The Importance of Memory and Place

*A Narrative of Oregon Geographic Names with Lewis L. McArthur*

*by Erin McCullugh Peneva*

Growing up in the sleepy Eastern Oregon town of Dayville, I knew my fair share of colorful place-names — Murderers Creek, Battle Creek, Mule, and Izee, for example. Murderers Creek held a particular fascination as it applies to a beautiful, meandering, cool country creek where riders water their horses and families picnic. When I asked another local child how Murderers Creek got its name, she replied that it was because a group of miners murdered a few Indians somewhere along its banks. Someone else told me that it was named for the killing of several of the wild horses that still roamed the hills and meadows. Since those credulous days, I have learned that the creek earned its name when a small party of Paiute Indians killed a group of prospectors who were investigating the potential of the creek. Murderers Creek is but one of thousands of place-names documented in *Oregon Geographic Names*, an important text that speaks to the long history of place and memory in Oregon.

The small bit of information offered in *Oregon Geographic Names* about the beautiful creek near my hometown may seem insignificant outside of Grant County, but the name is loaded with meaning. The name remarks on the presence of gold miners in the Dayville area, as well as the fact that, while the Civil War raged east of the Mississippi River, Indians still lived and fought in the John Day Valley. The moniker further notes the manner in which locals chose to memorialize the event. One hundred forty years later, the creek still flows, standing as a small marker of local history. In this manner, place-names not only serve as geographic markers but as cultural and historical markers, as well. Place-names give us value and a sense of shared community and memory.

Without *Oregon Geographic Names*, there would be many misremembered Oregon place-names and, consequently, a loss of Oregon history. What began with one man's personal passion and interest is now an important source for Oregon geography and history, with smatterings of etymology, folklore, and humor mixed in. The text provides glimpses of life across the state encompassing...
all the periods of Oregon history. From its earliest conception, Oregon Geographic Names took on a life of its own and continues to grow, much in the same manner as its original compiler, Lewis A. “Tam” McArthur, intended.

Lewis Ankeny McArthur, known to many as “Tam,” was born at The Dalles, Oregon, on April 27, 1883, into a family closely connected to Oregon history. His paternal grandfather, Navy Lieutenant William P. McArthur, was responsible for leading the first survey of the Pacific Coast for the United States Coast Survey of 1849 and 1850, while his maternal grandfather, James W. Nesmith, was an Oregon pioneer who arrived in 1843 and was heavily involved in territorial and state government, serving as U.S. Senator from Oregon from 1861 to 1867 and as a Representative from 1873 to 1875. McArthur’s mother, Harriet Nesmith, was one of the original organizers of the Oregon Historical Society, continuing to serve on its board for twenty-six years, from 1898 to 1924. There is little wonder that McArthur developed such a passion for precision and Oregon geography.

The idea for a book dedicated to Oregon place-names likely came from a comment by Harvey Scott, then-editor of the Oregonian. Scott had published a number of editorials expounding on place-names in Oregon, particularly those with Native American names, and believed an entire book dedicated to the topic might be interesting. McArthur apparently took this sentiment to heart. He began compiling information from county biographical guidebooks, current history texts, post office histories, and records of the provisional and territorial government of Oregon. One of the most important sources of information on Oregon place-names was people’s memories.

The first full-length edition of Oregon Geographic Names appeared in 1928, with a second edition following in 1944. Before McArthur could finish the third edition of Oregon Geographic Names, he fell ill and passed away in 1951. McArthur had compiled all the text for the third edition, and his second wife Nellie Pipes McArthur read and corrected the proofs, putting the work in final form. She also created a separate biblio-index of the people mentioned in the book — which must have been a painstaking process — getting the third edition off to press in 1952. In 1959, McArthur’s son, Lewis L. McArthur joined the Oregon Geographic Name Board and later responded to the call for a fourth edition of Oregon Geographic Names.

