

Towns with Unique Names

by Liz Gibbons

The state of Indiana, where I grew up, has a fine state park system. One summer during World War II our family rented a cabin for one week in Brown County State Park which is located in southern Indiana. That portion of the state is hilly. One day we took a short trip to two towns with unusual names located in Brown County. The first one we visited was Gnaw Bone. There are several theories about how it got its name. The most likely theory is that a well-known musician visited the area during the Great Depression. The area was hard hit with a drought, and there was much poverty in the area. In a newspaper interview he commented that he did not know how the people were staying alive with little more than a bone to gnaw on.

From Gnaw Bone we continued a bit further north to Bean Blossom. Beanblossom was the surname of a family who lived in the area. The name was first applied to a creek and then to the community that developed alongside the creek. There was an old covered bridge still there that passed over the creek.

The neighboring state of Kentucky has some colorful town names like Monkey's Eye Brow, Possum Trot, Whoopie Hill, Booger Branch, Rabbit Hash, and Tyewwhoppity. Tyewwhoppity is a Shawnee name that means "place of no return." It is thought that Rabbit Hash got its name from a dish that saved the community from starvation during a flood.

My husband grew up in Michigan, so I was introduced to some unusual town names in that state. There is Hell, Paradise, and Nirvana. It seems they wanted to cover all the bases for the afterlife. Hell is located northwest of Ann Arbor. It caters to tourists, and advertises that you can "have a devil of a good time" there. The town originated in 1838 when George Reeves opened a grist mill and general store. He paid local farmers for their grains with moonshine. When wives were asked about their husbands' whereabouts at harvest time many wives replied their husbands had gone to Hell. After Michigan gained statehood Reeves was asked what the town he helped settle should be called. He replied, "Call it Hell for all I care, everyone else does." Michigan also has a town named Bad Axe. When Michigan was being surveyed in 1861 two surveyors made camp and found a badly damaged axe. In their minutes of the survey they named the camp area "Bad Axe Camp" and placed a sign designating that on the trail. In a few years that name was on maps of that area.

Now that I live in Colorado I learned of two communities with unusual names: No Name and Last Chance. Years ago, Last Chance in eastern Colorado, now a deserted town, was the last stop for fuel and other supplies for many miles beyond in all directions. No Name got its unique name when I-70 was completed. When signage was planned for Exit 119 it was realized that the few homes and businesses there did not have a name. No Name was printed on the sign. The residents decided to keep that as their formal name. Because it is so odd, it attracts attention.

Towns with unusual names make traveling interesting, particularly when you dig into the history of the name.