

The Word “Hoosier”

by

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Like barnacles, a thick crust of speculation has gathered over the word “Hoosier” to explain the origin of Indiana’s nickname. Popular theories, diligently and often sincerely advanced, form a rich, often amusing body of folklore. Those theories include “Who’s here?” as a question to unknown visitors or to the inhabitants of a country cabin; Hussar, from the fiery European mounted troops; “Huzzah!” proclaimed after victory in a fight; Husher, a brawny man, capable of stilling opponents; Hoosa, an Indian word for corn; Hoose, an English term for a disease of cattle which gives the animals a wild sort of look; and the evergreen “Who’s ear?” asked while toeing a torn-off ear lying on the bar room floor the morning after a brawl.

The best evidence, however, suggests that “Hoosier” was a term of contempt and opprobrium common in the upland South and used to denote a rustic, a bumpkin, a countryman, a roughneck, a hick or an awkward, uncouth or unskilled fellow. Although the word’s derogatory meaning has faded, it can still be heard in its original sense, albeit less frequently than its cousins “Cracker” and “Redneck.”

From the South “Hoosier” moved north and westward with the people into the Ohio Valley, where it was applied at first to the presumably unsophisticated inhabitants of Southern Indiana. Later it expanded to include all residents of the state and gradually lost its original, potent connotation of coarseness in manners, appearance and intellect.

As for the word itself, it may derive from the Saxon word “hoo” meaning promontory or cliff or ridge or rise or hill. Jacob Piatt Dunn, a diligent scholar of the word, believes a Saxon beginning, and such a meaning survives in various place names in England. There is some sense in the notion, too, that those who applied the insult and those to whom it was applied (and who understood it) came primarily from British stock.

The unusual (ier or sier) ending has always been difficult to explain. Might it be from “scir” the old form of “shire?” The Hoo Shire would then be the Hill Country, the High Places or the Mountain Region. Would that meaning then extend to those who lived in the hills, making them the “hooscirs” and later the “Hoosiers,” the mountain people, hillbillies by another name?

Speculation Begins

Speculation about the origin of the word Hoosier as a nickname for residents of Indiana began in print as early as 1833. In that year the *Indiana Democrat* of October 26, 1833 reprinted an article from the *Cincinnati Republican*:

HOOSHIER

The appellation of Hooshier has been used in many of the Western States, for several years, to designate, in a good natural way, an inhabitant of our sister state of Indiana. Ex-Governor Ray has lately started a newspaper in Indiana, which he names "The Hoshier" [sic]. Many of our ingenious native philologists have attempted, though very unsatisfactorily, to explain this somewhat singular term. Mordecai M. Noah, in the late number of his *Evening Star*, undertakes to account for it upon the faith of a rather apocryphal story of a recruiting officer, who was engaged during the last war, in enlisting a company of HUSSARS, whom by mistake he unfortunately denominated Hooshiers. Another etymologist tells us that when the state of Indiana was being surveyed, the surveyors, on finding the residence of a squatter, would exclaim "Who's here," -- that this exclamation, abbreviated to Hoosier was, in process of time, applied as a distinctive appellation to the original settlers of that state, and, finally to its inhabitants generally. Neither of these hypotheses are deserving of any attention. The word Hooshier is indebted for its existence to that once numerous and unique, but now extinct class of mortals called the Ohio Boatmen. -- In its original acceptation it was equivalent to "Ripstaver," "Bulger," "Ring-tailroarer," and a hundred others, equally expressive, but which have never attained to such a respectable standing as itself. By some caprice which can never be explained, the appellation Hooshier became confined solely to such boatmen as had their homes upon the Indiana shore, and from them it was gradually applied to all the Indianians, who acknowledge it as good naturedly as the appellation of Yankee -- Whatever may have been the original acceptation of Hooshier this we know, that the people to whom it is now applied are amongst the bravest, most intelligent, most enterprising, most magnanimous, and most democratic of the Great West, and should we ever feel disposed to quit the state in which we are now sojourning, our own noble Ohio, it will be to enroll ourselves as adopted citizens in the land of the "HOOSHIER."