Under the diligent eye of Lewis L. McArthur Oregon Geographic Names — now it its seventh edition, published in 2003 — swelled to more than 6,200 entries and carries much of the same tone and tradition as it did under his father. Oregon Geographic Names breaks place-names into six roughly defined periods of history: Native American life, exploration, pioneer, Indian wars and mining, homestead, and the modern period of made-up names. It is not only a good source for knowledge of Oregon geography but is also an informative compendium of Oregon memory. When asked why place-names are so important, Lewis L. McArthur answered “that without names you have nothing; you can’t conduct . . . any thought process except some pure theoretical mathematical business, without names. And you can’t . . . really think about your own locality without names, without some way to identify things. And that takes you into the place. You have to have names to develop your history.”

In the following narrative, Lewis L. McArthur recalls how his father developed, researched, and published the first edition of Oregon Geographic Names. He also discusses how he became involved with the Oregon Geographic Names Board, his work with Oregon Geographic Names, and the direction the text is taking in 2008. This narrative is not a primary document, but is developed from an October 2006 interview conducted with Lewis L. McArthur at the Oregon Historical Society. The original transcripts are located in the Oregon Historical Society Research Library. In the narrative, Lewis L. refers to Tam simply as “Father” or “my father.”

Father was always interested in writing and publications, and when he went to the Portland Academy in the 1890s, he was a great friend of Max Wood, who was the son of C.E.S. Wood. They both lived in the same Northwest [Portland] neighborhood, and they had a little printing press. Of course, it all had movable type. Father printed a little thing called the The Bee, which had to do with the local news and one thing or another. In the latter part of the 1890s, C.E.S. Wood wrote a series of Indian tales, and around 1898, the boys printed that in an edition of one hundred copies. The Oregon Historical Society has a copy. Father’s copy was given to me, and in turn given to my son; he has it now. It’s a beautiful, beautiful production. They printed it
March 1910. Talbot became president of Pacific Power & Light, and he hired father. Max Wood also came along as an early employee.

Father, before he went to Berkeley, had been a reporter for the Oregonian, under Edgar Piper. Harvey Scott [Oregonian editor] had written a number of very interesting editorials on names, on Indian names, other names, and classic names. Father was intrigued by this. One of the editorials said that the subject of names would make a very interesting volume, and that is all Scott ever said about it. I guess that the old gentlemen picked it up from that, because he continued his interest with the Geographic Names Board. In 1917, Father was appointed general manager of Pacific Power & Light, and was made vice president and general manager in 1923. Sometime in that period he got started writing on this thing [Oregon Geographic Names]. He had a private secretary named Gertrude Humphrey who came to work for him two weeks before I was born. She was a typical secretary of the old days with carbon paper and a type-writer. You wouldn’t dare touch her typewriter. Father wrote letters to many of the postmasters of small communities to ask how they got their names. He knew some of them. He knew the story of Portland and St. Helens and things like that, because he was a voracious reader of history and he was also intensely interested in mapping and surveying — all on a side-line to the Pacific Power & Light business.

But, at that time, Pacific Power & Light were running a lot of their own level lines, because they did not have the benefit of all the infrastructure that we have now. And the maps were poor. The Forest Service was getting out maps, but large areas of the state were not mapped at any large scale. Contour wise, they were not mapped at all in some parts of Eastern Oregon. And Father actually produced a map of the state of Oregon with five-hundred-foot contours, which was as close as he could get, and it was all on sheets. It was a huge, big product completed shortly after World War I. This project served as the basis for Father’s honorary Masters Degree from University of Oregon in 1921. As this developed with his surveying and geography and history, he got interested in the names and he wrote this all up in our house. He had a library, an eighteen-by-thirty library. The library was as big as the living room and it was all lined with books; and he had cabinets for maps and what have you. He had an Underwood typewriter and a chair that supposedly was a Queen Anne chair, which I have, and I use for my computer now. He’d sit there and type these things and send it off to Koke-Chapman in Eugene.

