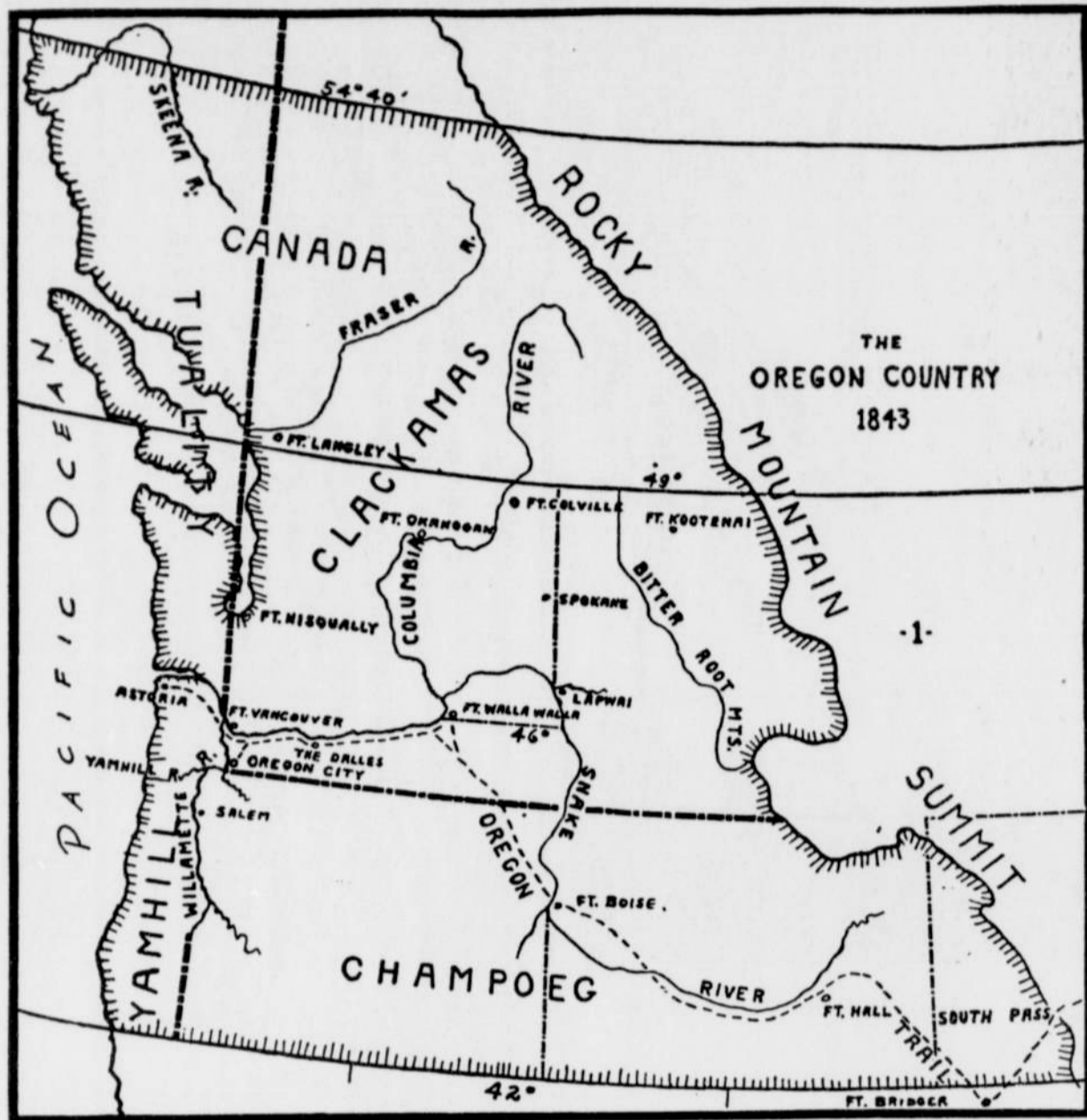


# THE NAME 'OREGON'



HISTORICAL OREGON

BY WALT CURTIS

What does it mean? No one knows for certain. There has been much speculation down through the years. Everything from "bark dish" to "beautiful water" to "long ears." Take your pick! It seems more like a Spanish name than an Indian one. Did an early Spanish explorer name our desolate coastline after Aragon? Your guess is as good as mine.

