A FEW NAMES IN A VAST LAND – SCANDINAVIAN PLACE-NAMES IN THE MIDWEST

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1. Immigration and Place-names

The century after 1825 saw the immigration of *c.* 2.5 million Scandinavians into North America, with the greatest number of immigrants arriving in the second half of the last century. Swedes and Norwegians settled more or less in the same areas: the northern, central Midwest and later the western parts of the USA and the adjoining provinces of Canada. The early settlers went to Texas, Kansas and Illinois. In the last part of the 19th century the main bulk of the immigrants arrived and settled in Wisconsin, Iowa, Minnesota and the Dakotas, flowing over into the central provinces of Canada. After the turn of the century, Swedes went to Nebraska and Michigan, Norwegians to the Pacific Northwest and British Colombia. Danes settled more unevenly over the same area, with certain concentrations in Kansas and California. Icelandic settlers are found in northern Wisconsin and southern Ontario, North Dakota and Manitoba and in Utah.

I spent two years in the United States and had the opportunity to travel fairly extensively around the Midwest. As a linguist I was struck by two facts: firstly, the extent to which the Norwegian and Swedish languages were still spoken among older people in certain areas; secondly, the lack of Scandinavian place-names in those same areas, where I would have expected to find them.

We do not find any Scandinavian names of states, and there is only one county out of *c.* 5000 with a Scandinavian name (*Bremer* County, Iowa), one county seat (*Mora*) and only very few townships. Scandinavian place-names usually designate small towns or villages – the biggest settlement with a 'Swedish' name is *Hallandale*, Florida, with 26,000 inhabitants – and sometimes topographical features such as brooks, lakes and hills. Einar Haugen's fundamental work[1] proves that there are quite a few Norwegian names to be found in the Midwest, and Hallaråker[2] shows that many such names are to be found in historical records.

A book on Swedish place-names,[3] published in 1985, has approximately 800 entries. It has been claimed[4] that the book includes all Swedish-American place-names, both

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On Scandinavian Place-names in North-America
by Arne Kruse

The map is made from the quadrangles
Coon Valley, Wis. and Esofea, Wis.
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Topographical names
and names on schools,
churches and roads

Ba Bakstadråden
Bo Bergedalen
Bd Bohemidalen
Br Bohemiryggen
Bre Brodebygda
Co Coonkrikken
Dd Daledalen
Da Dauverråden
En Endrikdalen
Gr Grytheryggen
Gb Gronvoldbläffe
Grr Gronvoldryggen
Haa Haatvedtdalen
He Haugenbläffe
He Helgesonråden
Ho Holfeldtkrikken
Jo Joreryggen
Ko Kolldalen / Kollerdalen
Kok Kolldalskrikken
Kl Klomstenryggen
Kb Knipstilbläffe
Lb Leebläffe
Lr Lindvigryggen
Lir Lindvigråden
Lo Lovasryggen
Mr Midtlandryggen
Mo Molassidalen
Mb Maurbugbläffe
Md Maurbaugdalen
Mk Midtdalskjorka
Mu Muusdalen
Ne Nabbedelen
Ne Nerisonskulen
NN Nord-Natvigskulen
Nr Nordryggen
No Norskedalen
On Onsetskulen
Os Ospedalen
Pd Paradisdalen
Pd Paradishaugen
Paradishuset
Pl Pleasantryggen
Pr Punkiryggen
Rr Rongstadryggen
Rd Rullandsdalen
Rk Rullandskrikken
Rd Rundahldalen
Sd Skogdalen
Sk Skogdalskjorka
Spd Springdalen
Spb Springdalsbläffa
Spk Springdalskrikken
Spa Springdalskulen
Spr Springdalsryggen
Sr Staflandsryggen
Std Strangstadlidalen
Stb Storbakkbläffa
Svr Sveamsryggen
Sve Sverige
SN Sor-Natvigskulen
Sor Sorryggen
Tb Tillisbläffe
Td Tyskedalen
Tr Tyskeryggen
Vk Vangkjorka
VRs Von Rudenskulen

names of habitation and of topography. This is certainly not the case, but the very fact that one is able to include articles on all Swedish-American place-names within one normal size volume says something significant. One to two thousand names would be the number you would expect to find within *one* Swedish or Norwegian village of some size today.

