

While not necessarily the case in New York—or in New Jersey—in the sticks, it seems, America remains “in tack.”

Joyce Bennett writes from Leonardtown, Maryland.

## American Names

by Larry Tritten

I have fallen in love with American names,  
The sharp names that never get fat,  
The snakeskin titles of mining claims,  
The plumed war-bonnet of Medicine Hat,  
Tucson and Deadwood and Lost Mule Flat.

—Stephen Vincent Benét,  
*American Names*

My family used to live in a mountain valley near a mining community in the wilds of Northern Idaho, and our mailing address was Star Route, Smeltonville, Idaho. Before that we lived in a town called Coeur d'Alene, which indisputably is a sharp name, although Smeltonville is anything but sharp and isn't exactly a snakeskin title, either. In any case, I became acquainted early in life with the extreme possibility in the linguistic architecture of American names, which can range from ugly folk metaphor to foreign exoticism.

You cannot, I submit, have an address such as Smeltonville, Idaho, without having your stylistic sensibilities affected, and I remember how oddly self-conscious I used to feel as a boy when I ordered things through the mail from mythic metropolises such as Chicago and New York City and was forced to locate myself in so unglamorous-sounding a place as Smeltonville, which is probably only one stylistic millimeter less gauche than the Mudville of Ernest Lawrence Thayer's *Casey at the Bat*—and Mudville was a parody name! I did not know then that “Idaho” is an Indian word that means roughly “light on the mountains” and consequently is as pretty a name as Smeltonville is viscid and

gloomy. The name Smeltonville would seep from my pen with the same sluggish morbidity with which the wastes from the mines in the area infiltrated and obfuscated some of the local streams and rivers.

In the meantime, I thought typical Americans (i.e., the typical American families in all of the radio and television shows and movies and comic books) lived in towns with straightforward, idyllic names that could be gotten by mixing up any of a couple of dozen nouns and adjectives—for example, oak, palm, sun, wood, lake, view, green, dale, glen, hill, falls, grove, spring, and so forth. Archie Andrews lived in Riverdale, Henry Aldrich lived in Centerville, Pepper Young's family lived in Elmwood, etc. Typical Americans, it seemed, never lived in places such as Key West or Council Bluffs.

These formulaic stereotypes aside, there is, as Benét asserts, something special about American names, and I think the reason for that is that they are made up of words from so many different languages. Thus we have names that cover an exotic spectrum—Angola on the Lake, Ball Ground, Cinnamonson, Dreamland Villa, Encino, Frostproof, Germantown, Ho-Ho-Kus, Isla Vista, Kaawa, Lost Nation, Moscow, Neon, Oblong, Pend Oreille, Quapaw, Rome, Santa Claus, Tahitian Gardens, Urania, Vermilion, West Babylon, Xenia, Young America, Zilwaukee. American names fill the mouth with fascinating combinations of vowels and consonants and are full of soft utterance and hard articulation, bird song and verbal grapeshot.

The language is a mongrel, and while it may lack the precise grace and purity of a thoroughbred language, it is full of odd tricks and delightful quirks that give it a unique class of its own. Nowhere is this more obvious than in our place-names. And they can be complicated. Sioux (which French traders and trappers learned from the Dakotas and Lakotas and means “adders,” literally “little snakes,” i.e., the enemy—the name given them by their enemies the Ojibwas), for example, is a dulcet sound that must be altogether different for those who know what it really means. Consider the effect this has on a pleasant song like “Sioux City Sue.” And Coeur d'Alene, which sounds so lyrically romantic, means literally heart of the awl (a tool), an ungainly metaphor considering how many different things this French heart

might have been transplanted into—heart of the mountains, heart of the woods, and so on. Still, the sound is mellifluous—so if you can stash the translation in the back of your mind the name still shines.

Names are, to begin with, utilitarian; they are the labels that enable us to distinguish one person from another and one place from another. But beyond that they are entities of aesthetic and stylistic substance. Consider the many and varied moods and impressions evoked by them: Red, Vanessa, Crazy Horse, Algernon, Blackie, Jove, Silver City, Riverdale, Canal Street, Loon Lake, Wounded Knee, Salt Lake City.

Pick a state, any state, take a close look at the map of it and feast your eye and mind on the wealth of colorful, eccentric, and fascinating names your forefathers doled out to its streams, valleys, meadows, hills, towns, mountains, rivers, roads, and the like. Then multiply these thousands of names by 50 and consider that this heroic task of naming, hundreds of thousands of names, was for the most part performed in a few decades as men and women swarmed westward across the plains and over the mountains, filling the rivers of Colorado with bottles from New York and the wilderness of Wyoming with product wrappers from the stores of Ohio. Hundreds of thousands of names, summarily served up, ladled out, tacked on—just as, no doubt, will one day happen on Mars.

America is little more than 200 years old, and already much of the history of its names has been lost in the headwaters of the Rio Tempora, untraceable in the darkling reaches of the past. California, the name of our most high-profile state, has an uncertain etymology. One theory has it that the name can be traced back to the French epic *Chanson de Roland*, but the record is incomplete, a matter of speculation. No one knows who named California. And I've always wondered how Montana got a Spanish name so early when it took the taco and enchilada until just a few decades ago to migrate there commercially from California. Apparently language can predate cuisine by a century or so. In Idaho, in 1955, when Dean Martin's hit song “That's Amore” (“When the moon hits your eye like a big pizza pie, that's amore!”) reached our juke boxes, we thought the phrase was “piece of pie.” There were no pizza parlors in the panhandle of Idaho yet.

