

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

No, I'm breaking it in for a friend.

--Groucho Marx, when asked if Groucho

was his real name

There are no secrets in a small town. No anonymity. None of the impersonality that besets present-day cities. Folks who lived in my hometown in the mountains of central Pennsylvania had a saying that captured the familiarity, the intimacy, of life there: "Everyone in Renovo knows what color toilet paper you use."

And as anyone who's ever lived in a small town can tell you, social closeness also leads to the wholesale assignment of nicknames--monikers that describe, extol, or mock those to whom they have been given.

The Renovo I knew, the railroad town of the 1950s and early '60s, could have kept legions of linguists, sociologists and anthropologists busy codifying, analyzing, and interpreting the handles of its citizens. It was rife with nicknames. (At a time when the U.S. was becoming less rooted, less rural, and less folksy--and the giving of nicknames was doing a long, slow fade--Renovo seemed to be trying to keep the art of the great American nickname alive all by itself.) In fact, the use of nicknames was so pervasive that few townsfolk could recall, if they ever knew them at all, many of their neighbors' proper names. For those moments when one needed to know someone's proper name (for, say, a wedding announcement or a church bulletin) but didn't want to go through the embarrassment of asking that person directly--after all, he or she was probably someone you said hello to on a daily basis--it was common practice to consult a yearbook or ask a close member of the family.

Renovo's best nicknames are pure poetry, music to the ears when spoken with the nickname's last name. To me, no name in Renovo history is more melodic than Slum Summerson. Ah luv dat name--it sings. In second place on my list of all-time faves is a poetic sobriquet in the manner of Stan the Man, Neon Deion, and Will the Thrill: Bill Martella came to be known as Scorch the Torch, which was a melding of two nicknames that he had been given. Also near the top of the lyric scale are Juju Costulas, Mutt Duden, Perk Girton, Cat Mahaffey, and Snuffy Sutliff. (My favorite "nonpoetic" name originated when a fellow whose last name was Fellows picked up the moniker "Precious," yielding--you got it--Precious Fellows.)

If your name doesn't have a poetic ring to it, then the next best thing is to have one that's alliterative--something on the order of Joltin' Joe, Hammerin' Hank, or Goose Gossage. Not only does alliteration give a certain cachet to one's name, but it also ensures that the name will roll off the tongue easily and sound pleasant. In the Renovo of times past, you could have said hello to Beansy Baker, Barnyard Barnum, Booner Brown, Bear Bruno, Bubbles Bobanick, Blackie Brown, Bigney Brown, Butch Biernesser, Bus Benshaw, Copey Carlson, Cowboy Croak, Cooch Curcio, Doodle Drake, Fifi Farwell, Gazull Grenell, Hammy Hemmerley, Honey Hevner, Hirk Hirlinger, Hisser Hiller, Hennie Hanobic, Hickey Haupt, Hose Heaps, Jerp Johnson, King Kelley, Lappy Levander, Mac McGarvey, Mooch Miller, Meatball Murphy, Mad Dog Morton, Mole Monoski, Nekar Nevins, Newt Newlin, Nush Knauff, Knobby Nestlerode, Peck Paul, Picnic Pacini, Rosie Rosenberger, Ratzy Rathmell, Rocky Rosamilia, Sod Stellfox, Skeeter Saxton, Sabu Sheehan, Skinny Sheehan, Sappy Sabora, Snakey Snodgrass, Sickle Smith, Swede Shaffer, Spade Sabatini, Waldo Walters, and Windy Windfelter.

If one had to choose one letter of the alphabet that reigned supreme in Renovo

nicknames, it would be T. The town had Tacky, Tappy, Tippy, Toppy, Taddy, Turkey, Tubby, Toggie, Tuggie, Tipper, Trapper, Timer, Tucker, Tunner, Tubber, Teeter, Tooter, Tuney, Tissy, Tossy, Teeny, Tiny, Tidy, Tin Top, and Tincup--not to mention Taa, Tank, Tete, Toot, Toss, Tip, Turk, and Turp. Whew! I'm temporarily tapped out.