This article will discuss the seemingly paradoxical discrepancy between the many Scandinavian settlers in the North American Midwest and the infrequency of Scandinavian place-names in the same area. I will base my statements on research done on Swedish-American place-names by Swedish researchers F. Hedblom[5] and O.R. Landelius,[6] on Einar Haugen's pioneering work on the Norwegian language in North America[7] and on my own research on a Norwegian-American community in Wisconsin.[8]

2. Settlers and Names

The conclusions to be drawn from the little research that has been done on Scandinavian place-names in North America seem to be unanimous: there are relatively few Scandinavian place-names, and certain types or groups of names that are very frequent in Scandinavia are under-represented or, indeed, seem to be altogether non-existent. It follows that there does not seem to be a naming tradition in the Midwest that accords with a Scandinavian pattern.

There seems at once to be a paradox or, at least, a contradiction in this: the Norwegian immigrants, and also the Swedes to a great extent, came from a relatively egalitarian society based on a conservative agricultural culture. A rich place-name tradition must necessarily have been part of the culture they brought with them. Not only would they know hundreds, perhaps thousands of names from the area they came from but, more importantly, they would bring with then a naming system, a certain tradition of denotation. Furthermore, the Norwegians and Swedes settled in clusters, preferring to settle close to people from their own area – obviously a defensive, conservative move, since the best way to stick to the old and known is to stick together with those who share your traditions.

I will in the following paper discuss a few of the possible reasons for this situation. Clearly this is a major topic that includes a number of possible explanations on which I do not have space to develop, but I would draw attention to certain of the most important ones. They are:-

1. The transition through English
2. The short time perspective
3. The type of settlement: urban – rural
4. The type of landscape
5. The immigrant's role in society

2.1 The Transition through English

As in Scotland when names in Gaelic or Norse are written on 'English' maps, we have the problem of making out the origin of non-English names on American maps. Many names of Scandinavian origin may thus be 'hidden'. Just from reading the map one wouldn't see the Swedish origin *Gävle* of *Galva*, Illinois, (*Galva*, Iowa, is secondary to this) or *Sýren* of today's *Siren*, Wisconsin.[9] There is not only the problem of the various attempts at replacing the special Scandinavian vowels or even of simple distortion. Sometimes folk-etymology or other kinds of creativity may have 'improved' the original name. Settlers from *Folldalen* in Norway ended up in what is now *Fall Coulee*, Wisconsin (by Hixton, Jackson County) – the English-American pronunciation of *Foll-* (originally the river name *Folda*, 'wide') being close to the meaningful American term *fall* 'autumn' and the meaning of *-dal* 'dale, valley' carried on in the Midwestern (originally French) *coulee* 'valley with steep sides' – word which is sometimes also used in Norwegian-American. Many an obscure name – and sometimes seemingly obvious English ones – may have Scandinavian origins that only a close examination will unveil.

2.2 Young Names

Perhaps the most obvious factor to be considered is the short period of time that the cultural landscape has had to develop. With the exception of the Swedish colony in Delaware and the Danish and Swedish in the Caribbean, hardly any Scandinavian place-names in America will be older than the early 1880s and the bulk of them were coined in the second half of the last century. (A special group of names that wont be examined here are the many coined by Swedish explorers in Alaska.[10]) A name may have been transferred from Scandinavia and as such be very ancient in its origin, but we will here regard this type as a new name, in a new setting, with new functions.

The relationship between naming and time is naturally a very complex matter and we would need to compare other areas of colonisation in order to say anything meaningful on this topic. Still, what seems to be the case in the Midwest is that the typical Scandinavian naming system for farms and fields has not developed, and it is most unlikely that it ever will develop since we now see the last generation of Scandinavian speakers ageing rapidly. In spite of the short time span, we can observe how a great number of Scandinavian names are now no longer functioning. Only very few, for instance, will have survived of all the names of religious congregations such as the Norwegian ones recorded in the *Norske Lutherske Menigheter i Amerika.*[11]

2.3 Type of Settlement: Rural – Urban

Very few Danish place-names have been handed down to us. There are substantially more Swedish and still more Norwegian names. This coincides well with Haugen's observation about the different rates of assimilation among Scandinavian national

groups, and it is a consequence of how the Scandinavian nationalities settled: Danes became city dwellers while Swedes and even more so Norwegians became farmers, settling in clusters with other Swedes and Norwegians.

