

SOME NOTES AND OBSERVATIONS ON THE ORIGIN
AND EVOLUTION OF THE NAME OREGON AS
APPLIED TO THE RIVER OF THE WEST

For nearly one hundred years there has been considerable speculation and much thoughtful effort expended by historical students in, what the writer considers, rather futile and misdirected efforts to trace and establish the origin and meaning of this euphonious and poetical name. All attempts to give it a Spanish origin, as from "Ore-jin," signifying "Big ear," or "Oye el agua," "hear the waters," or as a corruption of "Ar-a-gon," or to attribute it to some French origin as from "Ouragan," "a windstorm, or tornado," have ignored its rather obvious Indian origin.

The first two students to recognize this fact apparently were two friends of the writer, Mr. John E. Rees, of Salmon, Idaho, and the late Mr. Jacob A. Meyers of Meyers Falls, Washington, neither of whom had an opportunity to consult and use the resources of any of our great libraries in the further development and proof of their theories. While using their suggestions, the writer has no desire to detract from any credit due them. It has, however, been my privilege to have had time and opportunity to examine and consult to some extent many sources of information that were not available to, nor consulted by, either of these gentlemen, and to cite these in confirmation and proof of their general theory that the name "Oregon" is of Indian origin, and that the last syllable thereof is obviously from the Indian word signifying "river."

Contemporary records of the time and scene of Carver's travels seem to contain practically all the data necessary to elucidate the origin of the name "Oregon" and its true Indian meaning.

The first recorded mention of this name, so far as generally known, and so far as the writer can ascertain, is that contained in Major Robert Rogers' proposal, of date August 12, 1765, wherein the Major proposes to explore "from thence to the River called by the Indians 'Ouragon'." Note the words "called by the Indians." Major Rogers' instructions and orders to Stanley Goddard of date 12 September, 1766, state that the expedition is in part: "ordered for the Discovery of the River Ourigan."

Major Rogers' instructions to Captain James Tute, Esq., of the same date contain the following language: "do you endeavour to fall in with the great River Ourgan which rises in several

different branches between Latitude fifty-six and forty-eight and runs westward for near three hundred Leagues."

In the latter part of the order we find: "from where the above rivers join this great River Ourigan," with the name later twice repeated with the same spelling. Again in Major Robert Rogers' second proposal, 11th February, 1772, we find the following: "to stem that (Missouri R.) northwesterly to its source; to cross thence a Portage of about thirty Miles, into the great River Ourigan."

Jonathan Carver's first mention of the name would appear to be in his original journal of date: "May 6 (1767) arrived at La prairie Chien or Dog Plains here found Capt. James Tute Mr. James Stanley Goddard and a Party with (sic) some Goods in order to proceed from this to Find out the Great River Ourigan that runs into the South sea. . . ."

So far as known Carver's own petition and private papers make no previous mention of the name "Ourigan."

In chronological order of their appearance as noted above we have the following:

Major Rogers	1765	-----	Ouragon
Major Rogers	1766	-----	Ourigan
Major Rogers	1766	-----	Ourgan
Major Rogers	1766	-----	Ourigan
Carver	1767	-----	Ourigan

So far as the writer has been able to learn, the name "Ourigan" does not appear in any map prior to the date of the publication of the first edition of Carver's travels (London edition, 1778). The original edition, as shown by the catalogue card (F597 C33) in the Library of Congress and the copy on the shelves there, contained no map. In the subsequent several editions of 1779 we find, in the London edition of that year, the name appearing as "Origan" in the map, and an examination of the maps in the map room of the Congressional Library discloses that first form of the word appearing on any map is "Origan," then, as in Tamer and Flager's map of 1790, as "Oregon."

In the text to the various earlier editions of *Carver's Travels* there is little uniformity in the choice of the spelling. The first edition gives "Oregon" at page 542, and Oregon at pages ix and 76. The spelling Oregon appears on page iv of the Dublin edition, 1779; page xv of the Hamburg edition, 1789; page 5 of the Philadelphia edition of 1796; page II of the Edinburgh edition of 1798, etc. In fact the text of most editions contain both

"Oregon" and "Oregon," used apparently at the choice of the compositor. We thus have as to Carver's published work:

Early maps ----- Origan
 In occasional texts----- Origan
 First London edition also,----- Oregon
 and more frequently----- Oregon

The original sound and spelling of the last syllable of the word was unquestionably "gan" or the Indian "kan," not "gon" as in Argon or Oregon.

Taking Major Rigers' original statement of 1766, the name is first an Indian name, and, applying the law of average, the first attempts to give an English equivalent of the sound of the Indian word practically agree upon the sounds Our-i-gan, as the equivalent of the Indian name for the river.

