

The Constant Webfoot: From Frontier to Football

A Nickname California Started, Oregon Adopted and Students Misused

In Oregon, the land of the modern collegiate Webfoots, the use of the word *webfoot* has a long history, and has attracted much folklore because of its obscure origin.

One story claims the term originated in Lane county, but evidence seems to show that *webfoot* was first used by Californians to express their satirical dislike of the Oregonian and his rainy country, and was brought to Oregon by California miners settling in or traveling through the territory during the various gold rushes of the late 1850's into the Pacific Northwest.

In fact, it seems quite probable that *webfoot* began as a derisive epithet in California during the gold rush of 1848-1849. The Oregonians, who were among the first to reach the California gold fields, were not beloved by the California, for they banded together, worked hard, praised Oregon and its climate, and saved all their gold to take back to the Willamette Valley.

Oregon Vs. California

Even before 1848, there was friction between the settlers of the two regions. The editor of the Oregon Spectator wrote on Sept. 30, 1847: "We perceive with regret that the California editors seize with great avidity upon everything that can be made to appear subversive to the interests of this country."

The first discovered printed usage in California, however, of the word *webfoot* in the sense of Oregon or Oregonian is in the San Francisco Sun of May 19, 1853. The writer of the item requested that "If you have any *webfoot* friends bound this way, dissuade them from putting in here, as nothing in the way of supplies can be obtained but water." Apparently, though *webfoot* was in use in California during the 1850's, the Oregonian studiously avoided the insulting word, at least in his newspapers, until 1862, when he suddenly adopted it as a descriptive badge of honor and even as a term of affection.

The only known use of *webfoot* before 1862 in an Oregon newspaper is as an adjective in a dialect letter printed in the Oregon Spectator of April 10, 1851. The correspondent comments: "a nuse paper here caled the Oregonian is sissor-billed and *web-footed* against you . . ." There is, of course, not necessarily any local application of the term *webfoot* intended in this usage.

The only other clue that *webfoot* was recognized in Oregon in the 1850's is found in a notation by Lewis McArthur that the early southern Oregon mining town of Browntown, which was not far above the Oregon border and largely settled by Californians about 1853, was named for "one *Webfoot* Brown, the pioneer Brown of the vicinity."

About 1862, the Oregonian apparently decided to accept the Oregon mist and acknowledge cheerfully and humorously that, though the climate was not all it might be, he had adapted himself to it. Beginning in June of that year, *webfoot* is found in manuscript and printed records of Oregon used as both noun and adjective to mean Oregon or Oregonian. As an adjective it is always *webfoot*; as a noun it appears in the singular as *Webfoot* or *Webfooter*, in the plural as *Webfeet*, *Webfooters*, and later *Webfoots*.

Webfooters Vs. Tarheads

The earliest recorded use of *webfoot* as noun and adjective in Oregon is in an account of a miners' meeting called June 20, 1862, to elect a recorder of mining claims for the Blue Canyon district in soon-to-be Baker county of Eastern Oregon.

The candidates took their respective positions when the president said, "now boys, all of you who are in favor of Packwood for recorder, go over there, and all who are in favor of Brainard for recorder, go over to him." An Oregonian immediately started towards Packwood, calling out, "come on, all you *Webfooters*, here's our *Webfoot* candidate," and a Californian answered, "come this way, all you *Tarheads*, here's a *Tarhead* candidate."

The *Tarhead* candidate won the election because the California miners had been generous in helping the emigrants of 1862 from the eastern states who had settled in Baker county, while the *Webfooters* had shown their early-noted characteristic of parsimony.

California miners feature also in the first contemporary printed appearance of *webfoot* in Oregon, found in the Portland Oregonian of Sept. 6, 1862.

Returning to Winter—Quite a number of miners returned on last night's boats. Many with whom we have conversed intend returning early in the Spring to the mines on Powder and John Day Rivers; others who have not been quite so successful, swear it is all a humbug, and that they will never return to the land of the "*webfeet*."

But the use of *webfoot* even then was not confined to miners in Oregon. On Sept. 17, 1862, a man in Eugene City wrote a letter to a friend describing a wedding

dance he had attended, which must have been quite an affair: "...they had the dance which was a *web foot* hooptedoodendo as Monse calls it with big boots and spurs with boys stuck in them with corn stock fiddles and drunk men to play them so the dance went off disgustingly nice . . ."