2.4 The Type of Landscape

Einar Haugen[12] points to the fact that the simple structure of the Midwestern farm does not invite names. The Midwestern farm will have a very simple layout compared to a Swedish or Norwegian farm that might stretch over a highly varied landscape from the sea to high on the mountain. On a farm of the latter type there is a greater need to identify variations in the topography by naming them. Most of the Midwest is monotonous old prairie-land or, anyway, relatively flat. Most farms are square-shaped with the houses placed in the middle of vast fields of monoculture. There are very few topographical names on the prairie and, where there is a lack of characteristic features, there is hardly any need to stick detailed address labels on the topography.

The importance of this factor is clearly seen when we compare the typical Midwestern farm with farms in the varied topography of the Coulee Region in Wisconsin, adjoining the Mississippi valley. (See below.)

2.5 The Immigrants' Place in Society

The under-representation of Scandinavian names compared to Scandinavian population is strikingly characteristic of the Midwest. Out of more than 1,500 names that Cassidy[13] investigated in Dane County, Wisconsin, only 11 are of Norwegian origin and yet this is an area with an exceptionally dense Norwegian settlement. After scanning maps of Swedish-dominated Isanti and Chisago counties in Minnesota, Hedblom[14] reports the same to be the case there. Obviously there has to be social reasons for this. The Reverend Alfred Bergin[15] from Isanti County writes as follows:

> *During all the years (since the 1850s) it has been left to a few persons, especially 'Yankees' from Ireland or some other country, to assume almost all responsibilities. One looks up to these so-called Americans with a childish trust and willingly obeys their slightest nod... In politics the Swedes on the basis of their numerical strength have been obliged to participate even if in many instances it has been with reluctance.*

All over the area where Scandinavians settled the same story is told: the settlers did not take part in official responsibilities in the early years. This must be the main reason for the lack of Scandinavian place-names on American maps: the names on the maps are administrative names that often already existed before the Scandinavians arrived, or they were settlement names that were baptized by the English-speaking American administration in order to be registered.

The Scandinavian settlers were naturally outside official life in the first period because of language difficulties, but they must also have felt alienated from the

American administrative system. The settlers felt that the Yankee administration had very little to do with them since they had their own social network organised around their religious traditions and community customs in Scandinavia.

A sort of dualism must have emerged very soon in the Scandinavian communities in the countryside. While the official administration was turned outwards and represented the communities in the English language, the Scandinavian languages survived well *underneath* the English-American official facade. It is here, in the local communities in the countryside, that we will find Scandinavian place-names still alive today. The example of Coon Valley serves to illustrate this.

3. Coon Valley

Coon Valley is located in Vernon County in south-eastern Wisconsin. The valley's central and upper parts were settled almost completely by emigrants from the south-eastern part of Norway, mainly from Biri. Gudbrandsdalen and Telemark. The clearing of the land was done mainly in the second half of the last century. Even today there is a strong Norwegian-ness to the valley, and Norwegian is heard frequently wherever elderly people are met.

3.1 Administrative Names

In Coon Valley there are actually two Norwegian township names, *Bergen* and *Christiana*, and they came about in a rather characteristic way: when the authorities demanded that the first township should be organised in Coon Valley, the locals had to elect someone to be in charge of this and to see to it that the settlement was named. The overwhelming majority of Norwegians didn't really have much option other than to elect one of the few local Yankees, who was able to read and write English. The one to be elected was the one to promise the Norwegians that the township would get a Norwegian name. This talented politician kept his promise, and he chose the name *Bergen*, which was Norwegian and easy to pronounce, in spite of the fact that none of the local Norwegians came from anywhere close to Bergen. The idea was that the next township was to be named after the Norwegian capital Christiania, but the Yankee clerk missed out the last i in the name and so it became *Christiana*. These two names still exist but the townships which have developed since have all got English names.

By the time we finally see Norwegians taking part in official administration in Coon Valley, they have taken over the English administrative terminology, and they seem to have accepted that the official nomenclature should be in English or at least Anglicized. Consequently, all new towns in Coon Valley are given English names, the valley loses its Norwegian name *Haatveitdalen*, and the spelling of *Christiana* is accepted.

3.2 Nature Names

Coon Valley is unlike the usual landscape of the Midwestern prairie. As part of the Coulee Region, Coon Valley is located in an area which was not flattened by the glaciers and which today can be compared with an eastern Norwegian valley landscape – a topography resembling closely what the emigrants to Coon Valley left behind in Norway. As a consequence, Coon Valley does have exceptionally many Norwegian place-names, especially nature names or topographical names.[16] (See map.)