From the foregoing it is apparent that some Indian word, sounding like "ri-gan" to Rogers and Carver, forms the latter part of the Indian name they have each attempted to record. The sound of the consonant "r" is not used by the plains Indians from whom these gentlemen secured the name and, to use their own expressions, they have merely rendered the vocabularies as near as they could using English characters for the sounds. (Carver, p. 238).

Considerable knowledge then existed among the plains Indians concerning the Indians inhabiting, and the geography of the country immediately to the west of the Rocky Mountains, into which they made periodical raids for the joint purpose of securing slaves and horses.

The word "Or-i-gan" as shown, would probably be of the Assinaboia dialect, as they were an off-shoot of the Sioux Tribe and long allied with the Chipewars, and as noted by Henry, the holders of slaves from the "River of the West," and from whom, almost all of their knowledge of those rivers would come. No two of these slaves would have the same name for the river they had come from; hence it would naturally be spoken of as the "River of the Slaves," or "River of the West." Both Carver and Henry mention Slaves as a most valuable object of barter and trade.

Henry says in his "Travels," published in New York by J. Riley, 1809, page 273, "The Indians who inhabit them immediately to the southward (of Fort des Prairie Plains) are called Osinipoilles or Assiniboins. At the fort I met with a woman who was a slave among the Osinipoilles; taken far to the westward of the

mountains, in a country which the latter incessantly ravaged. She informed me, that the men of the country never suffer themselves to be taken, but always die in the field, rather than fall into captivity. The women and children are made slaves, but are not put to death, nor tormented. Her nation lived on a great river, running to the southwest, and cultivated beans, squashes, maize and tobacco. The lands were generally mountainous, and covered with pine and fir. She had heard of men who wear their beards. She had been taken in one of the incursions of the Osinipoills. Of the men who were in the village the greater part were killed, but a few escaped by swimming across the river."

Henry, on pages 306-7, after relating of the cruel treatment of a female slave that had been captured west of the mountains, states: "It is known that some slaves have the good fortune to be adopted into Indian families, and are afterwards allowed to marry in them, but among the Osinipoilles this seldom happens; and even among the Chipeways, where a female slave is so adopted and married, I never knew her to lose the degrading appellation of 'wa'-kan', a slave."

On page 325, he mentioned the buying of two slaves from the Indians from Lake Athabaska, that were natives of the country west of the Rockies. One a woman of twenty-five years of age and the other a boy of twelve, giving for each a gun. These would have been from the Fraser River country, but a "River of the West."

All contemporary accounts recite incidents of the slaves held by the Indians among whom Carver's expedition traveled, especially the Assinaboia and the Chippeway tribes, and a large part of the knowledge of the plains Indians of the geography west of the mountains was acquired from these slaves, and it would be most natural for the Assinaboia, Chippewas and other plains Indians to associate both the country and the great river of the mountains with these slaves, and in their name given to the river.

"Ogwa" is a Shoshone word signifying "river," and "Owah" is the Chippeway equivalent. Here we evidently have the first syllable of our present *Oregon* "Wa-kan" is the Chippeway word for slave, and here we have the last syllable of the name *Oregon*, which as shown did not originally appear in its present form *Oregon*. What more natural than the plains Indians should call the great legendary river west of the mountains "The River of the Slaves," or "Slave's River"? In original Indian this would be "Owah wakan." This is easily shortened in common use by

dropping the repeated syllable "wa," or "ha," to simply "O-wa-kan." In this, I believe, we have as close an approximation of Rogers' original "Or-i-gan" as we may ever hope to get, and a reasonable and logical significance therefor, "The River of the Slaves," or River of the West—a great river flowing into the Western Sea—told of by Indian slaves captured in raids against the Snake or Shoshone Indians, the Flathead Indians, the Kootenai and other intermountain tribes who themselves were often in ignorance as to its actual place of outlet. Witness the two Indian women sent from Spokane House to carry despatches to Stuart's post—in what is now British Columbia,—who descended the Columbia River and were intercepted by the Astor party at the mouth of that stream.

The location and outlet of the river was long a puzzle to geographers. M. d'Vangondy's map, Paris, 1772, at 45°, just below his C. Blanc shows at "Entrée de Martin d'Aquilar" a "Riviere de l'Ouest suivant les Francois" having an eastern course; and north of that a "Riviere de l'Ouest suivant les Cartes Russes"—both streams heading among the Assiniboels. D'Anville' and Roberts' General Atlas and Maps of 1787 and 1782 also show two rivers of the West; the northern having its source at Lake Winnipeg in the lands of the Assinipoels and the southern river or branch having its source in Pike's Lake in the country of the Sioux. Most contemporary maps show the mystical river to have a source in the lands of the Sioux and the Assiniboin Indians, which terms would include the allied Chippewas. This continued association of the source of the stream with these Indians is, to the mind of the writer, but further proof and confirmation of the position that the name Origan as applied to that stream was first obtained from these Indians, and that the Indian name for the river was "O-wa-kan," meaning "River of the Slaves."

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