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ABSTRACT

A cursory examination of place names on a map of South Dakota does not reflect the important role that Indians have played in the state and their relation to the land framed by its borders. Only three towns with populations over 1,000 bear names that clearly come from Indian languages: Sioux Falls, Sisseton, and Yankton. The hostile relationship existing between white settlers and Indians in South Dakota from 1859-1890 when most of the names which have gained official status were assigned by whites may account, in part, for the lack of Indian names. However, a closer examination of the names of smaller towns reveals a fascinating variety of documentation and folklore tracing back to a rich heritage of Sioux Indian influence. Interesting details surround the towns of Huron, Iroquois, Seneca, Onida, Pukwana, Kodoka, Oacoma, Oglala, Wasta, and Wakonda. Place names that are translations of Indian words form a longer list, but it is difficult to ascertain which are actually translations and which are descriptive labels that would be natural in any language. Place names falling into this group include Black Hills, Badlands, Vermillion River, and Wounded Knee. (NEC)

INDIAN PLACE NAMES IN SOUTH DAKOTA ©

Thomas J. Gasque

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When we consider the important role that Indians have played in making South Dakota the way it is today and the relation that Indians have had to the land that is framed by the borders of this state, it comes as something of a shock to look at a map and see that there are not many names of important places that are clearly derived from Indian languages. By contrast, if our eyes wander across the map's border to Minnesota, we see, for example, Chaska, Mankato, Owatonna, Shakopee, Wabasha, Waseca, and Winona -- all derived from words in the Dakota or Sioux language (Upham 82, 57-58, 533, 510, 555, 564, 581)* and all with populations well above one thousand (Rand McNally 143). In South Dakota we look in vain for a similar pattern. Granted, towns in Minnesota are generally larger than those in South Dakota; even so, I find only three towns above one thousand with names that clearly come from Indian languages, and this short list includes Sioux Falls: sioux is the French spelling of a Chippewa suffix meaning "little," combined with nadowe 'snake' to give nadowesiou 'little snake' (Buechel 3), obviously a derogatory term but widely used anyway. The other two places of some size with names of Indian origin are Sisseton and Yankton, both names referring to tribal subdivisions of the Sioux. There are, as I hope to explain, reasons for this small number of names; in fact, once we look beyond the modern maps we can find a very large number of names that come from Indian languages.

When I use the term place name, I do not mean to restrict it to towns or other populated places. Generally synonymous with geographic names, place names (or placenames or place-names) refer to any feature, man-made or natural, important enough or large enough and stationary enough to need a name. A place name usually consists of two parts, a generic and a specific (Stewart xviii). A generic, such as city, lake, river, is modified by a specific, such as Rapid, Herman, Big Sioux. In practice, generics are usually unstated in the case of towns and cities; Madison is just Madison, and the City in Rapid City is part of the specific (although Rapid is a very commonly used short form of the name). Some places or features are so prominent, at least within a certain range, that the specific can be omitted with no danger of confusion. No one in South Dakota is likely to ask which hills you mean if you say you are going

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*Documentation in this paper follows the revised form recommended by The Modern Language Association (Gibaldi).

to The Hills. I suspect that any reference to The River is assumed to be to the Missouri and not to the Vermillion (note how the article the makes the generic unnecessary). Place names in English generally follow the pattern set by adjectives coming before nouns; thus the specific precedes the generic: Missouri River, Iron Mountain, Harney Peak, Big Stone Lake, Lewis and Clark Lake, etc. Curiously, a number of names reverse this order, the reason often being a direct or an indirect influence of French or Spanish languages in which adjectives usually follow nouns. this pattern may also be felt to be a bit more elegant. We have, for example, Mount Rushmore rather than Rushmore Mountain. In Lake County (specific plus generic) there are Lake Madison and Lake Herman but there are also Milwaukee Lake and Brandt Lake. The order of generic and specific enters into the discussion of Indian place names, as we shall see later.

