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WASHINGTON'S NAME-CALLERS

*A group of locals have the last word
when it comes to settling the state's place-name disputes.*

By Stephen Fry

A governmental body exists in Washington which has the power to create or change any place name in the state. It is the Washington State Board on Geographic Names (WSBGN), which was created by the legislature in 1973. The Board is authorized to establish official names for cities, towns, mountains, streams, lakes, and other geographic features within Washington.

At its office in Olympia, the Board oversees nearly 20,000 names, and annually receives approximately 100 place-name proposals. They come from people who want to name an unnamed feature, rename a locality, or change the spelling of a name.

Over the years Mt. Rainier has consistently drawn attention.

A state UFO group wants to change the name of Mt. Rainier back to Tahoma (the general name applied by Northwest Indians). They argue that extraterrestrials, who love to congregate on the prominent mountain, know it *only* as Tahoma! Consequently, when the name was changed nearly 200 years ago by white men, the aliens started having trouble locating their beloved peak. The public, they contend, has suffered extreme hardship by being denied contact with these visitors from outer space.

Needless to say, this rationale did not fall upon sympathetic ears. After a brief discussion about the Mt. Rainier-Tahoma controversy, the Board jettisoned the group's request. (From 1883 to 1925 Tacoma officials unsuccessfully attempted to change the name of Mt. Rainier to Mt. Tacoma.) The issue remained dormant until 1979, when an applicant petitioned the WSBGN to change Mt. Rainier's name to Tahhomah (with an extra "h"). The proposal was rejected.

To be considered seriously, an applicant must complete a standard geographic-name application form. The

form asks for latitude, longitude, use on published maps, origin of the name, and authorities supporting the recommended name. In addition, the applicant should attach a letter detailing all other pertinent information.

Once the WSBGN has received all the necessary information, its staff members, Bob Edwards (Executive Secretary) and Cynthia Holmes (Secretary), begin their research. They collect maps of the area, conduct searches through historical literature and records, and send out query letters to historical societies, county seats, landowners (e.g., US Forest Service or Department of Natural Resources), knowledgeable citizens, and anybody who is familiar with or who might have an opinion on a particular proposal. After a reasonable search, the material is readied for the Board.

The Board consists of six members. The Commissioner of Public Lands is chairman. The other five members are a mix of historians and geographers. They convene four times a year, usually at the Washington State Historical Society Museum in Tacoma.

At one meeting the name Wiggins Head was proposed by the grandson of Henry Wiggins, the first homesteader of Sucia Island in the San Juans. Although a submerged reef already bears Mr. Wiggins' name, his grandson wished to commemorate him with a more prominent geographic feature.

Excerpts from the minutes:

"John McClelland, Jr. (board member): Can see no reason not to name a feature that's above water for Wiggins.

Bill Speidel: Agrees with the suggestion to honor him 24 hours a day instead of just when the tide is out."

In cases of wider interest, public testimony can be very lengthy. A case in point was the Harry's Ridge/Truman Ridge dispute.

The ridge is located on the west arm of Spirit Lake, very near the site where Harry Truman died in the May 18 blast. Most everyone agreed that Harry deserved to be commemorated, but the question was how. Fourteen citizens testified in favor of one or the other proposal. Three television crews, a cluster of reporters, and an assorted throng listened to the lively debate.

Every conceivable effort was made by applicants and testifiers to make their cases, including: a dazzling slide show, attempts to disqualify a possibly prejudiced Board member, pleas to respect an ailing relative's last request, the delivery of over 500 petition signatures — which either endorsed Harry's Ridge or Truman Ridge — plus conflicting viewpoints from people who had known Harry for 40 or 50 years.

After all was said and done, the members chose by a split decision to ratify the name Harry's Ridge, saying that "Truman Ridge" might commemorate our former president more than the 50-year resident of Mount St. Helens.

If the WSBGN approves a proposal, the name will appear on appropriate future state maps and charts.

If you have the initiative necessary to propose a place name of your own, follow these basic rules:

1. Your proposal should be backed by solid reasons for its establishment, such as: public safety, eliminating confusion, or commemoration.


2. Your suggestion for a place name should have the support of locals.

3. The feature must not be named after a living person.

4. The name should either have historical origins, or suitably describe the feature in question.

5. When your proposal is up for final consideration, be sure to attend the meeting. This enables you to clarify points and answer questions.

If you adhere to these tactics, your place name will likely capture its place in Washington's history.

For more information on Washington place naming, write: WSBGN, Dept. of Natural Resources, Mailstop EV-31, Olympia, WA 98504. 

Stephen Fry is an avid amateur geographer who has faced the WSBGN on several occasions. Of four names proposed, three have been adopted.

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