

Coulee Country Roots

by

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According to a scholar long familiar with "Coulee Country," the meanings of residents' surnames, and of commonly-used phrases, are fascinating when time is taken to "dig out" and consider them. Here are a few, in no particular order.

The word "coulee" itself is French for a small, narrow valley, having no permanent stream or creek; it is dry in mid-summer. Often of rather spectacular beauty, these valleys are part of the "Driftless Area," unscoured by the glaciers that moved through the general area eons ago, still rugged and laying essentially as originally formed. Located between Minneapolis-St. Paul and Chicago, with the Mississippi River on the "West and Interstate 90/94 on the East, this part of western Wisconsin has seen little population change between early settlement and today. (An interesting booklet, "Upper Coulee Country," is available from: Trimbelle Publishing, P.O. Box 836, Prescott, Wisconsin 54021. It concerns the area roughly bounded by Prescott/Hastings on the North, La Crosse on the South, the Mississippi on the West and the Eau Claire area on the East.)

Trempealeau. Though "stealing" land from, and often having little respect for, the native Indians, we kept many of their place names, sometimes translated through the French as here, "The mountain that soaks with its feet in the water."

Dugway. A short, winding, steep grade, for example Highway 95 from Fountain City, Wisconsin to about five miles west of Arcadia. Around the 1870's or perhaps even before, a crude way or road had been dug into and around the hills, to permit wheat to be hauled by ox teams from farms around Arcadia to Fountain City for shipment to market by riverboat. The road's remains can still be seen if one knows where to look.

Beef Slough. A backwater of the Mississippi located at the delta of the tributary Chippewa River, north of Alma, Wisconsin. A barge loaded with cattle enroute from New Orleans to the Sioux Indian Reservation near New Ulm, Minnesota ran aground here. The cattle had to be off-loaded, and walked to "where the river was more deep," then re-loaded to continue the trip. Ever since, the location has been known as "Beef Slough."

River Rats. According to some observers, people who did not milk cows or go to church, and who were faintly rapscallion—though they'd have been astonished to hear this. (Landlocked "slaves to butter making" privately envied them!) Such "lotus eaters" lived on the river itself, or along it in towns like Alma, Fountain City or Winona. Typically, they didn't stay in one place, but traveled up and down the Mississippi, some as far, it was said, as Prairie du Chien!

In addition to such place names and people labels, commonly-used phrases are also distinctive to the area. You know you're in Wisconsin, for example, when people say—

though they write it correctly—"They're just going *across* the street to the store." The speech is similar in its way, to people down South who tote bags and carry women, as in, "Hey Joe, y'all hep me tote these cee-ment bags, hear?", and "Ah'm fixin' to carry Louella May to the movie come Friday night."

Also in the deep South, a 300-pound, 65-year-old man commonly talks about his "Daddy." In Coulee Country, people talk about "cricks," as in "Nort Crick," meaning of course, "North Creek."

In Hamlin Garland Country, men wear bib overhauls (overalls) and thrash (thresh) grain.

When the flag passes in parades, respectful watchers "take their hats off of their heads." Critics feel that just taking off one's hat would be sufficient. From where *else*, after all, would they be removed? Similarly, when summer peaks, it gets so hot that "tires melt off of the rims." Again, where else would they be?

And when, during a noisy party, someone wants to talk more privately in an adjoining room, he or she will ask another person to "bring the door to," meaning it should be neither fully closed nor latched, but only that the door is to be pushed "to" direct contact with the frame. In German, "Bitte, Machen die tuer zu."

Most interesting of all perhaps, because they relate to people, are surnames. Many of the following are still borne by those living in the area.

Ziegeweid. The name is very regional, peculiar to the so-called "Saurland" of North Rhine Westphalia, Germany. Zieg is a goat, ziege is the female, and weid or weidt is a pasture, more accurately a bald, naturally treeless meadow, usually circular, such as occurs on low, well-worn mountains such as the Smokies or Ozarks in the United States. Hence, Ziegeweid becomes "goats' meadow."

Foegen. No direct German derivation has been found, although some have said it originally meant "street sweeper." In Dickens' English, a villainous type—though spelled "Fagin." In this case, pronunciation was the same.

Rebhahn. Reb, pronounced "rabe" as rhymes with "babe," is grape or grape arbor; hahn is chicken. Two distinct words are involved. Hence, chicken of the grape arbor literally, or partridge.