I don’t know that he intended to publish a book immediately, but there’s an interesting subject, because it tied in with family history. Remember that both my great-grandfathers were here in the 1850s, and Father was interested in the history, and so was my grandmother. My grandmother, Harriet [Nesmith] McArthur, was one of the founders of the Oregon Historical Society and she was on the first board of directors. The whole family was interested in history, even Grandpa Hewett who was very, very involved in marine history. He was an authority on that. I guess that’s just the way it developed. We were always brought up in history. When [my parents] built the house, they built a great big living room, a great big library, nice kitchen, and we had a breakfast room, which was a very pleasant little room, but there wasn’t enough money or enough space to put a dining room, so if we were going to have a dinner, why, we’d have it in the living room. But in the breakfast room, we all sat around the table — the six of us, the four kids and my mother and father — and on the wall there was that map of Oregon, the base map. If some question came up, [Father would] say, “show me on the map,” and you would have to get up and go over and look at it. He would tell you about where it was and you would go over and find it.

My father would sit there and explicate on all sorts of things, including the problems of the precession of the equinox. He would talk about other scientific things. He had a wealth of information. He would ask questions and we were supposed to be able to respond or to give something interesting that was going on. My mother would contribute somewhat, but she had had encephalitis when my younger sister was born and after that had the shakes. Her mind was all right, but it was awkward for her. So, it was a very, very interesting period of growing up.

Book publishing was all linotype in those days. Koke-Chapman produced the first edition, and it was put out in 1928. I remember the endless galleys,
and I remember Father correcting them and becoming infuriated when something was wrong and he had to re-write a whole paragraph in order to justify the thing. It must have been a pain in the posterior. He did all this himself and during this period Pacific Power & Light was very active. They had offices in Walla Walla, Lewiston, Yakima, and Toppenish, Washington, and at Bend and Madras in central Oregon. They did not go down to Klamath Falls and they did not go into eastern Oregon, but they were along the Columbia River, Hood River, and The Dalles, and then to Astoria. Father was moving back and forth extensively between these various places, and he would usually go by train. I went a couple of times with him. I remember primarily going to Bend, but I also remember going one time to Yakima, when we took the train. During those trips we would combine the geographic names work with business, and we were always looking for people [to talk to]. Father would take me out of school and say, “Well, you’ll learn more coming with me than you ever will in school.” So, I wandered around with him quite a bit. He liked some company and also somebody to carry the bags.

He was a great friend of Robert Sawyer, from Bend, and we would always go to see him. When he went to Bend, for example, somewhere along the line he’d talk to Bill Vandevert, of the Vandevert Ranch, which is now Sun River. Sawyer knew all those people, and they’d get together. He was interested in surveying and level lines, and we would drive around. I was only a kid, probably ten or twelve years old. That was nice, but I found some of the interviews a little boring. We went from Bend over to Burns one time, and that was [still] a gravel road, before it was paved. Later on, we went down to Lakeview, and we might have taken the district manager. They were looking at things, and they would go down one way and come back up some other way, just seeing the country. Every time we’d get to some odd place, my father would ask some questions. He was picking up information all the time. He had this tremendous memory. He was a very, very outgoing person; he liked to talk to people. I’m a little more of a reclusive. That is what he was doing and he kept on with that. Meanwhile, while he was talking with all these people about the local history, he was also a book collector and he collected all sorts of books himself. He’d also gotten some books from my aunt Velina [Nesmith] Molson, our grandmother’s younger sister, who married William Markland Molson, of Montreal, of the Molson brewing family. She was very interested in history and had quite a collection of books, including the Charles Wilkes Report books. Father inherited a lot of those. He bought other books as well. He bought Vancouver and Cook’s journals, and other travel journals or records and read them. That was how he put together the history of [Oregon’s] capes, the maritime features of the Columbia River, and much of what the early explorers had done.

Father’s job often required him to go down to Salem to the legislature. Of course, that gave him the chance to...
meet some more people and ask some more questions. He actively cultivated several friends like Omar Spencer, who was an authority on Columbia County and history and Sauvie Island. He'd find people who were from all over, and he'd run into people everywhere. He knew, for example, the Hanleys over in Burns. I'm not sure how, but somehow or other he'd met them, but I think a lot of it had to do with the Bureau of Reclamation meetings that went on. In those days, people were much more social. You'd have a meeting of the Electric Light people, the Northwestern Electric Light and Power Association, or you would have a meeting of the people involved in the U.S. Bureau of Reclamation. Sawyer was head of the Reclamation Congress. People would go to these meetings and they'd not only discuss the immediate problems, but they would discuss all sorts of other things going on in the state. In those days, there were many more active players in the life of the state. It has faded out now.