The question I raised at the outset--why are there so few place names in South Dakota that come from Indian languages?--can probably be answered quite easily by referring to the condition of Indian-white relations at the time that most of the names which have gained official status were assigned. Dakota Territory was opened for settlement in the summer of 1859 (Schell 72). In the summer of 1862, the "Santee uprising" touched off the long conflict which kept both sides in a state of constant fear and hatred. This period, extending at least until the massacre at Wounded Knee in 1890, was the period that saw the settlement and the naming of nearly all of the land east of The River and a sizable portion of the west. Where there were well-established names for natural features, such as rivers, creeks, hills, and lakes, these were often kept, sometimes simply translated. But the whites who were shaping the land and fulfilling manifest destiny were not often in the mood to commemorate the accomplishments of the enemy they so feared.

The following discussion will focus on a small number of interesting cases and will not attempt to cover all of the names in this state that can be traced to Indian origins. To do so would be to repeat the extensive work that has already been done so well by Virginia Driving Hawk Sneve in her book The Dakota's Heritage.

If we go back to our map and look more closely at some of the smaller towns in the eastern part of the state, we find a few more that seem to be of Indian extraction. Among these should be included Huron, not to be treated as one of the smaller towns, but the name, while referring to a tribe of Indians in Canada who gave their names to one of the Great Lakes, is probably French, meaning "boor" or "rough person," though this had been challenged in favor of a native word (Stewart 215; Vogel 23-24). East of Huron and on the same line of the North Western Railroad is Iroquois; both towns were probably named by Marvin Hughitt, general manager and later president of the railroad (Hamburg 421).

Huron and Iroquois Indians were sufficiently distant not to cause concern in the minds of settlers who might contemplate moving to Dakota Territory. Two other towns with Indian names are Seneca, in Faulk County, and Onida, in Sully County. Most likely, the influence here was not Indian tribes--although both the Seneca and the Oneida are members of the Iroquois confederacy--but places in New York State. The South Dakota Onida has been spelled in a slightly different way.

Perhaps the most interesting of all of these names, however, is Pukwana. The choice of this name provides an insight into the way that settlers were thinking about Indians in the 1880's; it was an attitude that mixed hatred, as suggested above, and admiration, so long as the Indians were sufficiently distant and romanticized. The details differ, but there is general agreement that Pukwana comes from Hiawatha, Henry Wadsworth Longfellow's romantic epic about the Chippewa in Minnesota. This poem was immensely popular for decades after its publication in 1855. Here is the relevant passage, describing the smoke of the peace pipe smoked by Gitche Manito, the great spirit:

> And the smoke rose slowly, slowly,
> Through the tranquil air of morning,
> First a single line of darkness,
> Then a denser, bluer vapor,
> Then a snow-white cloud unfolding,
> Like the tree-tops of the forest,
> Ever rising, rising, rising,
> Till it touched the top of heaven...
> ...All the tribes beheld the signal,
> Saw the distant smoke ascending
> The Pukwana of the Peace-Pipe. (Longfellow 7-8)

Pukwana is the name of the smoke. According to a 1977 history of Brule County, the naming took place one morning in 1882 when several residents of the new town noticed the smoke hanging in the early-morning air above the shanties. Frank Kimball, who had supervised the construction of the railroad and was responsible for naming the towns, had been reading Hiawatha, and he said that the scene reminded him of the sacred pipe-smoke Pukwana; all agreed it would be a good name for the new town (Brule County 19).

There are, of course, a few populated places in South Dakota that have names that are legitimate descendants of the languages once spoken there. Yankton is located where the Yankton Sioux once had a large camp and from where they moved when they accepted the conditions of the 1858 treaty: to relinquish all claim to land in what amounts to the southeast quarter of the present state of South Dakota in exchange for a reservation along the river in what is now Charles Mix County (Schell 69-71). The Yankton spoke the middle or N dialect of the Sioux language, usually called Nakota. They were called Ihanktonwan, which evolved into the word Yankton and which means "People of the End", but it

is not clear whether this refers to the location of their camps on the far edge of the Sioux Nation (Buechel 3), or whether it refers to the seats they took in the council ring. The final element of Ihanktonwan appears also in Sisseton, Sisitonwan, which probably means "People of the Marsh" (Buechel 3) but may mean "Dead Fish" (Sneve, Geographic Names 600). The element tonwan means people in the sense of a band or group. The similarity between that element and the English place-name element ton as in Washington (originally a place name) and Charleston is coincidental, but the influence of that common suffix probably accounts for the form of both Yankton and Sisseton. When Speakers of one of the Sioux dialects refer to a town or city in their own language, Lakota, for instance, they use the word otonwanhe. In referring to specific towns, the word becomes a generic, and it is followed by the specific. Rapid City in Lakota is Otonwanhe Mniluzahe. The literal meaning of this is town + water (mni) + moves fast (luzahe). This is most likely a direct translation out of English.

