



Talking Turkey

As the (probably apocryphal) tale spins out, back in the early colonial days, a white hunter and a friendly Native American made a pact before they started out on the day's hunt. Whatever they bagged was to be divided equally between them. At the end of the day, the white man undertook to distribute the spoils, consisting of several buzzards and turkeys. He suggested to his cohunter, "Either I take the turkeys and you the buzzards, or you take the buzzards and I take the turkeys." At this point the Native American complained, "You talk buzzard to me. Now talk turkey." And ever since, to talk turkey has meant "to tell it like it is."

Let's talk turkey about our Native American heritage. Suppose you had been one of the early explorers or settlers of North America. You would have found many things in your new land unknown to you. The handiest way of filling voids in your vocabulary would have been to ask local Native Americans what words they used. The early colonists began borrowing words from friendly Native Americans almost from the moment of their first contact, and many of those names have remained in our everyday language:

Food squash (Natick), pecan (Algonquian), hominy (Algonquian), pone (Algonquian), pemmican (Cree), succotash (Narraganset);

People sachem (Narraganset), squaw (Massachuset), papoose (Narraganset), mugwump (Natick);

Native American life moccasin (Chippewa), toboggan (Algonquian), tomahawk (Algonquian), wigwam (Abenaki), tepee (Dakota), caucus (Algonquian), pow-wow (Narraganset), wampum (Massachuset), bayou (Choctaw), potlatch (Chinook), hogan (Navajo), hickory (Algonquian), kayak (Inuit), totem (Ojibwa).

Pronouncing many of the Native American words was difficult for the early explorers and settlers. In many instances, they had to shorten and simplify the names. Given the Native American names, identify the following animals:

apossoun (Don't play dead now.)

otchock (How much wood?)

rahaugcum (Ring around the tail.)

segankw (What's black and white and stinks all over?)

The hidden animals are: opossum (Algonquian), woodchuck (Narraganset), raccoon (Algonquian), and skunk (Algonquian). To this menagerie we may add the likes of caribou (Micmac), chipmunk (Ojibwa), moose (Algonquian), muskrat (Abenaki), and porgy (Algonquian).

If you look at a map of the United States, you will realize how freely settlers used words of Indian origin to name the places where we live. Rivers, lakes, ponds, creeks, mountains, valleys, counties, towns, and cities as large as Chicago (from a Fox word that means "place that stinks of onions" or from another Indian word that means "great, powerful") bear Native American names, even when all or most of the speakers of the languages have long since vanished. Four of our five Great Lakes and twenty-five — exactly half — of our states have names that were borrowed from Native American words:

Alabama name of a tribe in the Creek Confederacy; Alaska: mainland (Aleutian); Arizona: place of the little springs (Papago); Arkansas: downstream people (Sioux); Connecticut: place of the long river (Algonquian)

Idaho behold the sun coming down the mountains (Shoshone); Illinois: superior people (Illini); Iowa: beautiful land (Ioway); Kansas: south wind people (Sioux); Kentucky: meadowland (Cherokee)

Massachusetts great hill place (Massachuset); Michigan: great water (Chippewa); Minnesota: milky blue water (Sioux); Mississippi: father of waters (Ojibway); Missouri: people of the large canoes (Fox)

Nebraska flat water (Sioux); North Dakota and South Dakota: named for the Dakota tribe; Ohio: great river (Iroquois); Oklahoma: red people (Choctaw)

Tennessee name of Cherokee village; Texas: friends (Tejas); Utah: name of Ute tribe; Wisconsin: gathering of waters (Algonquian); Wyoming: large prairie place (Delaware)

Some of our loveliest place names began life as Native American words — Susquehanna, Shenandoah, Rappahannock. Such names are the stuff of poetry. William Penn wrote: "I know not a language spoken in Europe that hath words of more sweetness and greatness." To Walt Whitman, Monongahela "rolls with venison richness upon the palate." How unhappy it is that the poetry the First Peoples heard in the American landscape has eluded those who have overrun them. ❧

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