I remember other times when driving to Eastern Oregon when we stopped at the Warm Springs Agency. Father would talk to the Indians, and he would talk to the Indians up in the Umatilla Reservation. He tried to find out the meaning of some of the Indian words, and I think that probably was as difficult for him then as it is now to get anything really concise. There are the professional linguists that are able to put something together, but for the amateur it is very, very difficult. A correct rendering [spelling] of the word is even more difficult, I think, as I remember there are eleven renditions of Willamette by various peoples that heard the word, and they all have to do with Walla, water, Walla Walla, Willamette, and Wallowa. Wallowa is a Nez Perce word for a fish trap. But again, maybe the wall has something to do with it because of the fish trap. Father, he talked to the Indians, but again, getting involved with the jargon was difficult.

Getting the true Indian name is pretty tough. I made a survey of the names in OGN [Oregon Geographic Names] and there are less than one hundred Indian names that I think were ever used by the Indians for the feature that we were talking about. Neahkahnie Mountain, however, is one of them, and that is a reasonable approximation of what the Indians called it. They did not call it mountain they called it Neahkahnie. Netarts is the place of the oyster, the ne meaning the place, and the same way that ne, Kahnie, the Kahnie was the god and the ne was the place. There are a number of those names. There are other names scattered throughout the state, but again, many of the Indians do not want to give the Indian name or the location. That is something that is their business.

By 1936, Father was no longer general manager of Pacific Power & Light, and he had the opportunity to put together the second edition, which he'd been thinking about for some time. He had a lot of additional names. Because of his surveying, he met all sorts of people in Washington [D.C.], and one was Admiral L.O. Colbert, who was head of the Coast & Geodetic Survey. In the early 1930s there was a good deal of make-work by the Works Progress Administration, and Father prevailed upon Colbert to have a couple of the secretaries go over to the post office department and copy off the postal records for Oregon. That was where a lot of the early post office information came from. When they got out the post office books, they used the microfilm, but they also compared that with Father's records. Father's records, of course, were not always copied one hundred percent correctly, but the microfilm was not always legible either, so it made a great combination. He was able to
get more post office information, and good maps were beginning to come out in the 1950s. Father would also write the local post master in Ione or in Hermiston, or wherever it might be, asking, “How did the town get that name?” When he would get an answer back, he would file the response in one of several grey binders that are currently housed in the vault at Oregon Historical Society.

He put that all together and it is all on record. By this time, Father had the text for the third edition completed. His health, however, failed badly in early 1950, and by late 1950, he was in serious condition. He spent most of 1951, until his death, either in the hospital or in a rest home, and then he passed away.

I had always been tangentially interested in Father’s project, but I was very busy with my family and my work, in the same way that Father had been in the early days. He was busy with his own affairs, and he had always said that you owe something to the community. I figured, well this is an interesting thing, I’ll work on it. Later on, about 1963 or ’64, after the Oregon Geographic Names Board was operating, Tom Vaughan said that we needed to have another addition of Oregon Geographic Names. I said, “Well, I’ll work on that,” as I already had some ideas on it. By that time, things were beginning to simmer down a little bit for me. The first thing that I decided was that I was not going to fiddle around with linotype and its endless galleys as I had seen Father do. I just was not going to put up with it. We knew that other things were coming along. Binford & Mort said that the thing to do was to just take the third edition and photo copy that, reproduce it, and then add the new information on as an appendix. “I thought that was a bummer.