A few towns have names that seem to be of Sioux heritage, although it is not always possible to identify exactly what the word is supposed to be. Kadoka, the county seat of Jackson County, is said to be a corruption of a word meaning "opening," with reference to a break in the Badlands Wall (Sneve, Geographic Names 73). If this is so, the word seems to be Dakota rather than the Lakota, we would expect in this region. Oacoma, just across the river from Chamberlain, comes from Lakota Okoma, meaning "the space between," apparently referring to its position between the Missouri River and the bluffs (Sneve, Geographic Names 83). There is no doubt about the village of Oglala on the Pine Ridge Reservation; the name is also the name of the largest group of the Teton Sioux. The word means, "he scatters his own" (Buechel 370), but what that means is not clear.

Then there are those place names that fall between authentic Sioux linguistic lineage and romantic fantasy. Wasta, in Pennington County, is from the Lakota word for "good," washtay, but apparently the name was selected by South Dakota state historian Doane Robinson (Sneve, Geographical Names 99). Wakonda in Clay County is obviously based on the word for "holy, spirit, magic," etc.: wakan, but no one seems to be able to explain the final element or why the name was given to this particular town. General W. H. H. Beadle, first territorial surveyor-general, then superintendent of public instruction, and finally president of what is now Dakota State College, is given credit for assigning the name (Sneve, Geographical Names 98; Moses 138).

Before I turn to translated names, I would like to make a comment on the larger political units. The name of the state is, of course, from an Indian word. It is generally agreed that the word Dakota means "alliance of friends," and refers to the large group of people that are usually called by the most convenient general term, Sioux. Dakota, Nakota, and Lakota should not be thought of as different words but

as different pronunciations of the same word, dialectical distinctions like /bahstun/ and /bawstun/ (Boston) or /wahshingtun/ and /warshingtun/ (Washington). Of the sixty-six present county names in South Dakota, only two are of Indian origin: Yankton and Minnehaha. A third county, Brule, bears the name of one of the branches of the Teton Sioux, but the word is French, a translation of the Lakota Sichangu 'burnt thigh.' I have discussed the name Yankton already. Minnehaha is usually explained as a word meaning "waterfall" (Sneve, Geographical Names 31). Since the falls of the Big Sioux River are the most prominent natural feature of this county, the name was aptly chosen. The combination, however, was apparently not ever used by native speakers of Dakota, who would more likely have said haha-wakpa 'falls of the river.' Most likely, Longfellow's Hiawatha once again played a role in this name; Minnehaha, which Longfellow mistakenly assumed meant "laughing waters," was the name he assigned to the Dakota maiden beloved by Hiawatha (Vogel 44; Longfellow 44). The answer to the question of who selected the name and why, however, has been lost with the loss of the early records (Sneve, Geographical Names 31).

County names, since they are usually chosen consciously and with the intent to commemorate a person or an ideal, are better guides to the values of the namers than are the town names, which are often chosen by a distant railroad official or the Post Office Department. The same generalization is true for township names. I have not yet made a systematic study of the nearly one thousand present township names in the state, but a cursory look reveals that less than three percent bear names that can be said to come from Indian languages.

When we turn to those names that are translations of Indian words, we find a much longer list, but we also find that we can make very few confident assertions about which names are actually translations and which ones are descriptive labels that would be natural in any language. The Black Hills, called by Lakota speakers Paha Sapa (the generic paha 'mound, hill' comes before the specific sapa 'black') because from a distance the dark green pines appear black. This illusion strikes speakers of English also. Likewise, the Badlands, in Lakota Makha Shiche, in French Mauvaises Terres, look equally bad to the speakers of any language, and it would be difficult to say with any certainty that the English form has been translated either from French (Sneve, Geographical Names 458) or from Lakota (Sneve, Dakota's Heritage 51).

