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PLACE NAMES OF THE MILLE LACS REGION¹

IF PRACTICAL UTILITY were the only reason for naming places, we might devise a system that would be far more orderly and efficient than the present haphazard method. For instance, we might use series of numbers and letters, which would immediately remove all problems of spelling, pronunciation, and duplication. Such a system would doubtless appeal to the postal authorities and the railroad companies. But who would care to live in City X 432 instead of Brainerd? Who would want a summer home on Lake A 57 instead of Sisabagama Lake? And how could we arouse the envy of friends back home if we had to write on our vacation postcards: "Am having a fine time in State 41, County 30, Lake B 432. Wish you were here." ?

We cherish our place names, not for their utility, but for their color and atmosphere, their descriptive value, their associations, the stories they have to tell. At their best they are signposts of history, guides to the past, themselves a part of that past, speaking to us across the years from pioneer times. In variety and charm of place names no state in the Union surpasses Minnesota; and in both respects—variety and charm—our place names derive their chief interest from the authenticity with which they tell us about the state and its past. They reveal to us what tribes of Indians once lived here, who the men were who first explored the

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wilderness, and who led in the processes of pioneer settlement. They tell us what countries of the Old World our people came from—even from what parts of those countries. They suggest typical industries of the state. They describe its topographic features, its flora and fauna. They point out events of the past, sometimes tell when a community came into existence, and often record significant aspects of its story.

The three counties bordering on Lake Mille Lacs are as rich as any part of Minnesota in the variety and interest of their place names. Each of these counties has a name closely linked with its past. Mille Lacs County took its name from the lake—a strange name for a single lake, if we translate it literally, “thousand lakes.” It comes to us from the Ojibway, or Chippewa, Indians, by way of French voyageurs and traders. The Ojibway name for the adjoining region meant “all sorts of lakes,” or “lakes everywhere.” Voyageurs translated the name for the region into their own language, and it came to be applied to the big lake in particular. Crow Wing County also is indebted to the Chippewa for its name; but if the Indian name for the Crow Wing River, which gave the county its name, had been translated literally, it would be Raven Wing County. The Chippewa named the river for an island at its mouth shaped like a raven’s wing. The name of Aitkin County is reminiscent of a later period in the state’s history. It honors a Scotch fur trader, William A. Aitkin, who in 1831 took charge of the Fond du Lac department of the American Fur Company, with his headquarters at Sandy Lake.

By far the largest number of place names in the region are descriptive. There are lakes named for their shape—Crooked, Horseshoe, Long, Square, and Round. There are lakes and streams named for the appearance of their water, or for the material of their beds—Mud, Clear, Clear-water, Crystal, Red Sand, White Sand, Silver, Green, Blue,

Rock, and Sandy lakes; Black and Stony brooks; Sand Creek, and Sandy River. There are places named for their location or for topographic features in their vicinity. Watertown Township was named for its many lakes. Farm Island Lake has an island on which the Indians once raised crops. Hill City was named for a prominent hill near by. Logan Township took its name from the long, narrow lakes lying in abandoned parts of the old channels of the Mississippi, which here have been called "logans" since early lumbering days. Twenty Lake is in section 20, and Town Line Lake is crossed by a township line. Such names as Bayview, Twin Lakes, and Lakeside Township speak for themselves.

There are lakes named for the fish in them—Bass, Pike, Whitefish, Bullhead, Pickerel, Trout; and what angler could resist Big Trout Lake, unless he happened to know that "big" describes the lake rather than the trout. There are lakes, streams, and other features named for animals that frequent, or once frequented, this area, such as Black Bear, Fox, Fawn, Wolf, Coon, Otter, Deer, Rabbit, Rat and Rat House, Loon, Duck, Goose, Eagle, Gull, Pelican, Heron, and Mallard lakes; Buffalo Creek; Cormorant Point; Beaver Township; and Deerwood. And we must not omit Mosquito Brook from the names suggestive of the wild life of the locality. The flora of the region is described by such names as Cranberry, Rice, Birch, Cedar, Pine, Jack Pine, Rush, Elm Island, and Tamarack lakes, and Maple Grove, Oak Lawn, and Balsam townships. Foreston is partly surrounded by hardwood forests, and Sugar Lake was named for its sugar-maple trees.

Many of the Indian place names of the three counties also are descriptive, and they have the further appeal of euphony, an aura of romance, a suggestion of the wilderness. Sisa-bagama, Waukenabo, Esquagamah, Onamia, Wahkon, Nokasippi—these names delight our ears and they excite our imaginations with the thrill of the unknown. Most of these

names are less beautiful when translated, but they are none the less interesting. Sisabagama is an Ojibway word meaning "the lake with arms running in all directions," which is not an apt description of the lake so named. The Chippewa used the name for another lake—Bay Lake, in Crow Wing County, which is a good translation of the Ojibway name. Waukenabo is the word used by the Chippewa for a broth that they made of moss or milt when faced with starvation. Esquagamah means "the last lake," and was given by the Chippewa to the last, from east to west, in a series of three lakes. Ogechie Lake—long, narrow, and curved—has the Ojibway name for an intestinal worm. The meaning of Onamia is a little uncertain, but it probably comes from the same Indian word from which Vermilion Lake in St. Louis County is translated. Nokasippi River and Nokay Lake were named for a Chippewa chief, Nokay.

