

## What's in a Name?

Pepto-Bismol  
Coca-Cola  
Dumpster  
Bubble Wrap  
Kleenex  
Thermos  
Popsicle  
Aspirin  
Yo-Yo  
Jeep

### What's in a Name?

What I just recited were household names of products that have brands so distinctive that they instantly conjure a, hopefully, positive emotion about that product. No company likes to have their brand associated with negativity or a bad experience. Here are some of those examples:

Enron  
Segway  
Halliburton  
BP  
Exxon  
Nestle  
Tylenol  
Dow

### What's in a Name?

The branded product, service, or concept should ideally be publicly distinguished from other products, services or concepts so that it can be easily marketed. Branding is the process of creating and publicizing the brand name, its qualities and personality.

When naming a city or town the practice is usually to bring attention to a conspicuous feature or attribute of the geography. So here's an easy one... Iceland, which is the only country named for its most predominant geographical feature. Geographical names or place names are called toponyms. They are proper nouns applied to topographical features and the settled or used places on our planet. Toponyms are found in both spoken and written languages and they represent an important reference system used by societies throughout the world. Some examples are names like the Rocky Mountains, or Beaver Dam in Kentucky, and even Stinkingwater Peak, Wyoming. Unless you live in Louisiana, Oklahoma, Alaska, or Hawaii there's at least one Riverside in your state.

In California we name cities and places from the languages of the indigenous Native American Indian tribes. We use Inyo, Marin, Modoc, Napa, Shasta, Siskiyou, Aptos, Azusa, Klamath, Lompoc, Milpitas, Petaluma, Ojai... the list goes on.

The point is that naming a place like this conveys a lot of the purpose or history of the town. Such names usually mean something to the locals. In the case of people from indigenous Native American tribes those names might be honoring, but they may be a painful reminder of what is lost... as people who now occupy their unceded lands also appropriate their names and language.

When discussing this aspect of naming places, Edward Relph wrote, “It has always been the case that a colonizing or imperial expansion has involved displacement of local names with new ones imposed by the conquerors. In the European expansions of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> century this was done partly to demonstrate authority and partly to honor those involved in the act of colonization by using names of the colonizers or the monarchs and aristocrats who supported them – Georgia, Victoria, Alberta, Sydney, Melbourne, Halifax, and so on in British colonies.”[1]

What’s in a name?

Language and words capture and convey human emotion. They transmit values. They communicate thoughts and concepts. Names are important because of this. This is why some names for children are naturally avoided. We just don’t give our children names of people historically associated with evil or trauma. Why should we do so for a town?

The effects of such trauma and evil is real, and it lasts for generations. There are those who say that slavery was not the main reason for the American Civil war. They say that it was a dispute about economies. They also now say that Africans brought over into slavery were “involuntarily relocated” and that the people to blame for the slave trade were the Africans themselves, who warred against each other.

Some people like this turn their backs on suffering and deny it. They say, “It’s all in the past. It’s just in your head. Get over it”. Such people can be indifferent to the feelings and needs of others. That is much worse than being unconcerned or hateful or ignorant. Being indifferent means to have no sympathy and no desire to understand the pain of others. Truth is thus, the casualty of such indifference. The truth, however terrible, and shocking, and harmful simply cannot be perceived by people who are indifferent to the feelings of others.

I personally know a man who will not set foot in Kelseyville because of what was done to his not-so-long ago ancestors. There are a surprising number of indigenous people who feel the way he does. Those people who are indifferent to the history that infuses my friend’s life... will say, “It’s all in the past. It’s just in your head. Get over it.” My friend won’t come to Kelseyville because there is something *wrong* with him. No... he won’t come because there is something *right* with him.

“Why”, some would ask, “are we suddenly insisting on destroying statues? Why take them down? Why rename schools, hospitals, sports teams, military bases, and public buildings and spaces?” Well, the answer is because the need to do so has never been just “all of a sudden”. Millions of Americans, myself included, have silently suffered because of the names we have given to places and things. Those names honor, commemorate, and therefore inappropriately validate a history of cruelty and oppression. It is past time to tear down statues that the celebrate people who fought for, and perpetuated, slavery. It is past time to change names of places celebrating these people *because they should never have been so named in the first place.*

If you don’t believe continuing harm comes from injustices of the past you don’t know what you’re talking about. My mother, Dorothy Lewis, was always thrilled to have a meal at Howard Johnson restaurants when I was growing up. You might have known them as the places with the signature orange roofs. My mother relished going to such upscale dining because she could not eat in those restaurants in the segregated South where she was raised as a child. Black people like her were not allowed to enter.