Jacob Piatt Dunn

Jacob Piatt Dunn, for many years secretary of the Indiana Historical Society, provides the fullest consideration of "Hoosier" in his 1907 article, "The Word Hoosier," which continues research he had done for a 1902 article in the *Indiana Magazine of History*. The two items and a third published in 1913 appear as a whole in slightly altered form in his *Indiana and Indianans* (1919). Dunn accurately observes that the 1833 article from the *Cincinnati Republican* covers "most of the ground that has since been occupied" only ten months after the publication of Finley's famous poem "The Hoosier's Nest." Dunn carefully examines that "occupied ground" in his 1907 article, a detailed examination of the term which nearly every serious researcher cites. He dismisses with scholarly ease explanations of the term that individuals had proposed

over the years. Three features, though, he find, are common to most of the suggested etymologies:

1. They are alike in the idea that the word was first applied to a rough, boisterous, uncouth, illiterate class of people, and that the word originally implied this character.
2. They are alike in the idea that the word come from the South, or was first applied by Southern people.
3. They are alike in the idea that the word was coined for the purpose of designating Indiana people, and was not in existence before it was applied to them.

The third characteristic, he finds, is true for many of the explanations, but untrue of the word itself, for it had long been used in the south as a derogatory term for a rough countryman. His correspondents assured him, too, that the term continued in its use and meaning at the time of his research, without reference to Indiana.

Dunn does an admirable job examining the various theories about the word “hoosier” and honestly states that the “real problem of the derivation of the word ‘hoosier,’ is not a question of the origin of a word formed to designate the State of Indiana and its people, but of the origin of a slang term widely in use in the South, signifying an uncouth rustic.” Although he declines to state an origin of ‘hoosier’ with certainty, Dunn concludes that the word “carries Anglo-Saxon credentials. It is Anglo-Saxon in form and Ango-Saxon in ring.” He considers several possibilities and notes that the Saxon term “hoo,” meaning a high place, cliff or promontory, survives in a number of place names. He also ran across the Cumberland dialect word, “hoozer,” meaning something unusually large.

As possible support for derivation from the Cumberland word he cites in the 1919 publication an article from the *Northwestern Pioneer and St. Joseph Intelligencer* of April 4, 1832:

A Real Hoosier. -- A sturgeon, who, no doubt, left Lake Michigan on a trip of pleasure, with a view of spending a few days in the pure waters of the St. Joseph, had his joyous anticipations unexpectedly marred by running foul of a fisherman’s spear near this place - being brought on terra firma, and cast into a balance, he was found to weigh 83 pounds.

Dunn commented, “The sturgeon, with its covering of plates, is a rough-looking customer as compared with common freshwater fishes; and the obvious inference of the use of the word “Hoosier” in this connection is that, while it was being applied to Indiana people, the “real Hoosier” was rough-looking individual, like the sturgeon.”

As for the form of the word, Dunn observes that throughout Finley’s manuscript copy of the “The Hoosier’s Nest,” Finley spells the word “Hoosher” and places it within quotation marks. In later editions of the work it appears as “Hoosier.” The original spelling suggests that the word had not yet been often seen in print, and, as Dunn says, “several years passed before the spelling

became fixed in its present form.” In fact it is seen as Hoosier, Hoosher and Hooshier in early spellings.

Conjecture, Moonshine, Hogwash and Spook Etymology

Dunn does a kindly job dismissing most of the proposed origins of Indiana’s nickname. Occasionally, however, he is moved to speak of “moonshine,” and Mencken uses the same term. Others, somewhat less courtly, refer to “spook etymology” (John Ciardi) or “hogwash” (*Webster’s Word Histories*). George Stimpson simply finds the propositions “ludicrous.” Each is right, for the “curious theories” (Stimpson) about the word have created an imaginative body of folklore, a collection of often foolish tales, as entertaining as they are inaccurate.

The speculation, the outrageous, endearing discussion of the term, makes it more interesting than the plain truth about it. From 1833 to the present it has figured in filler items for newspapers and in “Hot Line” or “Ask the Globe” columns because of the oddity of the word and the traditions surrounding it. “What is a Hoosier?” is the question; the answers follow in glorious plentitude.

The Indiana Historical Bureau Answers

The Indiana Historical Bureau in response to the often asked question issued a pamphlet, the revised version of an article that appeared in the September 1965 issue of the Indiana Historical Bureau Bulletin. Here appears the official, or semi-official, word:

The Word “Hoosier”

For well over a century and a half the people of Indiana have been called Hoosiers. It is one of the oldest of state nicknames and has had a wider acceptance than most. True, there are Buckeyes of Ohio, the Suckers of Illinois and the Tarheels of North Carolina -- but none of these has had the popular usage accorded Hoosier.