The names of Wahkon, Izatys, and Kathio Township have come down to us from the Sioux, who occupied the region before they were driven out by the Chippewa. Wahkon, the Sioux name for Lake Mille Lacs, means, loosely, "spirit." The same name was applied by the Sioux to the river outflowing from Mille Lacs, and early traders translated it into the name of the spirits they knew best. And so we have Rum River. Izatys and Kathio Township in Mille Lacs County are forms of the same Sioux name. Izatys was the name given by Duluth to the great Sioux village on Mille Lacs, which was a variation of Isanti, the name of that division of the Sioux. The word was later erroneously transcribed from Duluth's manuscript, the "Iz" being copied as "k" and the "ys" as "hio," which resulted in "Kathio." Many place names of the region are translations of the original Indian names—Pelican, Rabbit, Serpent, Hanging Kettle, and White Elk lakes, and Pine and Snake rivers, to mention a few.

A very large group of place names in this section is made

up of personal names. Accault Bay, Radisson Bay, and Hennepin Island in Mille Lacs commemorate early explorers, and the names of two early fur traders, William A. Aitkin and Mark Libby, are perpetuated in Aitkin County, Lake, Township, and village, and in Libby Township and village. Among the names that honor notable Minnesotans are Sibley and Whipple lakes, named for Henry H. Sibley and Bishop Henry B. Whipple. Men of national prominence, too, have contributed their names—Theodore Roosevelt to a lake and a township; General Jesse Reno, of Mexican and Civil War fame, to a lake; and Charles Stewart, a naval officer famous in the War of 1812, to another lake.

Most of the personal names in this area, however, have come to us from the men who lived and worked here—men who made farms, built villages and cities, and developed the resources of the region. A large number of lakes bear the names of persons who had homesteads adjoining them, and many of the townships and villages were named for early settlers. Among the scores of such names is Garrison, which was named for Oscar E. Garrison, a government surveyor and engineer who made a homestead claim in the township. One early settler, Austin R. Nichols, has his name perpetuated in two widely separated Minnesota communities—Nichols in Aitkin County and Austin in Mower County; and both Hazelton Township and the village of Cutler in Aitkin County were named for Cutler J. Hazelton, a former county commissioner. Aitkin County has six other townships named for county officials or their assistants. Crosby and Barrows have names of men prominent in the development of mining; and three villages—Long Siding, Page, and Jenkins—and nearly all the brooks and creeks in Mille Lacs County were named for early lumbermen. And then there are the names of sweethearts, wives, and daughters—lakes named for Anna, Bertha, Hannah, Edna, Emily, Mary, Molly, and Ruth.

In the long list of personal place names in this section, there is a striking predominance of names of English origin and relatively few names, in comparison with other parts of Minnesota, from other nationalities. These names came from the British Isles by way of Maine and other eastern states, and a large number of them were brought here by lumbermen and loggers. Of the names, personal and other, that give evidence of other elements in the population, the largest number have come from the Scandinavian countries. Among them are Jevne, Malmo, Salo, and Nordland townships, Nord and Hanson lakes, and the village of Opstead.

An interesting group of place names is that of combinations and derivations, such as Quadna, shortened from Piquadinaw, the earlier Indian name of the township; Milaca, derived from Mille Lacs; Arthyde, named for its founders, Arthur and Clyde Hutchins; and Cuyuna, a name manufactured by Cuyler Adams by combining the first syllable of his given name with the name of his dog, Una. Another type of name is concentrated in Crow Wing County, which has not been shy in advertising its mineral wealth and leading industry in its place names. Ironton, Iron Mountain, Iron Hub, Irondale, and Manganese tell their own story. Aitkin County has two names of classical origin, Pliny Township and Attica. And all three counties have innumerable names whose origins the writer has not yet been able to determine. How did Grave and Deadman's lakes get their lugubrious names? Who named Glory in Aitkin County, and why? How in the world did Pig Lake get its name? And what did the foolish person do to have Fool's Lake named for him?

Like every other section of Minnesota—and the entire country, for that matter—these three counties have many duplications and much confusion in their place names. There are at least eleven Bass lakes in the area, nine of them in Crow Wing County; thirteen Mud lakes; eleven Long

lakes; ten Rice lakes; and six Round lakes. Cedar, Clear, Birch, Hill, Otter, Pine, Crooked, Eagle, Fawn, Island, Perch, Pine, Twin, and Whitefish lakes are duplicated at least once. Innumerable lakes in the region have more than one name. Gun Lake is known also as Manomin Lake. Fish Lake is often called Marsh Lake. Which is the correct name for the historic lake in Aitkin County—Sandy or Big Sandy Lake? Should Borden be Pike Lake, as it is named on some maps? And is it Horseshoe or Sandbar Lake? Boot or Boat Lake? Chrysler or Chryster Lake? Sisa-bagama Lake has three spellings on as many maps; and Hanson, Spaulding, Kimball, Waukenabo, and many other names have at least two different spellings.

Recognizing the need for eliminating, as far as possible, this duplication and confusion in nomenclature, the Minnesota legislature in 1937 established a state geographic board, composed of the commissioner of conservation, the commissioner of highways, and the superintendent of the Minnesota Historical Society. It empowered the board, with the cooperation and approval of county boards, to change place names in the state for the purpose of eliminating duplication; in cases where confusion exists, to determine the most appropriate names and their correct spellings; to name unnamed features; and to co-operate with the United States board on geographical names and with local communities in order to avoid conflict between the state and federal designations of geographic features. In addition, the board was directed to prepare and publish an official dictionary, or gazetteer, of Minnesota geographic names. Considerable progress has been made in collecting material for use in the preparation of this gazetteer; and on a number of occasions the board has advised and co-operated with local people and county boards in renaming features. The most recent change of name made under the guidance of the board was that of a lake in the north-central part of the state. The county

board, upon petition of the residents and after a hearing was held, resolved to change the name of Gnatt Lake, a name that the local people felt would lure few tourists to its shores; the resolution was forwarded to the state geographic board, the board accepted it, and the lake is now Beltrami Lake, the name of an explorer closely associated with the early history of the region, a musical name, and the only Beltrami Lake in Minnesota.

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