What do Alfred Powers and Malcom Clark Jr., have to say? Two of my favorite and most reliable Oregon historians and men of letters. *The History of Oregon Literature* by Powers and *The Eden Seekers* by Clark deserve immediately to be put back into print — or we are a second-rate, ungrateful, Podunk state! Such great scholars of our region would be lionized in a civilized nation.

It is likely a poet, William Cullen Bryant, popularized the name Oregon in his famous poem "Thanatopsis." (Power to the poets!) This meditation on nature and death went through many editions, starting as early as 1817. God knows how many Oregon writers and poets have alluded to it or quoted directly from it, including Samuel L. Simpson and Harold Lenoir Davis. Geographically speaking, there never was a river named 'Oregon' except in the imagination of the bard. "Thanatopsis" is a wonderful and reassuring lengthy poem on mortality, as kind as anything Whitman ever apostrophized on our demise in the cosmos. Here are the famous lines:

Take the winds  
Of morning, pierce the barcan wilderness,  
Or lose thyself in the continuous woods  
Where rolls the Oregon, and hears no sound,  
Save his own dashing —

(Portland's first poet laureate, Simpson, holed up in a cabin near Jacksonville. Trying to sober up he scribbled a now lost collection, *Dashings of Oregon*.)

Where the heck did William Cullen Bryant come across the name? He must have read Jonathon Carver or as Malcom Clark speculates, extrapolated from Major Robert Rogers' ravings<sup>1</sup>. The *Concise Accounts* (1765) by Rogers mentions no westward flowing river. Carver and he met briefly and planned an abortive exploration of the upper Mississippi River. Carver's *Travels Through the Interior Parts of North America* was published in 1778. Mostly bogus, except for a few stolen maps. In 1792 Captain Robert Gray sighted the mouth of our "Great River of the West," the Columbia, naming it after his ship.<sup>2</sup> The Chinook Indians simply called it 'Wauna' or the "big river." Bryant's poem mythicized our territory or bioregion, giving our state its name when it came into the union in 1859. Ten years earlier it was called the Oregon Territory.

When Joaquin Miller returned to Oregon, after seeking gold behind Mt. Shasta and almost getting hanged as a horse thief, he rhapsodically speculated on its origins. *Oye agual* "Listen to the water!" Water on the brain, water in the veins:

## NOTES

(1) Infamous Indian killer and founder of Rogers Rangers during the French & Indian War.

(2) The name 'Columbia' egregiously comes from Christopher Columbus, the Italo/Spanish navigator who was a rapist and murderer of indigenous peoples. Poet Joaquin Miller wrote a wretched jingoistic poem to Columbus with the hideous refrain, "Sail on! Sail on!" Too bad the Catholic killer didn't sail off the edge of the world. Or into a fatal hurricane. The New World might have had a sanguine future.

(3) Alice Roosevelt (later Longworth), famous for her unfettered behavior and sharp quips, such as "If you've got nothing good to say about anybody, come over here and sit by me."

(4) A Washington artist is attempting to change that state's name to 'Cascadia' because he is tired of its confusion with Washington, D.C. Cascadia has also been used as a name for a secessionist nation comprised of Pacific Northwest states.

Miller would write wonderful things about bears and longhorn cattle in the Willamette Valley and the heroic old pioneers who minted their own money (Beaver coins) and raised a militia (to slaughter the natives who were sick of the interlopers killing them with alien diseases). Miller was a true mythmaker, a poet. Read *The Selected Writings of Joaquin Miller* edited by Alan Rosenus from Union Press. Study the past, if you would have a future.

