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U.S.

Tribes See Name on Oregon Maps as Being Out of Bounds

By RICHARD PÉREZ-PEÑA MARCH 28, 2015

Grant County, a mountainous patch of eastern Oregon, has few Native Americans, but maps point to a different past, marking a spring, a rock, three meadows and several creeks with “squaw” in their names.

Calling the term offensive, nearby tribes have asked for name changes, and state law is on their side. But what may seem like a simple matter has turned into a dispute with the county’s white leaders that has dragged on for years, and may have years to go. Oregon and many other states have learned the hard way that erasing objectionable place names is slow and difficult at best, risks opening old wounds, and can divide people along racial lines over what is offensive and whose history the names should reflect.

“I really didn’t think it would be this hard,” said Teara Farrow Ferman, manager of cultural resource programs for the Confederated Tribes of the Umatilla Indian Reservation. “I didn’t think that we would still be disputing this after so much time.”

The county agreed to change most of the names, but it would not accept the Indian names proposed by the tribes.

“When somebody says because we’re not embracing the Umatilla names, that’s racist — that couldn’t be farther from the truth, and it makes me angry,” said Boyd Britton, a county commissioner and its main representative on the issue.

The American landscape has no shortage of potentially offensive labels that mostly go unnoticed. There are Wetback Tank, N.M.; Hebe Canyon, Utah; and Chinaman Flat, Ariz., to name just a few.

Once in a while, particular names draw attention, as when a Montana state legislator this year proposed eliminating names that include “halfbreed” or “breed.”

But the United States Board on Geographic Names, the obscure federal panel that is the last word on maps, sets a high bar for name changes and will not accept new ones without a consensus among interested local groups and state and local officials.

Few words are off limits nationally — in fact, when it comes to ethnic slurs, there are just two. Decades ago, the federal board banned a derogatory term for blacks and one for Japanese, forcing hundreds of name changes.

“There’s been discussion over the years about prohibiting others, but our board takes a very conservative approach to making any changes,” said Lou Yost, the board’s executive secretary for domestic names. “People disagree on what’s acceptable, and views change over time.”

A case in point is Negro, once a commonly accepted term that fell out of favor in the 1960s, though some government agencies used it until recently. It remains in hundreds of place names around the country, including many that were changed from the n-word that was banished.

There are occasional efforts to change one or more Negro names. Yet after South Dakota required removing the word from names there, some black leaders argued for keeping it, and lawmakers rescinded the mandate last year.

Efforts to remove “squaw” can draw bewildered reactions from white people, who say they had no idea that Indians objected to it. Some Native Americans do not take offense at the word, but many do, and some consider it so ugly they call it “the s-word.”

English speakers have used the term for almost 400 years, starting in what is now the Northeastern United States. Linguists say it probably derives from terms for woman in Algonquian languages, but Indians often contend that it comes from a word for vagina. (Sometimes, the vulgarity is beyond debate; there are summits called Squaw Teat or derivations of that.)

No other objectionable word appears nearly as many times — about 1,000 — in the federal place name database, and until the past decade, Oregon had the highest concentration, though no one seems to know why.

And no other word has been the target of such a widespread and sustained renaming campaign, with tribes around the country lobbying to eliminate it since the 1990s. State legislatures in Maine, Minnesota, Montana, Oklahoma, Oregon and South Dakota have passed measures to require or encourage the elimination of “squaw” names, and there have been more scattered efforts in other states.

The going has been slow. Montana’s law dates to 1999, and Oregon’s and South Dakota’s to 2001, yet in all three states, some changes have not been completed.

“It’s not like people here fought to keep the names — it just takes time,” said June Hansen, chairwoman of the South Dakota Board on Geographic Names.

Members of state naming boards typically have other jobs and receive little or no staff help or compensation, but before proposing any changes, they are expected to research the history, consult all sides, hold hearings and find common ground.

In many places, local resistance has made that hard. In 1995, Minnesota became the first state to pass a law banishing the word squaw from map locations, but the

tiny city of Squaw Lake refused to change, and the name survives. In Maine, Piscataquis County commissioners disdained the name-change mandate and just changed every “squaw” to “moose,” then tried to change them back.

Such disputes have flared around the country, and lately, none is hotter than the one in Grant County, home to 7,000 people, 95 percent of them white. The Umatilla reservation — home of the Cayuse, Walla Walla and Umatilla tribes — lies in neighboring Umatilla County.

Five years ago, the tribes proposed a set of Indian names, but many local officials and residents balked, often insisting that squaw names were fine.

“A lot of non-Indians don’t think they’re being derogatory when they use the s-word,” said Ms. Farrow Ferman, of the Umatilla tribes. “But there’s a history of it being used as a slur, and most of us hear it that way.”

Officials protested that some of the name changes proposed by Native Americans — like Sáykíptatpa and Nikéemex — were too hard to pronounce, prompting the tribes to create an interactive pronunciation guide.

“Seriously, can you pronounce them?” asked Mr. Britton, the county commissioner. “It’s a safety issue. Someone making a 911 call has to say the location, and the dispatcher has to understand and repeat it to the sheriff.”

Opponents of the name changes have argued with the Umatilla tribes over which tribes actually lived in the area, turning public hearings into debates on archaeology and linguistics.

“There’s some feeling in Grant County that because the Indians don’t live there, they should have no say, but of course, they’re not there because they were forced onto reservations,” said Phil Cogswell, a retired journalist who heads the Oregon Geographic Names Board. “People often want names with a historical reference, but they tend to think back to settler days, not the people who were there for thousands of years.”

The County Commission proposed replacing most of the squaw names, but not all, with names in English. The tribes eventually agreed to a list with about half the

names drawn from each camp, which the Oregon board adopted and sent to the federal board. The county rejected the compromise and submitted its own list to Washington.

“When it comes to Grant County and representing our citizens,” Mr. Britton said, “I want it all.”

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