One could not afford to be complacent where nicknames were concerned. Just when I thought I had Bish, Baggy, Bo, Bones, Boltzie, Beaky, Beezer, Beelum, Booky, Boo, Boob, Boodie, Booper, Booker, Boozer, Boo-boo, Boodle, Bootsie, Bozo, Bingo, Banjo, Bunjo, Butts, Buzz, Bushie, Buddy, Bunsy, Bubber, Budger, Bucky, Buckskin, Bullhead, Bravo, and Bricky straight in my mind, along came Fitch, Flick, Flash, Flip, Fripp, Frenchy, Feeb, Feen, Fofu, Fudd, and Fuzzy to mess me up. And as soon as had I mastered Gimpty, Groundy, Gook, Gobbo, Goagie, Googie, Goomie, Gum, Gump, Gubby, Gussie, Gundy, and Gunner, there were more mind-boggling handles to sort out: Pale, Pug, Penna, Pud, Pogeey, Pute, Prof, Pixie, Picky, Popeye, Peakas, Pee Wee, and Peek-a-boo...Itch, Ish, Irish, Izzle, Izzy, Iggy, and Ickey...and the names just kept on coming...Hamie, Hap, Happy, Hoppy, Hippy, Hip, Hippo, Harpo, Highball, Hitler, Hawk, Horsie, Hud, Hubber, Hundred, Huck, Husky, and Hunky...Scat, Sickly, Simpty, Squeak, Squirk, Slowie, Sledge, Shick, Sheeny, Shorty, Snookie, Sweetie, Siger, Spud, Speed, Sparky, Smiggy, Smokey, Soot, Stringer, and Stringy...help, I'm drowning...Cokie, Cocky, Corky, Crusty, Coonie, and Cooter...Java, Jiggs, Juney, Jarbo, Jock, Jinx, Jingles, and Judge...Chalky, Chase, Chick, Chickie, Chum, Chisel, and Chuckles. Remembering all the nicknames nearly fried my neurons.

You hungry? Renovo could serve up a smorgasbord worthy of royalty. On the menu: Ade (Smith), Alfalfa (Witchey), Beany (Hagen), Beets (Cohick), Chicken (Bradney), Coke (Gentzyel), Cookie (Barr), Eggo (Brooks), Fish (Williams), Ham (Biondi), Highball (Rankin), Honey (Hevner), Java (Coffey), Leeks (Botsford), Meatball (Murphy), Onion (Beyers), Pepper (Caskey), Peaches (Keegan), Peanut (Ross and Heaps), Pike (Thorsten), Pork (Gentzyel, Mills, and Lundfelt), Pumpkin (Hillyer), Shad (Fantaskey), Spud (Kane), Sy Seaweed (Barner), and Sugar (Kane and Larson).

Renovo also had its share of animal life: Ant (Staib), Bear (Bruno), Beetle (Sockman), Buck (Stiner), Bull (Floyd), Carp (Sockman), Cat (Mahaffey), Chick (Pedokus), Chickie (Naughton), Crab (McManigal), Crow (Barr), Doggie (Shaffer), Ducky (Hagen and Henry), Eel (Miller), Fish (Varana and Heintz), Frog (Cavaliere and Pickering), Froggy (Scrimshaw), Gander (Stout), Goose (Lucas), Goat (Bochkay), Hawk (Fisher), Hippo (McGowan), Horsie (Kelley), Mole (Monoski), Monkey (Fox), Moose (Auditori and Batschelet), Moo Moo (Davidson), Muskie (Long), Mutt (Duden), Newt (Gughiocello), Oxie (Adams), Peep (Hunter), Pig (Aungst), Pike (Swanson), Possum (Johnson), Puppy (Shaffer), Rabbit (Conti), Rooster (O'Toole), Sharky (Rankin), Skunk (Ellis), Slug (Logue), Snake (Lucas), Sparrow (Attig), Spider (Baird), Turkey (Donnelly), and Worm (Frantz).

And you could keep Renovo's menagerie in either of two barnyards because my cousin Charles Barnum and I were both nicknamed Barnyard, a name bestowed in different seasons for different reasons. Monk Stiner, who dubbed me Barnyard, thought it was reminiscent of Bernard, my proper first name, and Coach Dale Florey, who gave Barnyard to Charles, was wordplaying with Barnum. At any rate, one is tempted to point out that the nickname is not a barnyard epithet. In this case, Barnyard itself is an epithet.