I am tempted to quote from Miller's paean to our fair state in the essay, entitled "The New & The Old." He skewers a money-grubbing speculator in Portland who asks, "Can't you put this city into poetry. What's poetry good for if it can't raise the price of land?" The weight of the rain is bending the man's umbrella, running down his face. Miller says, "Mother Nature comes to the aid of the inhabitants and makes the webfooted like the waterfowl." Slop, slop! Drip, drip. The money-grubbing stranger protests, "It don't really rain much in Portland." But that down about the mouth of the Columbia, at Astoria, it does "sometimes rain a-right smart." Joaquin has the gift for gab, making him a great wordsmith. In his marvelous little poem "Mt. Shasta," he coins a musical phrase ubiquitous in our times. He heard the mountains "rock and roll."

I stood where the thunderbolts were wont  
To smite thy Titan-fashioned front,  
And heard the dark mountains rock and roll;  
I saw the lightning's gleaming rod  
Reach forth and write on Heaven's scroll  
The awful autograph of God!

Hooligan, ooligan, Aragon, ouragan, huracan, wauregon, orejon, origan, onagaon, oye-el-agua, oregano. You sing along. Ding dong. You tell me. The place is in our dreams. The name resounds. Oregon is a song.

Bark dish, Shoshoni for River-West, smelt or grease trail, beautiful water, hurricane, big ears. The tum-a-lum of its name tumbles, trills in my head like a bad hangover. Did I get smashed last night, wake up this morning and stare with blood-shot eyes at O-R-E-G-O-N? Yes, I did and all the *Oregon Historical Quarterly* articles, history books, scholarly research by Rees, Vernon Snow, T.C. Elliott, Lewis A. MacArthur's *Oregon Geographic Names*, Malcom Clark and Alfred Powers,



## ASTORIA: A GLIMPSE IN TIME

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and Milleresque poetry goes down the drain. Onomatopoeic madness! West is the direction of the big water. I listened to a waterfall and angels sang. The Cree Indians of the Great Lakes do not use the 'L' sound in their language. Smelt (ooligan), a highly prized oily rich fish, was traded all the way from the West Coast. They called it "oorigan," two anthropologists from the University of Oregon surmise.

I'm not sure I buy this most recent theory for the name Oregon. Bynam and Lewis claim they have paid attention to native oral history and trader journals to substantiate a considerable native trade in the "grease" or oil from smelt. Perhaps it's true. The distance seems extensive, but the oil was medicine, canoe sealant, and it brightened potlatch fires. When I was growing up in the 1950s there were magnificent spring smelt runs on the Sandy River and other tributaries of the Columbia. People dipped nets on poles, but also used garbage pails, pots and pans, there were so darned many fish. You could fill a gunny sack in an hour. In 2001 *The Oregonian* claimed a substantial return of the storied smelt. A guy told me at the mouth of the Sandy, he got one silvery candlefish. That's how pathetic the ecology of Oregon has become.

I wrote a poem back in the 1970s and smeared paint on a fish, making smelt drawings on paper. Drips of blood. Scale patterns. Slime. In bright colors. I even put some in a toilet bowl (I was a janitor), surreally showing the connection between clean flush water and the river. I bought the thin silvery fish in a supermarket; already the Sandy runs were scant. The fish probably came from the Cowlitz River in Washington State.

So Alfred Powers in the *Junior Historical Journal* states that the first man to write "Oregon" was Jonathon Carver in his *Travels*. He variably spells it 'Oregon' or 'Origan'. He claims interior Indian nations told him of four great rivers which start in the center of the continent. "And the river Oregon, or the River of the West," flows into the Pacific Ocean. Malcom Clark Jr. demolishes Carver's geography in "Oregon Revisited," an *Oregon Historical Quarterly* article in 1960. Clark said the River of the West was simply another version of the mythical Northwest Passage. But the idea sticks. The name sticks. William Cullen Bryant pours the glue, decades later, as "Thanatopsis" becomes a most popular poem in the 19th century.

"Shall we ever know the genesis of the name? It seems unlikely," writes Malcom Clark. "Perhaps it resulted from the application of Major Rogers' phonetic spelling of the word 'Aragon', a name sometimes given to unexplored reaches of Northwest America." Aragon is a name used by both Spanish and French explorers. Pretty good guess, I'd say.