By 1969 or 1968, things had really begun to gel, and I was getting information together, trying to figure out what to do. I traveled around the state a reasonable amount with the gas station business, but not too much. I had also become involved in the historic preservation business and was a member of the State Advisory Committee on Historic Preservation. I was an original member of that. That got me involved in a tremendous amount of history. I met people who were interested in history and they would give me information or leads or say “Did you know about this?” or “Why don’t you look that up?” They would frequently ask questions such as, “Why do we have a place named ‘Legality’ over in Gilliam County?”

George Abdill down in Roseburg, the head of the Douglas County Museum at the time, was a retired Southern Pacific [SP] locomotive engineer who gave me a lot of information about the early SP business. He had a librarian who stayed on after he passed away. I would go down there when I was going back and forth to San Francisco, and I would stop there to prowl around in some of the old books there. I always found a good amount of information.

I was making rather regular trips to San Francisco and Los Angeles, and I had a good friend down there named David Magee who was a book dealer. Magee had come to San Francisco occasionally and sometimes I would put my head in Magee’s shop, just to say “How do you do?” Near the end of the war, I was detailed to go to China, and part of that assignment was to have a four-month crash course in Mandarin Chinese at the University of California which was my old stomping grounds. I was there from April to August in 1945, and I spent a lot of time over in San Francisco. Magee was an intergenerational person. He was a good friend of Father’s and a very good friend of mine. I used to talk to him about the book [Oregon Geographic Names]. He put me in touch with Gordon Nelson, who developed the electronic system for the fourth edition of the book. This was one of the earliest electronic publications. It was all in computer printout. Being a professional printer and computer programmer, he figured out a way of programming it to achieve exemplary graphics. This included hyphenation, justification, leading, and pagination.

He said that he could justify it down to a thirty-second of an “em.”

I made the decision that I would try to maintain Father’s original style in the text. I think that I have done a reasonable job on it. It’s concise. I avoid redundancy, avoid the use of the word that, use appropriate words, and watch my tenses. It’s not simply the facts, you know; there’s a story and you have to have the story. I also try to include a bit of humor. For example, what I consider to be my best effort at humor in the whole book concerns the Watson
Cabin down in Douglas County, where this woman told me about it. She said her grandfather or somebody had gone up, and they gave the cabin its name. She said her grandfather had told her who Watson was and where the cabin was. She ended up saying it was a nice place where they stopped on the first night of their hunting trip and they had a little cooler over the spring with netting over it where they could put the venison. I ended up writing in the book the statement saying, “In the compiler’s opinion the venison was more often poached than fried.” I use that because that is the type of humor that I try to put in; it is the type Father put in.

Around the time the fifth edition was ready to be published, I was quite active with the Oregon Geographic Names Board. The federal government was in the process of producing the rest of the 1–to-62,500 maps, one inch to the mile maps, which they did for practically all of western Oregon and a smattering of eastern Oregon. By about 1970, they had come to the conclusion that they were going to do it on the 1 to 24,000, the same way as the rest of the United States. The West was way, way behind the eastern part of the country in terms of mapping. I was getting the proofs on those maps and looking them over for name corrections, just the same way that Father did. I made lists of the names that were on the quadrangles and checked off which ones I knew about. The Bureau of Land Management had the original land entry books, the big red volumes, in their office in the Lloyd Center. I would go over there at noon and pour through them to get names and tie them into the names on the maps. In this manner, I was able to get information on new place-names. There was other information coming in on the post offices and I would get new stuff. Additionally, I used correspondence for finding information. There was a fellow over at the Central Oregonian in Prineville who would send me stuff. The members of the Oregon Geographic Names Board were also helpful. Francis “Van” Landrum, down in Klamath Falls, was quite an historian and did a lot of work on that area. There were all kinds of things going on with people who would send stuff in. One of the things that we missed was I had about half of John Horner’s Wallowa County name stuff, and everybody wondered where the rest of his information was. Grace Bartlett had said that when Horner went on or died, his nephew had taken them and hung onto them like grim death because he thought they were an invaluable resource. He was a dentist down in Eureka. He did not have any more use for them than my left foot, but he took them. Tom Vaughan and I made a determined effort to get them back, but we were never successful. That went on for years, and about five years ago, I was talking to Jack Evans over in the La Grande area, and he said he understood that somebody in Wallowa County had a copy of the Horner notes. He did a little gumshoe work and discovered that the Horner notes were located at the Oregon Historical Society. As far as other book sources on Oregon place-names, you [Oregon Historical Society] have got all the mug books, the Illustrated History of Central Oregon, and you have got Rachel Applegate’s book on Klamath County.2

