understanding of what toponymy entails and why it is so vital to ensure that it is neither a monolithic exercise nor one which is purely technical. The Historic Sites Board of Alberta, then, has chosen to direct the treatment of geographical names away from its existence as a purely technical exercise in mapping and toward its application as a cultural achievement and part of the "ology" of the onomastic sciences. The names which do, in the final analysis, appear on maps in general use, certainly reflect not only the cultural reality of an area in a contemporary sense, but definite characteristics of the unfolding nature of historical events as well. In Alberta, therefore, there is a critical sense of the need to promote the activity of geographical naming as a historical and cultural study and to treat the names proper as evidence of the development of mankind and his settlement patterns.

One creek crossing the Canada/United States border is officially called Rolph Creek in Alberta, and is named after the district's first white settlers who lived on its banks. In Montana, however, the creek is known as Willow Creek. The philosophical basis for the naming of geographical features allows for the identification of toponymy that can trace the development of

emergent civilizations. Therefore, these two distinct geographical names can and do co-exist, and attest to the success of two different toponymic traditions.

IV

It is apparent that the policy decisions used by the United States Board on Geographic Names rely very strongly on the ideas inherent in the concept of standardization: that is, the concept of homogeneity in usage, the encouragement of assimilation of non-English (or American) name roots, and the requirement (Principle V) that each geographical feature have a single official name, spelling and application.⁴ These policies do not necessarily preclude the officialization of names which represent cultural reality or which trace, more or less, the historical development of a given area. But names which, in order to represent accurately the realities of their communities, must have diacritic marks; names which are not assimilative in nature; and features which have two or more names in approximately equal local use, due to the original possession of a name and the later application of a different name, which have thus garnered two locally well-established names are all seen as problems which could lead to confusion, uncertainty and misunderstanding. The United States Board of Geographic Names, therefore, has forwarded policies and presented principles that avoid these problems and which can be identified under the rubric of "standardization."

In Alberta, however, these particular geographical naming phenomena are not seen as problems but rather, as challenges. And the need to conform to the cultural landscape, a basic tenet of naming in Alberta, demands creative approaches to whatever challenges of conflicting orthographic preferences or use

heterogeneity this may present. It is impossible, in a country committed to the principle of multiculturalism, for example, to make a value judgement for the exclusive worth or use of one toponymic tradition over another. Therefore, a principle of univocity is unacceptable to both contemporary and historical antecedents. The answer, in Alberta, is not to simply deny the existence of differences or to eliminate those differences, but to attempt to meet the challenge offered by them. Bureaucratic or cartographic ease does not preclude the purpose of geographical naming which is not only to provide orientation and reference spatially, but also culturally.

V

Recently, several meetings have been held, at the Federal level involving representation from both Canada and the United States, to hammer out an agreement on the treatment of geographical features that are shared by both countries. At these meetings, it was almost axiomatically agreed upon that standardization of the names of these types of features was not only possible but necessary. It is Alberta's contention that this is not so: standardization may ease the cartographic burden of differences at borders, but the critical issue of the graphic representation of cultural reality must not be overlooked. Therefore, any agreements, if they are to be practical and useful, must take the cultural component of the differences of these two societies into consideration.

Of the 31 different features to be found at the Alberta/Montana boundary, names are given to only 14 features on the Canadian side and to 25 features on the side of the United States. While there is evidence to suggest that the adoption of one name on one side would likely correspond to the local name on the other side, this should

never be taken for granted. Each and every name appearing on any map is a reflection of the cultural, procedural and philosophical differences that define and shape the development of a toponymic tradition.

CHART # 1

ALBERTA/MONTANA BOUNDARY NAME DIFFERENCES

<u>Canada</u>	<u>Location</u> (49°N)	<u>United States</u>
Cutbank Creek	110°04'15"	-----
-----	110°15'00"	Spring Coulee Ridge
-----	110°16'00"	Spring Coulee
Kennedy Creek	110°42'50"	-----
Lost Creek	110°52'25"	-----
-----	110°00'10"	Lost Coulee
-----	111°00'10"	Carvers Coulee
Philp Coulee	111°03'55"	Flat Coulee
Bear Creek	111°14'00"	Bear Gulch
-----	111°25'00"	Prichard Creek
-----	111°28'00"	Macdonald Creek
Macdonald Creek	111°31'55"	-----
Police Creek	111°39'50"	Police Coulee
-----	112°03'15"	Buckley Coulee
Red Creek	112°09'30"	Red River
Shanks Creek	112°54'15"	-----
-----	112°56'35"	Bushnell Hill
-----	112°59'30"	Bish Coulee
-----	112°59'50"	Fox Coulee ?
North Milk River	112°59'55"	North Fork Milk River
-----	113°03'00"	Dubray Coulee
Rolph Creek	113°09'50"	Willow Creek
-----	113°33'55"	Roberts Creek
-----	113°32'40"	East Fork Lee Creek
-----	113°32'55"	Middle Fork Lee Creek
-----	113°36'00"	Lee Creek
-----	113°39'00"	Lee Ridge
North Belly River	113°45'20"	North Fork Belly River
Wilson Range	113°50'50"	-----
Upper Waterton Lake	113°54'00"	Waterton Lake
-----	113°55'?"	Boundary Creek*

*U.S.G.S. 1:24,000 "Porcupine Ridge" shows this creek entering Canada then re-entering the United States while N.T.S. 1:50,000 82 H/4 does not show it entering Canada.

NOTES

1. Donald J. Orth. Principles, Policies, and Procedures: Domestic Geographic Names. Reston, Virginia: United States Board on Geographic Names, 1987: page 6.
2. Ibid., page iii.
3. Ibid., page iii.
4. Ibid., page 8.