Renovo had a Ranger (Ignozzi), a Scout (Probst), a Count (Bochkay), an Admiral (Cleary), a King (Kelley), a Queenie (Robbins), a Schemer (Green), two Monks (Stiner and Conti), a Prof (Sawyer), a Doc (Wagner), a Chief Dirty Underwear (Grotzinger), a Flatfoot (Kyler), a Plugger (McGarvey), a couple of Pappys (Goetz and Heck), a Pop (Eckel), a Deacon (Jones), a Sissy (Potts), a Punk (Glover), a Mooch (Miller), a Duke (Ross), a Scrooge (Young), a Judge (Adams), a Skipper (Hie),

a Major (Gardner), a Codger (Thurston), a Coot (Whitman), two Cowboys (Croak and Larson), a Rube (Carlson), a Yogi (Stuart), a Jinx (Bratton), an Iron Man (Gasull), a Babe (Smith), a Mayor (Adams), two Jocks (Harber and Ransdorf), a Gunner (Markert), an Okie (Simmerson), a Swede (Ekendahl), a Wimp (Gentzyel), a Greek (Gianoplos), a Hermit (Kepler), a Nag (Bradney), a Trapper (Hale), and a Hick (Serwatki).

Renovo also had a Bum (Fox), a Chum (Noll), a Slum (Summerson), and a Lum (whatever that is--Kenworthy).

Renovo was not without some mystery and mischief: It had a Wink (Bradney), a Shadow (Friel), a Spook (Friel), and a Devil (Conti). And where there was Smoke (Lucas), there was sure to be a Fireball (Herter).

A few Renovo natives had nicknames that were, shall we say, colorful: Whitey (Edmondson), Blackie (Brown), Brownie (Jobson), Red (Franklin and Mader), Peachy (Biernesser), and Pinkie (Fry and Reardon).

Renovo even had its own version of the Seven Dwarfs, um, make that seventeen dwarfs: Chummy, Cocky, Crusty, Darky, Gabby, Happy, Hoppy, Picky, Sappy, Scrubby, Sleepy, Squeaky, Stinky, Wacky, Whizzy, Wimpy, and Windy.

And what good would a little town be without its own edition of the Marx Brothers? If they had been given half a chance, Beano, Danko, Dodo, Dordo, Kayo, and Jarbo, along with the aforementioned Bingo, Bunjo, Bozo, Bravo, Fofo, Gobbo, Harpo, Hippo, and Waldo would have had TV and movie careers, too.

Inanimate objects were plentiful: Banjo (Cohick), Barrel (Poletto), Beanie (Hague), Buckets (Coleman), Bump (Moore), Bus (Benshaw), Cash (Henry), Chisel (Johnson), Clipper (McGill), Copper (Staib), Gum (Welton), Hat (Shank), Hook (Caskey and Rotegliano), Hose (Heaps), Iron (DeLong), Keys (Gutt), Pump (Serafini), Satchel (Heaps), Scoop (Young), Spade (Sabatini), Shoes (Pirc), Sickle (Smith), Sod (Stellfox), Spike (Benshaw), Stogie (Gullborg), and Whistle (Summerson).

Other nicknames seemed to fall into the category of strange sounds and unintelligible rock lyrics: Hoodle, Woop, Woopee, Mookie, Noogie, Aukie, Utie, Udda, Oodie, Odie, Ogar, Yave, Yula, Yubber, Yonk, Dit, Muck...I'll give it a 95, Dick; it's got a great beat and the kids can dance to it...Spong, Ding, Jingles, Ching, Chingaboo, Wang...definitely a chart-topper.

Noteworthy physical characteristics were certainly fair game: Baldy, BB Eyes, Legs, Lefty, Moon Eyes, No Neck, Pie Face, Saucer Eyes, Skinny, and Stubby. (Not to be indelicate, but there were three brothers in South Renovo who answered to Stink, Stank, and Stunk, respectively.)

And finally, at least five Renovo men, much to their chagrin, had nicknames that are women's names: Mabel Fox, Nancy Kulka, Patty Long, Susie O'Donnell, and Tulip Snyder.

To be present at the birth of a nickname was an honor--that is, if you were not the one getting saddled with the lifetime tag. But even then, one had a hunch that every nickname, regardless of the intent of the giver, would over time become a term of endearment, an appellation of affection.