But where did Hoosier come from? What is its origin? We know that it came into general usage in the 1830s. John Finley of Richmond wrote a poem, “The Hoosier’s Nest,” which was used as the “Carrier’s Address” of the Indianapolis Journal Jan. 1, 1833. It was widely copied throughout the country and even abroad. Finley originally wrote Hoosier as “Hoosher.” Apparently the poet felt that it was sufficiently familiar to be understandable to his readers. A few days later, on Jan. 8, 1833, at the Jackson Day dinner in Indianapolis, John W. Davis offered “The Hoosher State of Indiana” as a toast. And in August, former Indiana Gov. James B. Ray announced that he intended to publish a newspaper, The Hoosier, at Greencastle, Indiana.

A few instances of the earlier written use of Hoosier have been found. The word appears in the “Carrier’s Address” of the Indiana Democrat on Jan. 3, 1832. G. L. Murdock wrote

on Feb. 11, 1831, in a letter to Gen. John Tipton, "Our Boat will [be] named the Indiana Hoosier." In a publication printed in 1860, *Recollections . . . of the Wabash Valley*, Sanford Cox quotes a diary which he dates July 14, 1827, "There is a Yankee trick for you -- done up by a Hoosier." One can only wonder how long before this Hoosier was used orally.

As soon as the nickname came into general use, speculation began as to its origin. Among the more popular theories:

- When a visitor hailed a pioneer cabin in Indiana or knocked upon its door, the settler would respond, "Who's yere?" And from this frequent response Indiana became the "Who's yere" or Hoosier state. No one ever explained why this was more typical of Indiana than of Illinois or Ohio.
- Indiana rivermen were so spectacularly successful in trouncing or "hushing" their adversaries in the brawling that was then common that they became known as "hushers," and eventually Hoosiers.
- There was once a contractor named Hoosier employed on the Louisville and Portland Canal who preferred to hire laborers from Indiana. They were called "Hoosier's men" and eventually all Indianans were called Hoosiers.
- A theory attributed to Gov. Joseph Wright derived Hoosier from an Indian word for corn, "hoosa." Indiana flatboatmen taking corn or maize to New Orleans came to be known as "hoosa men" or Hoosiers. Unfortunately for this theory, a search of Indian vocabularies by a careful student of linguistics failed to reveal any such word for corn.
- Quite as possible is a facetious explanation offered by "The Hoosier Poet," James Whitcomb Riley. He claimed that Hoosier originated in the pugnacious habits of our early settlers. They were enthusiastic and vicious fighters who gouged, scratched and bit off noses and ears. This was so common an occurrence that a settler coming into a tavern the morning after a fight and seeing an ear on the floor would touch it with his toe and casually ask, "Whose ear?"

Many have inquired into the origin of Hoosier. But by all odds the most serious student of the matter was Jacob Piatt Dunn, Jr., Indiana historian and longtime secretary of the Indiana Historical Society. Dunn noted that "hoosier" was frequently used in many parts of the South in the 19th century for woodsmen or rough hill people. He traced the word back to "hoozer," in the Cumberland dialect of England. This derives from the Anglo-Saxon word "hoo" meaning high or hill. In the Cumberland dialect, the word "hoozer" meant anything unusually large, presumably like a hill. It is not hard to see how this word was attached to a hill dweller or highlander. Immigrants from Cumberland, England, settled in the southern mountains (Cumberland Mountains, Cumberland River, Cumberland Gap, etc.). Their descendants brought the name with them when they settled in the hills of southern Indiana.

As Indiana writer Meredith Nicholson observed: "The origin of the term 'Hoosier' is not known with certainty. But certain it is that ... Hoosiers bear their nickname proudly."