Most people overlook the whole geographic names business. I had been a member of the American Names Society for many, many years, was president of it for two years, and on the board for a long time. But, of all the geographic names books that I know of — and there are many of them scattered throughout the country, some of them very good — I don’t think there’s any up to OGN, but there are some excellent ones. Some are just very, very primitive. But the only other one that OGN is produced by a professor of history was Edmond S. Meany’s book in Washington.3 All the others have been produced by either English professors, occasionally somebody in the linguistics like William Bright, by an interested amateur, or by a geographer. There are many, many tools available if you have the time to search them. I just kind of fell into the project, and the deeper I got, the more I became intrigued with it so that now I cannot imagine being without it. I think that is probably the way Father felt.

Oregon Geographic Names is currently in its seventh edition with an eighth being developed for publication. Lewis L. McArthur, who recently celebrated his ninety-first birthday, is still deeply involved with the process and keeps an office at the Oregon Historical Society, where he regularly receives letters from across the state concerning place-names or asking for information. His children have also joined the project, and his daughter Mary McArthur now holds his place on the Oregon Geographic Names Board and is continuing working on Oregon Geographic Names. His son, Lewis A. McArthur is working on the McArthur family history and genealogy.

NOTES

3. Lewis L. McArthur, interview by Eliza Jones, December 28, 2006, interview SR 11092, transcript (transcribed by Alton Spencer), Oregon Historical Society Research Library, Portland. Lewis L. McArthur added additional information during the process of preparing this narrative for publication.
4. Additional information is from Lewis A. McArthur and Lewis L. McArthur, eds., Oregon Geographic Names 7th ed. (Portland: Oregon Historical Society Press, 2005); conversations with Lewis L. McArthur; and Omar C. Spencer,


6. See also the history of the Oregon Geographic Names Board in this issue: Champ Clark Vaughan, “The Oregon Geographic Names Board: 100 Years of Toponymic Nomenclature,” *Oregon Historical Quarterly* 109:3 (Fall 2008).

7. Tam was always interested in surveying. In 1910, he started the contour-map project of the state of Oregon. This brought him into contact with geologic surveys of the state, the new topographic map program, as well as the name recording process. Conversation with Lewis L. McArthur, August 5, 2008.

8. Harriet Nesmith McArthur served at Oregon Historical Society from 1898 until 1924.

9. The successor to moveable print, linotype printing involved setting the letters in order and then casting the letters with hot lead to form “slugs.” These slugs were literally lines of type. This process made editing difficult and laborious. Conversation with Lewis L. McArthur, 5 August 2008.

10. Koke-Chapman was a printer out of Eugene, Oregon.

11. A galley is the printed compilation of all of the lines, known as slugs, set into place and produced by the linotype machine. The galleys arrived in long sheets, without pagination, for proof by the author. Justification is the process of inserting spaces between words and letters in order to create equal-length lines.

12. Robert Sawyer (1880–1959) moved to Bend, Oregon, in 1912, soon joining the staff of the *Bend Bulletin*. After purchasing the newspaper, Sawyer became editor and remained so until 1953. Sawyer was active in Northwest politics and Deschutes County, served as director of the American Forestry Association, and sat on the board of the Pacific Northwest Regional Forestry Advisory Council. He also contributed to the Oregon Historical Society. For more on Sawyer, see Robert W. Sawyer Papers, Knight Library, Special Collections and University Archives, University of Oregon, Eugene.


16. Binford & Mort is a book publishing and printing house previously of Portland and now out of Hillsboro, Oregon.

17. An “em” is the size of the space taken up by the letter “m” in lowercase type when printed. “Leading” refers to the amount of space between the lines of type.
