

A NOTE ON KENTUCKY'S LICKSKILLETS

In my continuing research on Kentucky's place names, I have come across at least twelve applications of the name Lickskillet to communities or other features in the Commonwealth.

Lickskillet is generally assumed to be one of the class of folk-derived names humorously or disparagingly applied to more formally designated places that residents or neighbors or both have regarded as deficient in some basic resource or condition. Sometimes called "Po' Mouthing" names,¹ they describe or connote a place or people so "bad off" or "backward" that the social graces are lacking, and even eating and other basic behaviors are on a primitive level. This description may seem a bit severe unless it is kept in mind that our pioneer forebears had a rather earthy sense of humor, as well as a penchant for making light of their hardships and troubles. They were "good sports" about their own and especially their neighbors' deficiencies and shortcomings. Hyperbole was a most common expressive form of their sense of humor.

Lickskillet, as a "Po' Mouthing" name, was usually applied to a place whose residents were so poor they were reduced to "licking the skillets" to get every last morsel,² or, simply, any place where food was scarce and it was necessary to conserve or relish what little

could be provided from one's limited resources. As we shall see from the following Kentucky examples, the name may refer to a particular event in the early history of the place or it may describe, in exaggerated form, the characteristics of life or behavior of the local population. It may also reflect the sheer enjoyment to be had in good eating when one is hungry--people enjoyed the meal so much they licked the skillet in which it was prepared. In another vein, when people complained about their inadequate diet, they may have been told that "if they can't get enough to eat they can always lick the skillet."

In its most extreme form, as a pejorative, the name has also described a people so primitive or coarse that, among other practices, they routinely cleaned their cooking utensils (skillets) by having them licked by their pet dogs (or occasionally even by some wild animals like deer and raccoons.)

By no means is the name unique to Kentucky. According to Wayne Guthrie,³ at least sixteen applications of the name have been found in neighboring Indiana, and Ramsay reported some eight examples from Missouri.⁴ It has been known as well in Louisiana, Georgia, Tennessee, the Carolinas, and other southern states.

Though more often a nickname for other named places or features, several Lickskillets have appeared on maps and in gazetteers and other official lists of names. Lacking evidence, it is merely assumed that where the Lickskillet name officially identifies an inhabited place or, more likely, some feature like a creek, knob, school, or church, it simply developed by longstanding local usage and succeeded any earlier name by the time it was recorded on a map or document.

I have not yet discovered how widespread the name is outside of Kentucky, Indiana, and Missouri, nor its age or ultimate derivation. In Kentucky it certainly predates the Civil War for it is known to have been applied to a Logan County community as early as 1810. But whether it originated in Kentucky or elsewhere remains a mystery. My hunch is that, in Kentucky and other states, it was far more common in the past as a nickname or the official designation of a place or feature that was later replaced by residents bent on improving their social image.

Usually the name, as nickname or official name, has survived the reasons for its application. In most cases it is not known why the name was given, leading to some ex post facto accounts that should not be taken seriously; that is, "folk" accounts more

useful for what they may tell about the people who applied the name or those who lived at the place it identified than for what they say about the origin of the name itself.

SPECIFIC KENTUCKY LICKSKILLETS

The now almost defunct Anderson County hamlet of Lick Skillet,⁵ some twenty miles west of Lawrenceburg, is said to have been named after a political rally was held there at which burgoo, a popular Kentucky dish, was served. According to Judge J.T. Cox, there wasn't enough of it to go around and some disappointed late-comer was heard to complain that "they ate up all the burgoo and licked the skillet."⁶ A similar account, reported by the late Wyatt Shely, refers to a fish fry there about 1870. "When the supply of fish was too soon exhausted, hungry latecomers licked the skillet."⁷ This was the only name by which this community was known.

Meade County's crossroads community of Lickskillet, two miles south of the Ohio River and less than a mile west of Otter Creek Park, allegedly grew up around an encampment of John Hunt Morgan's Confederate cavalry. Lacking adequate provisions, the men were forced to eat "what little they had and licked the skillets clean, wishing for more."⁸ The community was abandoned in the 1930s when land in the area was taken for the expansion of the nearby Fort Knox Military Reservation.

Lick Skillet was the name traditionally applied to the 1773 campsite of James McAfee and his party of pioneer surveyors at the confluence of Mill Creek and the Kentucky River, eight miles west of Owenton in the present Owen County. According to Charles Johnson, in the Owenton News-Herald, "hunters for the party were so busy with guard duty (against an especially ferocious band of Indians) that little game was killed; so short on rations were they that they said 'we would eat everything in sight, then lick the skillet.'" ⁷ A settlement with post office established near the site has borne several names over its century-long history and is now the resort and retirement community of Perry Park.

On KY 220, in Hardin County, just northwest of the crossroads settlement of Four Corners and almost six miles southeast of Big Spring, is the Pleasantview Church said also to have been nicknamed Lickskillet. Herb Hodges of Big Spring relates "that they used to have a lot of big dinners in which each person was supposed to bring a dish. More didn't than did, and the food didn't last long. Some oldtimer made the remark that if you got anything to eat, that you would have to lick the skillet. And the name stuck." ¹⁰

Another Kentucky example of the name's use to suggest the scarcity of food was its nineteenth century application as a nickname (Lick Skillet) for the northern McLean County hamlet and post office (since closed) of Glenville.¹¹