Hoevel. An umlaut was probably used over the letter "o" originally, as in Höfel, "servant of the hof," or house. This name is not to be confused with "Hofmeister," or "master of the house." The diminutive, that "el" at the end, makes the difference, connoting familiar, small, or not greatly respected.

Schmidtkecht. Blacksmith's helper. Schmidt is Smith of course, knecht another of the "untermenschen" or working classes.

Glencoe. Referring to the Scots, this was originally Glen Coe, a place still found in Argyllshire, Scotland. In and around Arcadia, is pronounced with a hard, ringing "g," as in "Glenk-koh," like a wrench dropped on a cement floor. The earliest white settlers, with New England pinery and logging connections, allegedly retailed their purchased acreage to later, land-hungry Continentals. Cannily, these early Scots rejected the too steep hills and wet narrow valleys of the area, choosing instead better, more level land

nearer the Trempealeau River. (Galesville, Wisconsin is a fine example of a New England town.) Excellent animal husbandrymen, they owned good farms and blooded livestock, but apparently did not breed enough Scots, so one finds the Muirs, Ashtons and Comstocks living mostly in memory, land records, and on tombstones. "Schottische" remains, however, meaning in German, "As the Scots dance."

Putz. To ornament, trim or polish.

Reuter. One who clears the land. Probably derived from "to root," or "to rout out."

Buchholz. Mans 'book wood.' Before the printing press or lithography, images were transferred using wood cuts. Prepared in mirror image, they were then inked and pressed to paper. The best wood for this job was beech. Hence, both the means used to print, and the product derived, became in the accepted German sense, "buch." Interestingly enough, "Buchenwald," for all its horrible current meaning, is literally, "beech woods."

Haines. Of the sylvan grove, the bosky glen.

Krautwurm. Literally, cabbage worm.

Knaub. A knob, pommel as on a saddle, hilt of a sword.

Wunderlich. Wonderful. Knaub and Wunderlich were early grocers in Fountain City.

Schultz. Village mayor, local-government official.

Rotering. "Of the red ring."

Schlesser. "The locksmith." From German to English, a "stepped" derivation would move from chlosas (castle or keep) through Schhussel (key to some) to Schlesser (locksmith.) The inference is "protected," or "under lock and key."

Weber. Weaver.

Fernholz. "Far woods."

Kastner. Box or chest maker. A casket is a little box!

Krumholz. "Crooked wood." This "crooked" sense remains to us in Grimm's Fairy Tales; see for example, in "The House That Jack Built," the phrase, "This is the dog, so old and worn, who was tossed by the cow with the crumpled horn."

Angst. Anxious, anxiety, worry.

Amman. In the Swiss-German dialect, a magistrate, bailiff, minor court official. (Orientation is legal, not royal.)

Grotjahn. "Big John."

Bremer. Probably "man of/from Bremen," a major German seaport city.

Thies. Diminutive for St. Matthew, hence loving. Like saying "little Bobby" instead of "Robert." St. Mattieus is a favorite patron saint in the Catholic, Southern Rhinisch Palatinate.

Sendlebach. Probably, "the quiet brook."

Wittenberg. "Of the White Mountains".

Krause. "Frill, ruffle." To encircle, go around one's waist. A certain sense of a closed loop, as with a cuff, armband, even rosary.

Schank. Sale of liquor or beer; hence, those licensed to do so.

Dorn. "Thorn." In going from German to English, a sound shift often occurs, as when Teutsch became Deutsche, Pfeffer Pepper, and Dorn Thorn.

Koenig. "The King." From the German, meaning "he who can." More properly spelled with an umlaut over the "o", as "König."

Engle. "Angel."

Rumple. Rubbish, junk, carpenter's scraps, also bits and pieces rummaged from attics.

Runkel. Small lump or chunk, as with coal or wood fuel, a chunk of wood for a stove or furnace.

Fertig. Ready, as in "Are you ready?" The German reply might be, "Ja, ben ich schone fertig."

This is only a sample of the thousands of similar surnames peculiar to even *this* relatively small area. Upon reflection, it is equally apparent that everybody's name began in some way or other. If you don't yet know your own "roots" in this respect, and are willing to risk finding out (!), maybe now is a good time to start. If you live in Coulee Country, or have ties to the region, one way to begin is to write the co-author who has available a wealth of such information: Joseph E. Ziegeweid, 6419 84th Court North, Brooklyn Park, Minnesota 55455.