If you don’t believe continuing harm comes from injustices of the past you don’t know what you’re talking about. You need to do some research, assuming you even care about educating yourself. You should familiarize yourself, for example, with the Act for the Government and Protection of Indians of 1850. The law was nicknamed the Indian Indenture Act. It was enacted by the first session of the California State Legislature and signed into law by the first Governor of California, Peter Hardeman Burnett. The legislation sanctioned what is known as the California genocide, that allowed tens of thousands of Native Californians to be killed and enslaved by white settlers. Did you know that the then new state of California also created a fund to pay for heads or scalps of each Native American person who was murdered during this period of genocide? The fund paid \$1 million for this service. The prices were said to range from 25 cents per scalp, to \$5 per severed head.

When Burnett signed the Act for the Government and Protection of Indians bill into law he explained, “That a war of extermination will continue to be waged between the races until the Indian race becomes extinct must be expected. While we cannot anticipate this result but with painful regret, the inevitable destiny of the race is beyond the power or wisdom of man to avert.”

What’s in a name?

Well, a lot of meaning is invested in most names. We all suffer when we disregard the legitimate feelings of pain associated with people, places, events, symbols, and things that represent oppression and cruelty. The names of things matter. They tell us what is important. They also transmit to the future what we value.

For those who say we should not change the name of kelseyville because to do so would be unsettling, or too much of a hassle, or dishonoring of history, or giving in to cancel culture, I ask “why not?” The town has been called other names in the past. The

community was formerly named Kelsey, Kelsey Creek, Kelsey Town, Peartown, and Uncle Sam.

The predominate geographical element of this region is the lake we call Clearlake. We have been very literal when naming many of the communities in this region: Lakeport, Lower Lake, Upper Lake, Clearlake, Hidden Valley Lake, Cobb, Soda Bay, Spring Valley, Whispering Pines, Parramore Springs, Glenhaven, and Middletown are all names that spring to mind. We've even been aspirational in our naming, with towns like Clearlake Riviera, Nice, and Lucerne! What's out of place here? I would argue the name kelseyville is not only incongruent; it is inappropriate and unnecessarily divisive... *and it always has been.*

Changing the name of kelseyville is not about being politically correct. It's about being respectful to ourselves and to the people who suffered under the hands of Andrew Kelsey and Charles Stone. Keep in mind that these men perpetuated their actions during a time when they were allowed to do so. Why should we honor that? Hubert Howe Bancroft, the American historian and ethnologist, who was himself, an acknowledged racist wrote: "The Kelsey's were 'rough men often in trouble with the law.' 'Kelsey and Stone were men (who could never) use conciliatory methods with 'Injuns and such varmint', and they were both killed as they well deserved to be."

I'm not here to talk about the history of kelseyville. Many, more capable than I, are able to do that, and they do so very well. I appear today in my capacity as a Unitarian Universalist minister. We Unitarians are well known for our work in countering oppression and fighting for social justice. I am here today to make an appeal to change the name of the town now known as kelseyville because it is named for someone we all understand to have been a despicable human. It is not astonishing to me that a town like kelseyville would have this name, given the history of racism in our nation. What is astonishing is that we are having debates about whether or not to change the name! I realize there are procedures, laws... things that need to be done to affect this change, but those challenges should not deter us.

Oh, and while we're on the subject, we also need to change the historical landmark and registry. Remember what I just said that, "Truth is thus, the casualty of such indifference. The truth, however terrible, and shocking, and harmful simply cannot be perceived by people who are indifferent to the feelings of others."? Here is what was written in the California registry of historical monuments in March 16, 1949. It is what is written on the marker at the intersection of Main St and Bell Hill Rd, and what is still the official record: "This home was built by Charles Stone and Andy Kelsey on land purchased from Salvador Vallejo. They forced Indians to do the construction work, causing much resentment. Finally, in the fall of 1849, the Indians killed both Stone and Kelsey - their remains are buried beneath this monument." Does this marker tell the truth? "*They forced Indians to do the construction work, causing much resentment?*" These are the fruits of indifference. I can understand how the "historical landmark" would be inscribed as it is in 1949, when, in the cowboys and Indians movies the cowboys were always right. But again, what is astonishing to me is that we are having

debates about whether or not to change the name of this bloody town. It is astonishing to me that the marker on the gravesite is allowed to so brutally mock the people who “resented” Kelsey and Stone!

What’s in a name? What’s on a Historical Marker?

Let us be clear... Andrew Kelsey and his buddy Charles Stone enslaved, confined, starved, abused, murdered, and raped the Pomo indigenous people of this area. That is an indisputable fact. Most humans consider these acts worthy of damnation. Most religions would consider such men as damned. We Unitarians tend to be less judgmental about these things. But even though we might not throw words like damnation around. We can think of other creative terms for the same thing.

I don’t care what new name is conjured for the place now called kelseyville as long as it is a name free of such infamy and injustice. I say, “Change the name. Change the historical monument. And change them NOW!!”

[1] (<https://www.placeness.com/toponymy-and-the-particularity-of-place-names>)