Compared to a similar area in Norway, however, the topographical names in Coon Valley are very few and there is remarkably little variation in the generics used. The generics are as follows:

blåff, f., from American English *bluff* 'steep sandstone hillside' e.g. *Tilliblïffa*, *Knipstillbliffa*
dal, m. 'dale, valley, glen' e.g. *Springdalen*, *Bergedalen*
krikk, m., from the American English creek 'brook, small river' e.g. *Rullandskrikken*, *Springdalskrikken*
rygg, m., = 'ridge' e.g. *Tyskeryggen*, *Rongstadryggen*

The specifics likewise are few and show very little variation. The pattern is as follows: a surname or family name, which indicates a centrally-located *farm*, constitutes the specific of a name both to a valley, e.g. *dal*, and to the neighbouring ridge e.g. *rygg* or *bliff*. Other specifics that are not as frequent will indicate ethnic groups that live there or *directions*:

Farm central to the location: e.g. *Rullandsdalen*, *Rullandskrikken*, *Tilliblïffa*, *Lindvigryggen*
Directions: e.g. *Scryggen*, *Nordryggen*
Ethnic groups: e.g. *Bohemidalen*, *Tyskeryggen*
Other : *Punkiryggen*, *Musdalen*, *Skogdalen*, *Sprindalen*

3.3 Farm Names

In North America farm-names are not permanent as in Scandinavia. An American farm is referred to by the family name of the present owner or occupier of the farm. If the Strand family lives on the farm, it will be referred to as *Strand*, *Strandfarmen* or *Strandplassen*. If taken over by the Olson family, it will very soon be called *Olson*, *Olsonfarmen* or *Olsonplassen*.

Personal names are more or less frequent as part of farm-names in Scandinavia, both Christian names and – less usually – surnames. The main difference to the American system is that while Scandinavian farm-names are permanent, the American

are current references to the occupier and are subject to change when the occupier moves away.

The Scandinavian settlers must have taken over this system fairly soon, and the reason for this I believe is to be found in the new way of farming that the settlers experienced in their new homeland. An American farm is economically and culturally different from its Scandinavian counterpart in the sense that it is more or less regarded as providing an income for a family here and now. To many Scandinavian immigrants it was a shock to first experience the businesslike, even cynical, attitude to the land in the Midwest, but they were forced to adapt and we soon hear reports that Scandinavian settlers were as hungry for new land as anyone else as the Frontier moved west.[17] It became quite usual for the immigrants to settle for a year or two in one place until rumours told them of better land further west.

In North America the farm name is first and foremost an address label that refers to the economic ownership of the land, while in Scandinavia the farm name has an historic aspect beside the obvious address function. In a society with extensive internal migration and a market-oriented structure, it is inevitable that historic aspects of names are not as important as in a more stable, traditional agricultural society such as we know in the Old World.

3.4 Field Names

Apart from the lack of farm-names, perhaps the most remarkable difference from a Scandinavian cultural landscape is the absence of names within a farm, especially field-names. Fields within an American farm are identified according to what is cultivated on the field at the present season – a parallel to the ad hoc-reference to the farm itself: as long as potatoes are grown there a field will be known as *potetfila*; if tobacco is grown there next year it will be referred to as *tobakkfila* (*fil*, f. a borrowing from the English-American field).

The reason for the lack of permanent names for both farms and fields is to be found in a way of farming that was, to say the least, very different from that in Scandinavia at that time. We should not forget that with the introduction of new methods of farming to modern Scandinavia we are in the process of losing most of our old field-names. In the Midwest, large fields and monoculture have been the reality from the start. In addition, the more consistent crop rotation in the Midwest prevents the establishment of permanent names linked to what grows on the field.

4. Names and Function

The underlying motivation for all naming is that of distinguishing one location from others, i.e. to identify the object. The means we choose in order to do so will vary. Names from the Old World will often include an important aspect of identity with

historic continuity from an inherited tradition, while the function of the name as an identifier or address tag is more important in the New World. A good illustration of this is the usual American way of denoting city streets with numbers. Anyone who has tried to drive into a big American city for the first time must admit to the practicality of this system, unfamiliar though it might look to European eyes. In a young cultural landscape such as the Midwest, much of the need for address tags is taken over by the use of descriptive prepositional phrases, like *attmed skulen* 'next to the school', *oppi dalen* 'up into the valley', *over krikken* 'over on the other side of the brook'. As the prepositions change, these can hardly be regarded as names in a traditional sense. Harder to leave out as names are the many appellatives functioning as local names, e.g. *krikken* or *Krikken*, *blaffa* or *Blaffa* .