Beyond Dunn

Mencken

H. L. Mencken treats the term in *The American Language* where the Sage of Baltimore relies considerably on the scholarship of Jacob Piatt Dunn for his discussion of “hoosier.” Using Dunn as his guide, he discusses the various possibilities of the term’s origin, observing that early etymologists “all sought to connect the term with some idea of ruffianism.” He begins with the “husher” theory and moves quickly to “Who’s here?” both of which Dunn rejected. He mentions the fanciful barroom brawl and “Whose year?” and Lehmanowsky and the “hussar” story. Sam Hoosier, the canal contractor, comes next, followed by hoosa, that Indian word for corn, and the exclamation, “Huzza!” He returns to Dunn and offers three more possibilities: hoose, a cattle disease; hoozer, a Cumberland, England, dialect word applied to “anything unusually large;” and huzur, a Hindustani form of address to “persons of rank or superiority.” Mencken endorses no explanation; he observes that “hoosier” at the start “did not signify an Indianan particularly, but any rough fellow...” and that it was a more or less common term in the upland South, a synonym for cracker. In Indiana, however, the term had settled into its current meaning as a resident of the state by 1833.

Webster’s Word Histories

Webster’s Word Histories neatly and concisely presents the various theories about the word “hoosier,” including the seldom-mentioned “houssière” (holly plantation) and the dialectical “hoose” (roundworm). It acknowledges that Dunn “dismissed most of these explanations as hogwash as far back as 1907.” Dunn’s theory of “hoozer,” the Cumberland word for anything unusually large has “at least some vestige of plausibility.” A discussion of the disparaging use of the term follows. Webster’s tends to doubt the connection between “Hoosier” as a nickname of Indiana and “hoosier” as a term applied to a mountaineer or backwoodsman. It errs when it refuses to recognize the possibility that “Hoosier” as a common term of opprobrium or disparagement migrated from the upland South to the Ohio River Valley and beyond into Indiana. It also rejects any connection with the Anglo-Saxon word “hoo.” Webster’s may be too hasty, and that haste somewhat spoils an otherwise excellent presentation.

Baker and Carmony

Ronald L. Baker and Marvin Carmony in their *Indiana Place Names* round up the usual suspects. They treat the “who’s ‘ere?” greeting; Samuel Hoosier, the Louisville canal contractor; “hussars” or “hushers;” “houssière, French for “bushy places;” “hoose,” an English dialect word for roundworm; “hoosa,” a supposed Indian word for corn; “huzza,” the exclamation of victory or celebration; and “hoozer,” “a southern dialect word meaning something especially large.” (Other sources, when speaking of “hoozer” meaning something very large, refer to the Cumberland, England, dialect word; Baker and Carmony seem alone in assigning the term with

the same meaning to the south without further explanation.) Evidence from the Linguistic Atlas, they conclude, reveals “Hoosier” as a “derogatory epithet” meaning uncouth and “synonymous with hick, hayseed and hillbilly,” a term still in use in the upland South.

Ronald Baker

Baker revisited the world of “Hoosier” origins in his *From Needmore to Prosperity*. In his introduction, he answers his own question, “Who is a hoosier” with a description of various suggested origins of the term. He examines recent scholarship and concludes that “most scholars now agree with Dunn and McDavid that Hoosier comes from a southern dialect word meaning ‘a rough or uncouth person.’”

Dictionary of American Regional English

The *Dictionary of American Regional English* provides a thorough treatment of the American regional lexicon, based on both written evidence and field work. For “hoosier” it gives the usual spelling and pronunciation and invites the reader to consult the variants in the entry: hoogie, hoojy, hoo(d)ger, hoojer, hooshier, hooshur. To illustrate the use of the word the Dictionary provides a number of quotations taken from a variety of sources dating from 1831 to 1980. It notes, too, that term also occurs in combined forms, like “country hoosier” and “mountain hoosier,” and it presents the definition:

A hillbilly or rustic; an unmannerly or objectionable person. Such usage is chiefly Southern or of the Southern Midlands and often derogatory.

A series of quotations follows to illustrate the definition, many of them identified by geographical source:

1941 Hall Coll. neTN, Hoosiers -- people speak of goddamn [hoosiers], a damn feller...who don't know nothin' except what they've [sic] learned in the mountains. In town they speak of “country hoodgers” or “mountain hoodgers” ... in North Carolina they speak of “Tennessee Hoosiers;” in Tennessee they speak of “North Carolina Hoosiers.”)

The *Dictionary* continues with additional definitions: “A White person considered to be objectionable, esp because of racial prejudice” and “... an inexperienced or incompetent person.” As a verb, “hoosier” means “to be a farmer” (Berry and Van den Bark) and “hoosier up” means “...to work incompetently; to slow down or shirk on a job, usually on purpose.” “Hoosier up” can also mean “to play tricks or take sides...; to badmouth.” With all definitions, noun or verb, several quotations show the word’s usage or serve as authorities for the definition itself.