In June, 1863, the Walla Walla Statesman recognized that "the inhabitants of Oregon are called *webfeet*"; and in that year there was built at Celilo, on the Columbia River, a stern-wheeler which was christened *Webfoot*. By 1864 the term was widely used in the newspapers in all its forms. The Eugene Oregon State Journal in March made what is the first discovered use of *webfoot* in com-

Randall V. Mills became a member of the Oregon English faculty in 1938. He distinguished himself as an authority on folklore and Western American transportation.

Deeply interested in Oregon history and folkways, Mr. Mills was founder and first president of the Oregon Folklore society formed in Eugene in October of 1951. He was appointed associate editor of *Western Folklore* in 1949. He collected folk music, literature and art work, much of which is now housed in the University library.

On Jan. 18, 1952, Mr. Mills died suddenly from a heart attack.

On this page the Emerald reprints excerpts from an article by Mrs. Randall V. Mills on the origin of the word *Webfoot*.

The article first appeared in *Western Folklore*. In a footnote to the article Mrs. Mills says: "I have written this article in memory of my husband, Randall V. Mills, who had gathered most of the notes, intending to write it himself for the first Oregon issue of *Western Folklore*."

menting on the weather, saying, "today the rain is coming down in real *webfoot* style." And again in August the same paper reported that "the thunder bellowed through those immense canyons in a way that would scare any *webfoot* out of his boots." Evidently *Webfoot* was out of his natural habitat.

By 1866 *Webfoot* as a synonym for Oregon had gained nation-wide recognition. On Feb. 5 of that year the Washington, D. C., Daily Morning Chronicle proclaimed: "A capital country for young ducks is '*Webfoot*,' in the Winter season anyway." But by then the Oregonians did not object. To them the land of the *Webfeet* was almost heaven on earth. From Salem someone wrote to the Oregonian in 1869: "The (State) Fair has not yet opened. . . The highways and bye ways (sic) are full of all manner of peoples and things, all driving toward this common centre of our little *Webfoot* universe. The *Webfeet* are coming to see the sights and the others are coming to see the *Webfeet* . . ."

Webfoots Were Curiosities

The *Webfeet* may have been curiosities to the outlander, but to be a *Webfoot* boy or girl was, to the Oregonian, the acme of distinction. However, on one occasion the editor of the Oregonian did admit, in answering a criticism of his newspaper, that "there be rough diamonds even in *Webfoot*, and we have had suspicions that we belong to that class of clods." From the late 1860's on there appear in the newspapers of Oregon examples of the pride of being a *Webfoot*. The following items are typical.

A *Webfoot* Crop.—Alex. McCorkle, from Howell Prairie, brags he is a *Webfoot* boy, bred in Oregon, and that this dry year, he has raised 1,000 bushels of wheat from 25 acres of land. Good for Howell Prairie, and good for this *Webfoot* boy.

Mr. Frank Crouch . . . has recently won for himself abroad the enviable distinction of the "*Webfoot* Genius." (He had invented a new steam engine). . . As indicated by the sobriquet which he has earned, Mr. Crouch is a genuine native of *Webfoot*. (He was from southern Oregon, near Roseburg.)

Several of the most successful and popular lady teachers in the public schools of Portland were not only educated in Oregon, but are natives of *Webfoot*.

'Frisco Pavements Rough

The synonym of *Webfoot* clung to Oregon and Oregonians because it did become a term of pride and affection. In 1873 an observer noted that Oregon is "affectionately '*Old Webfoot*' on account of the incessant rains which prevail."

Though the Oregonians never forgot that the Californians had christened them *Webfeet*, they came to feel as did a visiting author, Samuel Bowles, that "the fertility and perfection, which its agriculture enjoys in consequence (of the rain, leave the practical side of the joke with the Oregonian."

Besides, the true Oregonian never thought much of California anyway. One, Adam Staender, in 1877, thought that "walking on '*Frisco* pavements is rough on a *Webfoot*." And a number of other Oregonians, visiting San Francisco and other points in California at about the same time, "returned to the misty land of *Webfoot* declaring that Oregon is far better than her larger and more pretentious sister state."