Most of the nature-names found in Coon Valley are descriptive of the location in some way or another: *Nordryggen*, *Skogdalen*, *Tyskedalen*, *Storbakkblaffa* etc. But when it comes to the names of villages and administrative units, very few of the Scandinavian-American place-names describe the locations they denote. *Gimli*, *Viking*, *Odin* are original American creations declaring a romantic link to the ethnic past in the Old World. *Viborg*, *Mora*, *Eidsvoll*, *Sogn* – and as we saw in Coon Valley, *Bergen* and *Christiana* – are names that have been transferred from Scandinavia to the New World, usually coined by the immigrants themselves, again in order to establish links to their old roots. Such implanted or transferred names will have lost the descriptive function they (once) had where they originated, and the function that remains – besides the nostalgic implications[18] – is that of identifier. Names like *Norway*, *Norseville*, *Scandinavia*, and sometimes the type *Stockholm* and *Bergen*, will on the other hand often have been given by Yankee administrators in order to identify Scandinavian settlements.

We have seen how a new naming system develops from new demands in society. If the social or economic base for the society changes, we can observe how the place-names – as single names, groups and system – also change in order to function in response to the new demands.

With farmland only just over a century old, we can observe a naming system in the Midwest which is not established but which is still taking shape. The nomenclature in such a landscape is a special challenge to onomastic method and theory. Scandinavians have paid scant attention to the Scandinavian-American place-names. This is consistent with the fact that the field of place-name studies in Scandinavia has for long been – and still is – preoccupied with etymology. There are obviously only very few Scandinavian-American place-names that can be regarded as etymological challenges, but as with other place-names, they carry with them information of historic and linguistic value.

Place-names research has very often played the role of 'help-science', not least for historians and, typically, Scandinavian place-names in America have been used as

evidence for the history of immigration. It is now time that more emphasis was put on the place-names as linguistic evidence: linguistically speaking the onomastic material in North America is interesting because it provides evidence on how the native languages of Scandinavia behave in a bilingual situation. The challenge of Scandinavian place-names in America lies in the relationship between the name and the user, and between languages in conflict.

Except for the present-day contact of Sami and Finnish in the north and German and Danish in the south of Scandinavia, there are very few examples of Scandinavian place-names created in situations of language conflict. Otherwise one has to go to the two great Scandinavian migration periods in the past – the Viking period with its expansion to Britain, Normandy, the Baltic and Russia, and the immigration to North America. Here there are obvious common areas waiting to be explored.

NOTES

1. E. Haugen, *The Norwegian Language in America. A Study in Bilingual Behavior* (2nd Edition, London, 1969).
2. P. Hallaråker, Stadnamn i Vesterheimen – opphav og bruk, *Namm og nemne* 3 (1986), 101–116.
3. O.R. Landelius, *Swedish Place-Names in North America* (Carbondale and Edwardsvill, Illinois, 1985).
4. By Landelius's editor, Raymond Jarvi, in *Eau Claire* 15/2 1986.
5. F. Hedblom, Ortnamn i emigrantsamhalle. Om svensk ortnamnsbildning i Amerika, *Namn och Bygd* 54 (1966), 127–40: English translation, 'Place-names in immigrant communities. Concerning the giving of Swedish place-names in America', *The Swedish Pioneer Historical Quarterly* 23 (1972).
6. Landelius, *Swedish Place-Names* .
7. Haugen, *Norwegian Language* .
8. A. Kruse, 'Norske stadnamn i Coon Valley, Wisconsin. Mote mellom to tradisjonar' in *Norsk sprak i Amerika*, B. Helleland (ed.), (Oslo, 1991).
9. Landelius, *Swedish Place-Names* .
10. *Ibid* .
11. O.M. Nordlie, *Norsk Lutherske Menigheter i Amerika* , 1–2 (Minneapolis, 1918).
12. Haugen, *Norwegian Language*, 219.
13. *F.G. Cassidy, The Place-Names of Dane County, Wisconsin* (Greenboro, North Carolina, 1947).
14. Hedblom, Ortnamn i emigrantsamhalle.
15. A. Bergin, *Prairieblomman* (Rock Island, 1903), 117. Here quoted after Hedblom.
16. Kruse, Norske stadnamn i Coon Valley.
17. J. Gjerde, From Peasants to Farmers. The Migration from Balestrand, Norway, to the Upper Middle
West (Cambridge Univeristy Press, 1985), 137.
18. Hallaråker, Stadnamn i Vesterheimen.