WHEN VERMONT WENT WEST*

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Migration is a phenomenon older than mankind itself. It is a thread that runs through the entire fabric of life, so interwoven with instinct as to be indistinguishable from it, so strong a warp as to fashion the pattern of life around it. Migration is the exchange of one place of livelihood for another. As a student of place, the geographer has a special interest in the dynamics of migration, for at issue are several fundamental questions regarding the personalities of the places themselves. Why, for instance, do people migrate from some places and not from others? Or to some places and not to others? What factors most influence a people's decision to migrate -- the "push" of the place in which they find themselves, or the "pull" of the place to which they hope to go? Is migration more the result of withdrawal, due to failure, or of attraction, due to initiative?

My immediate interest in the dynamics of migration was aroused by a very casual discovery that many places surrounding the capital city of Michigan had names any Vermonter would find familiar. Within a few miles of Lansing lie such places as Chester, Castleton, Rutland, Charlotte, and Windsor, while at a somewhat greater distance are Burlington, Clarendon, Vergennes, Brandon, Bennington, New Haven, and Middlebury. There could be little doubt as to the origins of these place names, for the 'clincher' was to be found just thirty miles west of Lansing in Vermontville.

The discovery of these Vermont names on the rolling plains of southern Michigan immediately intrigued me. How valid, I wondered, is the place name as a tracer -- an indicator of geographic origins? If these place names were projected back to their origins in Vermont, what kind of a pattern of distribution would they show? And what might this pattern reveal about the routes used by the migrants and why they chose the new home sites? Answers to questions such as these could shed some light on the broader problem of the dynamics of migration.

My investigation quickly resolved itself into two fundamental lines of attack. First came an exhaustive analysis of maps to determine what the patterns of place names really were. For this purpose, I examined four detailed atlases of differing vintage -- the oldest dated from 1855, the next from 1889, the third from 1924, and the last from 1965. In this way I could watch the tide of westward migration both advance and recede through time. Then came the field-work, the on-the-spot examination of as many of these Vermont namesakes in Michigan as I could visit, in order to learn what the place itself could tell me about these wayward Green Mountaineers.

I first had to determine the validity of the place name as an indicator of geographic origins. This in itself presented a number of complications, for the technique of using the place name as a tracer has some very obvious limitations. Oftentimes the name of a frontier settlement was chosen for its exotic flavor rather than as an indicator
of the settler's origins. Such, we may confidently assume, was the case with such Michigan names as Nankin, Canton, Delhi, and Assyria. At the time Michigan was being settled, memories of Napoleon were still strong (witness both Waterloo and Austerlitz) and the struggles for the unification of Italy were proceeding apace (as reflected in the rash of Italian city names, including Rome, Milan, Genoa, Parma, Ravenna, and Verona). Besides the usual compliment of contemporary patriotic names and Biblical derivations, the settlers of Michigan demonstrated their high regard for the classics with such townships as Ovid, Homer, Seneca, Scipio, Marcellus, Aurelius, Orion, and Romulus, and with Byron, Attica, and Ypsilanti thrown in for good measure.

For the purposes of my study, however, such names told me nothing of the actual origins of the settlers. Even those that did perpetuate a recognizable place name often contained a change in spelling, thus making them yet more imperfect as tracers than if no change had occurred. For example, is the name Middlebury spelled with two r’s, or with an e and two r’s, the same name as that of Vermont's Middlebury? And how often did that final y get changed to a g, or the final syllables altered to borough? These things the maps will never tell us, or hardly ever, because on some the change is apparent from one map edition to the next.

Wary as one must be of place names alone, he must likewise use extreme caution in evaluating historical records. A case in point is the Michigan town whose historian attributes its name to a woman from New York City, but who terminates his most convincing discourse with the intriguing observation that the local inhabitants, for some unaccountable reason, insist on accenting the last syllable, pronouncing the name Charlotte!