Some archaeologists in the far distant

future, digging up the ruins of our towns and cities, may reconstruct a record by which they believe these same had names such as Nixon and Burger King, Radio City, Tinseltown, Coca Cola, Freeway, and Playboy. And perhaps the names will sound as exotic and colorful to them as the Indian names do to us.

Larry Tritten writes from  
San Francisco.

## FAMILY

### Estrogen Poisoning

by Marian Kester Coombs

A first-grade teacher in the suburbs of Washington, D.C., concludes that while some of her pupils suffer various degrees of parental neglect, others seem to be experiencing the opposite extreme: such pampering at home that they cannot even tie their own shoes, and must have it done for them. It takes a while before she realizes that the latter children cannot tie their shoes because no one has ever taken the trouble to teach them.

A developmental psychologist at the University of Rochester is disturbed by the high rate—13 percent and rising—of “attention-deficient,” “hyperactive” six- to 12-year-old boys being dosed with Ritalin in that urban area. After reporting on her informal observation of several mother-son pairs (“Son cuddled next to Mom. Son ran the strings from the hood of Mom’s jacket through his lips. Son rocked his body back and forth. Son patted Mom’s face. Through all of this, Mom ignored him”), the psychologist writes, “What’s behind the alarmingly high incidence of ADHD, I believe, is the widespread failure of parents and teachers to help children learn to regulate themselves, including managing their attention. Many parents do not seem inclined to socialize their children” (*Rochester Review*, Fall 1996).

A young working mother is having a dreadful time finding someone, *anyone* to whose mercenary mercies she can

safely entrust her precious two-year-old, and so she writes an angry little get-it-off-my-chest piece for *Woman’s Day*. “Day care in America is such a hodge-podge, antiquated affair that parents are forced to take a leap of faith with the well-being of their child that they wouldn’t take with any other part of their lives,” she whines. “We are so vulnerable. . . . Where is the affordable, decent day care that will let parents go off to work secure in the knowledge that their child is being well cared for? . . . Does it really have to be this gut-wrenching?” By now we do not have to be told what such whining precedes: still another demand for still another fix of big government.

When *The Awakening* was published in 1899, public reaction to author Kate Chopin’s hostility toward those lowly creatures she termed “mother-women” was disbelief that any woman could feel that way about motherhood, and scandalization at the sheer “perversity of her unnatural sentiments.” A mere three generations later, Ms. Chopin’s sentiments have been almost universally adopted by our society—most fervently, in fact, by mothers themselves.

Fatherlessness has been tagged as the biggest problem facing the family in this country today, and by extension the biggest problem facing our society as a whole. But it is really *motherlessness* that besets us. Nobody wants to be the mom. Motherhood is viewed as a sucker’s game. Yet what a wondrous system it was, admirable in its lavish economy, its unimpeachable irrationality, its gloriously selfish selflessness, its universal particularity. Every child was to have at least one person on earth who was absolutely crazy about him, a sucker for him. Every child was to be the diminutive king or queen of at least one person’s susceptible heart. The usual law of life—*Eat or be eaten!*—did not apply to motherhood, which gloried, up till now, in giving—*Eat, eat!* But big-government feminism has decreed that motherhood must go; taxes are levied against it; studies are concocted to prove it baneful; and so it is going.

“Feminism” is a misleading term for the culprit, however. What these infuriated women want to do is get rid of femininity altogether, to seize and wield what they clearly consider to be superior, masculine attributes. The movement should rightly be called *masculism*; it is the triumph of all values traditionally associated with the male: dominance,

aggression, egotism, single-mindedness, profanity, promiscuity, toughness, brutal objectivity, aloof self-sufficiency. Even the bodies of men—the sculpted musculature of flat abs and steel glutes—are displayed as templates for the new woman to reproduce herself upon. Not for her the female body as temple wherein the race is reproduced. Everything women have historically been associated with, among every people, in every land and age, is being devalued and derided in the name of “feminism.”

With these acquired masculine characteristics, then, young women are to force themselves into the mold of citizen-soldier, power attorney, “extreme” all-out athlete. Arrayed in teams, sorted into rigid hierarchies, exhorted to “Go for it!” no matter who or what stands in their way, women are to become male impersonators. Not mere impersonators, of course: one of the central beliefs of masculism is that women are and have always been just as good (that is, as *masculine*) as men, and indeed will prove better at the game once they have taken it over. This belief was recently stroked by a Foundation for the Future study “proving” that females in the labor force are superior to males in 28 out of 31 ways.

But “masculism” is also a misleading term. It is not really the masculinization but the *homosexualization* of society that is occurring. True masculinity is unswervingly attracted to the feminine; as Isak Dinesen, a female Nietzsche, wrote in her epigrammatic fashion, “The love of woman and womanliness is a masculine characteristic, and the love of man and manliness is a feminine characteristic. . . . [I]t is almost impossible for a woman to irritate a real man, and as to the women, a man is never quite contemptible, never altogether rejectable, as long as he remains a man.” In contrast, it is the homosexual mind that finds both the truly feminine and the truly masculine—that is, the heterosexual—unspcakably distasteful. It is the true natures of both men and women that have been targeted for denunciation and destruction. Why? Because the traditional familial order of society is an immovable object in the path of the irresistible force of the state and its plans for our improvement.

Thus at the same time masculine attributes are aped, their originators—men, and white men in particular—are savagely mocked and attacked for pos-