For many years a Lickskillet School provided an elementary education for the children of an area three miles northwest of Salem, in Livingston County. The building was constructed in the late nineteenth century on land acquired from the Barnett family, perhaps Sam Barnett, and the school was officially known as The Barnett School. Jacquetta Kemper, a former pupil and teacher now living in Salem, gives this traditional account, accepted locally as true: "A family lived on or near what became the school site. One day when local parents were searching for a place to build a school for the children of the area, they stopped at the site to enquire about getting some land. A small child was standing in the doorway of the home licking a skillet from which his mother had just made a batch of sorghum molasses candy. Thus the name Lickskillet after the child who was licking the skillet."¹² Around 1940, the school was consolidated with the Salem School, and some ten year later Herbert Miller of nearby Lola moved the building to its present

site where it was converted to a residence. Though it is now vacant, oldtimers still call it the Old Lick-skillet School House, and the Barnett Cemetery Road on which it was located (which extends for about a mile and a half from KY 133 to almost the Crittenden County line), is now called The Lick Skillet Road.¹³

The "hungry residents" motif has also accounted for the Barnett School's nickname. According to Braxton McDonald, the former School Superintendent of adjacent Crittenden County, "people were so hungry at a lunch given there that they ate everything on the table and then licked the skillet. And since the school was new and hadn't been named...it (got) the name Lickskillet."¹⁴

Kentucky's best known and probably oldest Lickskillet is a Logan County settlement which may be the actual source of the name in this state, the others likely being but "folk" explanations. In or around 1810, the name is said to have been given to a settlement on both banks of Whippoorwill Creek, in the vicinity of a pioneer mill dam, seven miles southwest of Russellville. Across from the dam, at the edge of the creek, was a rock which resembled a skillet that had been so shaped by the action of spring water and possibly by wild animals that had used it as a lick. The settlement has never had another name and the name has never been used disparagingly.¹⁵

OTHER KENTUCKY LICKSKILLETS

At least four other Lickskillets have been found in Kentucky but with no explanations of their origins.

Lickskillet Creek (Bullitt County) extends for about $3\frac{1}{2}$ miles in a roughly northerly direction to Cedar Creek, a Salt River tributary, $1\frac{1}{2}$ miles east of Shepherdsville, the county seat.

Lickskillet Fork extends in a southwesterly direction for half a mile to join ^{the} Right Fork of Beaver Creek at the Floyd-Knott County line, half a mile east of the Dema post office.

Lickskillet (Todd County) was a nineteenth century nickname for a community once known as Bivinsville and now called Clifty, twelve miles north of Elkton, the county seat.

Lickskillet Knob (Pulaski County) is three miles southeast of Somerset, the county seat, and a mile south of Pitman Creek.

AN INDIANA ADDENDUM

Though only one Kentucky instance of the motif of "animals licking skillets" has been found as a suggested though highly questionable alternative explanation of the Anderson County name,¹⁶ at least two of Indiana's Lickskillet nicknames may have had this derivation (though, in both cases, these may have simply been local jokes).

The late Wayne Guthrie, columnist for the Indianapolis News, tells the story of a Howard County family with a pack of hunting dogs who "instead of going to the time and trouble of washing their skillets...simply let the dogs lick them clean." This gave the name to a settlement southwest of Kokomo, the seat.¹⁷

According to an account of the nickname given to North Vernon, the seat of Jennings County, (recorded in his Hoosier Folk Legends by Ronald Baker), local "housewives would set out the pans and skillets for (their dogs and cats) to clean. So it was named Lick Skillet."¹⁸

Guthrie also offered an explanation for another Indiana Lickskillet, a nickname for Olio (in Hamilton County) that incorporated both the "skillet" and the "deer lick" motifs. "People..would place their skillets after being used, out of doors to cool. While they were there, the deer..would smell them and come right up to the door to lick those dirty skillets in order to get the salty grease they contained."¹⁹

FOOTNOTES

1. cf Francis Lee Utley and Marion R. Hemperley, Placenames of Georgia: Essays of John H. Goff, Athens: University of Georgia Press, 1975, Pp.

- 406-15 for a somewhat more inclusive and less severe description of this class of names.
2. Robert Lee Ramsay, Our Storehouse of Missouri Place Names. Columbia: University of Missouri Bulletin Vol. 53 (34), 1952, P. 89
 3. Indianapolis News, Feb. 9, 1960, P. 9C:3
 4. Ramsay, op. cit.
 5. Instances of one word and two word spellings of the name in the Kentucky cases are about equal; in some places, though, the spellings have been used interchangeably.
 6. Major Lewis W. McKee and Mrs. Lydia K. Bond, A History of Anderson County, Frankfort: Roberts Printing, 1937, P. 124
 7. Wyatt Shely in his column "Our Heritage" in the Anderson News, Sept. 30, 1971
 8. As reported by Mrs. Juanita Padgett, a nearby resident, to George Wright and mentioned in his article "For Those Hungry for Licksillet History" in The Messenger (Brandenburg, Ky. weekly newspaper), Sept. 25, 1985, P. A2
 9. Dec. 5, 1957, as quoted in Robert M. Rennick, Kentucky Place Names. Lexington: University Press of Kentucky, 1984, P. 230
 10. Letter to the author, Sept. 9, 1985

11. Katharyn Leachman, Manuscript on McLean County Placenames, for the Kentucky Place Name Survey, 1972
12. Letter to the author, June 9, 1985
13. Ibid. and confirmed in a letter from H.J. Shuecraft, Salem, Ky., July 9, 1985
14. Interview, August 28, 1978
15. Margaret Barnes Stratton, Place-Names of Logan County, Second Edition, 1947, n.p.
16. Philip Spencer, Lawrenceburg, Ky., interview, Aug. 4, 1978
17. "Doggy Settlement Named Lickskillet" Indianapolis News, July 16, 1952, P. 9:1-2
18. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1982, P. 185
19. "Deer Tale Accounts for Name Lickskillet" Indianapolis News, Feb. 18, 1960, P. 11C:4-7