As a general rule, the more uncommon a place name is, the more useful it is as a tracer. Thus, pockets of settlers from the state of Maine are easily recognizable in Michigan by the occurrence of such names as Augusta, Bath, and Bangor. In the same way, there can be little doubt but that names like Fredonia, Saranac, and Geneseo come straight out of New York State. The problem of tracing Vermont names westward becomes one of deciding which names are truly distinctive of the Green Mountain State. Certainly, the name of our largest city is not one of these, for there are at least three other Burlingtons in New England alone (Fig. 1). Its wide popularity throughout the Middle West does not in itself reveal which Burlington may have been the source of the settlers. In the same way, the name of our second largest city is not an infallible clue either, for there is at least one other Rutland in New England as well. Nevertheless, since both the Vermont Burlington and the Vermont Rutland are the most prominent of their New England namesakes, one might suspect that they are the most likely sources of these names. The same might be said of the name of Middlebury, which is larger than its Connecticut antecedent. Yet, one cannot pursue this argument too far, for the very reason that such a place's failure to grow may be the reason that it spawns numerous daughter towns on the frontier. A place with a more distinctly Vermont association is Bennington named after Governor Benning Wentworth who signed the first land grants in the state. Even here, however, there is a smaller namesake in southern New Hampshire that cannot be completely discounted as a possible source of mistaken identities.
It is when we find names that are unique to Vermont that we have, of course, the most reliable tracer of Vermont migrations. The state's name itself, either used alone or in compounds, is undoubtedly one of the most trustworthy (Fig. 2). Thus we have the Vermontville in Michigan, previously mentioned, together with a Vermont in each of Indiana, Illinois, and Missouri, and a Vermont City in South Dakota. It is the geographic association of this kind of name with others of less certain origin, such as Burlington, Rutland, Middlebury, and Bennington, that greatly strengthens the case for labeling a given cluster of settlements as having stemmed from Vermont. Another tracer of good reliability is the name of our state capital, which now has at least five counterparts scattered over the Middle West from Ohio to North Dakota. Of at least equal reliability to Montpelier is the name of Brandon. This English import has, to my knowledge, no namesake elsewhere in New England, but would seem to have given rise to at least nine Midwestern derivatives. Another English import, apparently unique to Vermont, is Castleton, which spawned at least three daughter towns in the Midwest. Vergennes, too, is a singular Vermont name that has been transplanted to at least two Midwestern localities. The persistence of place names, despite their lack of applicability to new geographic surroundings, is illustrated by Crown Point, across the narrows of Lake Champlain in adjacent New York state, which in Indiana is located in the plains rather than on a peninsula jutting out into a body of water. Other place names which relate to distinctive geographic features in Vermont but have been transferred to new settlements in the Midwest include Green Mountain in Iowa, Winooski in Wisconsin, and no fewer
than five Otter Creeks. ** To my mind, Otter Creek in Kansas must be the most nostalgic of all these transplanted Vermont names, for it sits out in the midst of the flat prairie, many miles from a stream of any kind. Here, a group of homesick Vermonters raised their memorial to a river of cool, clear water, the likes of which they might never again behold.

To be sure, we could trace many another Vermont place name in the same fashion, but to do so would only modify the pattern which emerges in local detail and not in general outline. Were we to plot all of the names we have examined on a composite map and link them by lines, a geographic pattern of Vermont migration would look something like that shown in Figure 3. The major corridor to the west was by way of Albany (a fact which probably explains why this name has been transplanted more widely throughout the western United States than any other), the Erie Canal, and Lake Erie to the southern end of Lake Michigan, where it fans out to the north, northwest, west, and southwest. A route of considerably lesser importance seems to have been the Ohio River. In any event, the use of the place name as a tracer, especially when several apparently related names concentrate themselves geographically, would seem to be a perfectly valid technique for reconstructing the patterns of migration from place of origin through routes of movement to place of destination.
Footnotes

*This manuscript was originally prepared as a lecture and is reproduced here in a format without reference footnotes.

**Although one can never be certain from map research alone about the origins of such place names as Green Mountain and Otter Creek, their association with nearby place names like Burlington, Rutland, and Brandon strongly suggests a common Vermont derivation.

Figure 3

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