Perhaps the best way to determine whether certain names are actually translations is to find out which features were widely known by Indian names before white settlement. Since many native speakers of Lakota or Dakota have a tradition of referring to places by names that are different from the official names, it is likely that those names represent very old designations. Acting on this assumption a few years

ago, James Howard went around to a number of sites in eastern South Dakota in the company of several elderly Yanktons, some of whom did not speak English. They told him the names that were used for many natural features; some designate different concepts from the English form. Some designate the same concept, and the lack of any clear relationship between the name and the feature is a good argument for the continuation of the name through translation. Perhaps the best example of this is the Vermillion River. This was known to the elderly Yanktons as "Wase-oyuze." Howard translates this as "Red-paint-source," a reference to "limonite, a yellow iron ore which turns red when heated," which apparently was found somewhere along the banks of this river (Howard 296-297). Vermilion [sic] is a French word meaning "scarlet." Since the feature is no longer visible, it is logical to assume that the present name is a translation. It is interesting to note that Lewis and Clark called the river Whitestone Creek on their way west and Redstone on their way back (Moses 136-137).

Howard surveyed the sites in southeastern South Dakota in 1966 and 1967. At the time, he admits, he was not aware of the existence of a map drawn by one of the nineteenth century's best cartographers, Joseph N. Nicollect. Nicollet, a French scientist employed by the U. S. Government, explored the Upper Mississippi watershed and the Missouri watershed as far west as Fort Pierre in 1839. With him was the young John C. Fremont, who would later become one of the most famous explorers of the West. Nicollet's map includes a very large number of place names and in many cases he gives both the Indian form (his informants apparently spoke the N dialect) and an English translation. The James River is given in its French form, "Riv. a Jaques," but an Indian name also appears: Tchan-sansan, which probably means "cream-colored tree," perhaps a reference to poplar or birch trees along its banks (Howard 296). A small tributary to the west of the James is "Toka Kiahe R. or R. where the enemy appeared on the Hill." Thus, it is clear that the Enemy Creek which flows through Davison and Hanson Counties south of Mitchell has an authentic Indian name. Just above that is "Chankah or Fire Steel R," the name unchanged today. Nicollet's name for one of the major landmarks on the Missouri River, Big Bend, is "Karmichigah Bend." Though this has sometimes been illogically translated as "little bend," the best interpretation is that it represents the verb kahmiga 'to bend' in the reflexive (Buechel 275). Hence, a literal translation would be "it bends back on itself," a good description for a curve that is twenty miles around and two miles across.

Nicollet's map is a rich source of early names, and I have only touched on a very few. Before I bring my cursory survey to an end, I would like to make a few remarks about South Dakota's most famous place name, Wounded Knee. This little community has drawn the attention of the world because of two unfortunate events, one in 1890, the other in

1973, and it is likely that the unusual and slightly comical name has contributed to the interest. The village is named for the creek that flows nearby, and there are at least three stories about the origin of that name. In one version, an Oglala was wounded in the knee in a fight with a Crow Indian somewhere along the banks of the creek (Sneve, Geographic Names 267-268). In another, an Indian man and his wife argued over some matter or another and the wife in her anger shot him in the knee (Sneve, Dakota's Heritage 58). In a third version, supplied by the Gildersleeves, who kept the store in Wounded Knee before the 1973 uprising, "Two braves were in love with the same Indian maiden and while practicing with their bows and arrows near the headwaters of the creek, one of the Indians saw what he believed was an opportunity to disqualify his companion in the eyes of the maiden. Therefore he 'accidentally' shot an arrow through the knee of his companion. This made him a cripple, and thus a poor hunter and poor prospect for a husband" (Quimby 381). The plurality of stories, their fanciful nature, and the absence of any documentation lead to the conclusion that we are not likely ever to find out why the creek bears the name it has. There are at least two versions of the Lakota name too. One is Hupataohpe (Sneve, Dakota's Heritage 58). The other is Chankpe Opi. Chankpe is knee. The word o is a verb which, with frightening efficiency, means "he shoots at and wounds." The suffix pi is a plural marker. Thus, the name means "They shoot at and wound in the knee."

I have in the course of this paper touched on a very small portion of the rich heritage of Indian names in South Dakota. What seems at first glance to be a relatively small number of names turns out to be much larger if we go just below the surface of the official map names. While it is frustrating not to be able to reach definite conclusions about the circumstances of some of the most enticing names, it is fascinating to look at the variety of documentation and folklore that has given our state its infinitely varied name cover.

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