Though at first the usage of *WEBFOOT* in its various forms seemed to be applied to all Oregonians, and still is applied to the state as a whole, the real *Webfoot*

as and is, as suggested by the editor of the Register-Guard, an inhabitant of western Oregon.

Moreover, it is an "old water-soaker pioneer that is rightly styled '*Webfoot*.' The Corvallis Gazette on Dec. 5, 1890, confirms this definition by announcing: "William Mitchell, county judge of Morrow county, died at Heppner last week. He was an old *Webfooter*, having lived in this valley in '53 and for several years thereafter."

Perhaps as a resident of eastern Oregon, Mr. Mitchell did not desire to be remembered as an old *Webfooter*, for the inhabitants of eastern Oregon came rather early to share the opinion of Californians regarding the people of the Willamette Valley. Charles J. Steedman, in writing of his cowboy experiences in eastern Oregon during the 'seventies, not only defines *Webfoot* well, but reveals the attitude of the eastern Oregonian.

The cattle we were to receive and brand at this point came from the Willamette River or *Webfoot* Country. The term "*Webfoot*" was given to the settler west of the Cascades ranges of mountains. The reason was that there was so much rain and mud in this section that feet webbed like those of a duck were necessary to keep on top of the ground and also to enable one to cross the innumerable sloughs. The "*Webfeet*" were looked down upon by those who lived and grazed their herds of sheep and cattle on the high tableaus (sic) of central and eastern Oregon and Washington Territory very much in the same manner that a highlander regards with contempt the farmer of the lowlands.

The western Oregonian's natural characteristics were heightened by the climatic conditions of his country. Quite naturally a folk story grew that the *Webfoot* actually as well as figuratively adapted himself physically to the aquatic conditions of the Willamette Valley. James F. Rusling in his *Across America*, published in 1875, wrote: "No wonder the Oregonians are called '*Web-Feet*.' They do say, the children there are all born *web-footed*, like ducks and geese, so as to paddle about, and thus get along well in that amphibious region. Perhaps this is rather strong, even for Darwinism . . ."

University Keeps the Word Alive

The use of *Webfoots* as the totem of the University of Oregon helps keep the word alive. It is interesting to trace the history of the use of *webfoot* by the university students.

The first usage was from 1901-1905 when an annual publication of the University students bore the title *Webfoot*. Evidently the state-wide efforts to suppress *Webfoot* succeeded at the University, for the next discovered usage of the term is in the 1925 *Oregana*, the yearbook of the Associated Students of the University of Oregon.

In the account of the Oregon-Stanford football game, the Oregon team is referred to as the *Webfoot* eleven, and the term continued until 1932. In September, 1926, a *Webfoot* club of independent men on the campus was organized and a campus humor magazine named *Webfoot* was published in October by the Associated Students. It had a brief career, lasting only until March, 1927, appearing only about four times. Also in 1925, the Emerald began to call the members of both the football and basketball teams *Webfooters*, and this plural use continued until 1932.

Too Much for the Rally Squad

The university students apparently became dissatisfied with the cumbersome *Webfooters* as the nickname for their athletic teams; it would be a bit difficult for the cheering section to handle. So on Jan. 16, 1932, the students of the University held an election and by a large majority voted that *Webfoots* should be the official name for the University of Oregon athletic teams. It was, then, the students who insisted on the plural *Webfoots*, thought many critics have felt that the ungrammatical *Webfoots* was merely a good device of the athletic department to get publicity on the sports pages, or, more unflatteringly, that the term was adopted through ignorance.

There was a precedent for *WEBFOOTS*, though that form of the plural had not appeared often in print. In one section of Oregon, in Wallowa county, it has been noted that the simple *S* plural, usually expanded to *ES* is regularly used instead of the irregular plural, and so *FOOT* becomes *FOOTES*. A similar use is also heard in the vulgate speech of western Oregon. A good proof that *WEBFOOTS* was sometimes used as the plural is found in an Oregon novel, *The Vanishing Swede*, published by Mary Hamilton O'Connor in 1905. Miss O'Connor was careful in her use of dialect, which is the best thing in her novel, so it can be assumed that her use of the term, which she put in quotation marks, must have reflected an actual use. In laying the scene of her story she wrote: "the frogs began their evening song . . . barking in this glorious rain . . . Ugh! No wonder they call us '*webfoot*'."