MacArthur's *Oregon Geographic Names* quotes Abigail Scott Dunaway's brother Harvey Scott extensively. He says "Carver had no scholarship." His book was cribbed in London "partly from the records of French and English exploration." T.C. Elliott in the *OHQ* is partial to Major Rogers' use of "ouragan," the French word for storm. As a poet, I am partial to the notion that many of these similar sounding words, homonyms, synergized themselves into the name Oregon. Over time. If you say something often enough, it sticks. The word sounds like it's of Spanish derivation. And if the French used the Spanish word too, so much the better to reinforce the name. We forget that spelling wasn't standardized. Ben Franklin and Shakespeare were whacked out spellers!

I found a worm-eaten ledger with yellowing newspaper clippings pasted-in at a garage sale in Oregon City. Many of the clippings were pre-World War 1. Some fascinating, others mundane. "Pioneer Woman Dies After Long Illness." ALICE PLAYS PART OF ROWDY? In 1905 Teddy Roosevelt's daughter<sup>3</sup> behaves like a whooping cowboy. Sam Simpson's poem "Beautiful Willamette." The Cliff House, built in the 1840s, to be razed by Hawley Pulp & Paper Co. JOHN LIVING STON DIES SUDDENLY — former slave and playmate of Mark Twain who rode hidden in a box on a wagon with his master to Oregon in 1864. PROHIBITION KILLS RED — Joe Suisap, Klickitat Indian and baseball player for O.C. team in 1874. Dies because he couldn't obtain a drink of whiskey, according to physicians. Bizarre! He was carrying wood for them. *Why didn't they give him a drink?* Goddamnit!

An egregious poem by Ella Wheeler Wilcox. "Smile a little, smile a little / Even through your tears." *It sucks!* We're almost to the war effort. Thanksgiving Proclamation by President Wilson. I've almost lost my frame of reference. No! Here it is:

OREGON DERIVED NAME FROM 'OREJONS,' LONG-EARED INDIAN. July 7, 1910 (*Oregon Journal*) newspaper clipping. Pioneer railroad man P.P. Shelby of San Francisco holds forth. His son visiting Fundacion, Peru, sends photo of native Indian with large ears and ornament, called Orejon. Shelby continues: "Bishop Blanchette of Oregon got in debt.... went to South America in 1838... A distinguished English scholar told him Spanish navigators in 1592 stopped at the mouth of the Columbia River... and designated the Indians they saw as 'Orejons'. The Spanish for 'large ears' — from the habit of wearing large ear ornaments. This is 200 years before Captain Gray named the big river 'Columbia' after his ship. I don't know. I kind of like it. *Did the Chinook Indians on the lower river wear large ear ornaments?* We know they flattened their heads.

To conclude, a poet named the territory and state known as Oregon. (You can call it *Cascadia* if you like.) William Cullen Bryant struck the name from our largest and most obvious geographical feature, which had mythical earlier associations, the River of the West. Made it sing! *Oregon is a song*. The bardic tradition gives us the name of the place in which we live. Never forget. And shall die. And be dispersed back into Nature. "And to lie down to pleasant dreams." Forever. With all the other creatures who have come before. Bryant impassions the mortal process so eloquently it deserves repeating here, once again. I love 19th century poetry for its rhythms and reassurance, bombast and moral messages. We live in a swinish epoch, heartless and anxious, a virtual hell of technology and capitalist hype. Thank God for soothing sentiment.

Earth that nourished thee, shall claim  
Thy growth, to be resolved to earth again,  
And, lost each human trace, surrendering up  
Thine individual being, shalt thou go  
To mix forever with the elements —

(*Thanatopsis*)

Walt Curtis is regarded by many as Oregon's unofficial poet Laureate. He is author of the famous *Mala Noche* as well as *Peckmeck Country*, *Mad Bomber's Notebook* and *The Roses of Portland*.