

Toponymic Tail-Piece

A piece of folk-etymology culled by our Editor himself (and for which he may perhaps be forgiven for perpetuating that canard about an encounter with a farmer's wife) left a squeakless scribe choking over the sparrow-grass soup. Talk in a train returning from Wales was related in a letter to the Sunday Express [26.x.80]:

'A lady in our compartment asked: "What is the name of that large bridge?" When [told] it was the Severn Bridge, she replied, in all seriousness: "What with the Severn Bridge and the Forth Bridge, it's very confusing. Why don't they give them names instead of numbers?"'

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Please, learned readers, be alert to socio- and psycho-onomastic phenomena and let us know about them. One harvest-mouse alone can never glean enough to keep this column supplied. Besides, we need wider coverage: this year's pickings make it only too clear that top onomasticians, and rodents too, indeed read The Times - but precious little else!

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Appendix

The Nicknames of Jay Ames

As a lad in western Canada where I was pupped - my family nicknames were Sunny Jim and Rufus. Outside the home I was as likely to be Red, Redtop, Shorty, Shortstop and Little Bit. Moving to England while Dad was in the R.F.A. in France, I had to become used to such nicknames as Ginger (Ginge), Bloodnut, Coppernob, in addition to Titch.

In my teens and later I got Bricktop, Sorreltop, Stutz, Kuss, Kleiner, Basso, Iazzo, Maleck, Malenko or Malenki, Piccolo - depending on the ethnic origin of the crew I was working with. In Wales, I was sometimes, though not always, called Cochin-bach (mostly by girls); fellow-dockers, deckhands or the like renamed me Shunny, Shunny-bach and Tanto, not being too familiar with a name such as Jay. Irish and Scottish co-workers, and Army comrades at a later date, altered Jay to John, Jake, Joe, or Shawn, Jaimie, even Jummie, and wee Wull, or wee Ahmess, and wee Aymish - a neat, near play on Hamish and on my complete signature.

Among Germans - both before the war and since, and no better able to cope with the name Jay - they've opted for dubbing me Hans, Hansi, Yan and Janni, even Joe. Slavic-speaking mates, &c., have done almost the same, save that their use of Joe or John is as apt to emerge as Yishko and Yanko. Italians and some of my French-Canadian buddies and neighbours have elected, over the years, to dub me Pepi and Pepino, or again, plain John. Oddly, they've never seen me as a Jean or even a P'ti-jean, as I might have expected.

Cockneys I've worked with overseas, disbelieving or doubtful about my Canadian origins, have variously dubbed me Yank, Scottie or Jock, Irish,

Paddy, and Iaff or Iaffy. Obviously my accent is (or was) neither English nor Canadian.

One current Greek neighbour and his family call me Stavrides - after a teacher the man had as a boy in Greece. Another neighbour, also Greek, gave me the name Colonel from a fancied resemblance to the late Harlan B. Sanders, America's once-famed Chicken King. I fail to see it because I'm handsomer, smoother, funnier, and still living - though he was undoubtedly far better dressed and wealthier than I'll ever be (if that counts for anything). The same goes (or went) for the name Beaverbrook I acquired for a short spell during WW II in Malta, given me by a C.O. we had at that time also over-pretentious for a damn roughneck, farmhand, miner, log swamper, who'd also been a fence-rider, railroader, mule-skinner, bridge-painter, deckhand, stevedore.

Perhaps the oddest nickname ever was the one Stuka, bestowed on me by German nurses and ward-orderlies when in Field Hosp. in Athens and Salonika, in 1943-44. Happily, it 'dive-bombed' by the time I was moved to similar quarters in Germany proper. It was based, of course, on my POW dog-tags, number 88. But why they'd bother nicknaming one of the 'enemy' puzzled me, and still does, years after the event.

Beachball was another nickname I neither liked nor was proud of owning - even on a short-term basis. Happily, I lost both, when I became no longer 'too short for my weight' as we quaintly put it; the once ugly 'beergut' or 'bay-window' or what we dub a 'Molson muscle', and the uglier monicker, have disappeared - long may they keep their distance!

The shipping-room crew of a firm I worked in and out of for eight years changed Jay to Jay-jay; through a handful of stages - Jay-bird, Blue-jay, Blue-bird - it was ultimately reduced to plain Blue. It should have made me feel doggy, at the very least. Had I been a 'coon dawg' or basset (bastard) 'hayound' in the Tennessee or Carolina hills or the bayous of 'Luziana', it might have better suited. Not that it ever had me baying at the moon; but I did think I was in danger of being obliged to wear a flea-collar - or put to stud.

Two glabrous-headed non-com buddies from Malta days were called Helio-head and Shino respectively, if not respectfully. There was also a Ghoolie Ball and Lakry Wood. At a much later date, in the '60s in fact, a non-hispid type I worked with part-time had been given the three-decker nickname Chrome-dome Brome (never having seen his name in writing, I'm not sure if he spelled his name thus or Broom, Broome, Brougham, Brohm or Brohme); it is the only one of its kind I've ever known, and would make an admirable addition to any collection of such esoterica.

JAY AMES

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