Paul Dickson

Paul Dickson in his *What do You Call a Person from ...?* explores the term and in easy prose discusses the ubiquity of “hoosier” in Indiana. He also reviews the “spirited Senate tomfoolery” between Senators Quayle and D’Amato concerning the 1987 NCAA basketball championship game between Indiana University and Syracuse. The Senate section of Congressional Record for March 30 and March 31, 1987 records the action. The day of the game Senator D’Amato toyed with the “sacred word” and quoted Webster’s Third New International Dictionary, which defines “hoosier” not only a resident of Indiana but also as “an awkward, unhandy or unskilled person, especially an uncouth rustic.” Syracuse lost the game to Indiana, and Senator Quayle rose to introduce a non-binding resolution with a new definition of “hoosier:”

Whereas Indiana University’s basketball team displayed the real meaning of the word, ‘hoosier,’ therefore be it resolved that a Hoosier is someone who is smart, resourceful, skillful, a winner, unique and brilliant.

Dickson also entertainingly records Quayle’s exchange with William A. Llewellyn, president of the Merriam-Webster Company, over the word’s definition. He suggests the senator might better turn his attention to Saint Louis, where the word’s meaning makes D’Amato’s teasing jibe seem positively mild.

Indianian or Indianan

The application of “hoosier” to residents of Indiana rather stifled the debate of the relative merits of Indianian or Indianan to refer to citizens of the state. In both popular writing and reference works neither Indianan nor Indianian is often seen, both terms having long ago yielded to “hoosier.” Indiana is nearly universally known as the “Hoosier State,” yet that is not its official nickname. Why states need legislated nicknames (and flowers, rocks, trees, animals, insects, or muffins) is a separate question, but Indiana in some fit of blandness adopted “The Crossroads of America” as its “official” sobriquet.

In support of the word “hoosier,” Indiana’s senators found bipartisan, common cause. On April 12, 2016 Senators Joe Donnelly and Dan Coats sent a letter to Michael Abramson, chairman of the Government Printing Office’s Style Board. They wrote to ask that the Style Board change its designation of Indiana natives in the next edition (2016) of the Style Manual from Indianan (Style Manual, 2008. p. 93; rule 5.23) to Hoosier. “For more than 180 years, the residents of Indiana have proudly called themselves Hoosiers. References to the term can be found in private correspondences, travel reminiscences, and local newspapers as early as 1826,” they observe. They further note, “As you can see, whether we are cheering for the Indiana Hoosiers on the basketball court, hiking the Hoosier National Forest, or inviting friends over for some Hoosier Hospitality, we have always called ourselves Hoosiers.” And they conclude, “As Meredith Nicholson wrote in 1912, ‘The origin of the term “Hoosier” is not known with certainty. But certain it is that...Hoosiers bear their nickname proudly.’ Regardless of its roots, the Hoosier moniker has endured since our state’s beginnings, and we urge you to consider its inclusion in the GPO’s next Style Manual.”

“Stalking the Elusive Hoosier’s Nest”

“For years one of the great mysteries of Indiana history has been the origin and true meaning of the word Hoosier,” George T. Blakey begins his essay in the summer, 1999 issue of *Traces*. “Three people -- John Finley, Marcus Mote and Monimia Boyd -- unsuspectingly collaborated in popularizing the term as a nickname for residents of Indiana.” Then the fun begins.

Lightheartedly, in a pawky manner even, but with the eye of an historian Blakey traces the appearance, disappearance, reappearance, dating, re-dating, speculative dating and the other curiosities surrounding three icons of Indiana history.

Finley’s poem is the best known. The “Hoosier’s Nest” is a classic (“The voice that sang the Hoosier’s Nest / Of Western singers the first and best,” according to James Whitcomb Riley.). Blakey explains that Finley “told his daughter that it [the term hoosier] was already in use by the time of his poem.” But Finley maintained he had written it in 1830. The first publication was the “carrier’s address” in the 1833 *Indianapolis Journal*. It was a separate printing and “cannot be located today with the newspaper of that date.” Apparently his daughter, Sarah Wrigley, inherited an original manuscript of the poem with a notation of the date in Finley’s hand. She donated the manuscript to the Indiana State Library. It somehow got lost. They have only a “literal copy” she made earlier when she was still reluctant to part with the original.

Then comes Marcus Mote whose painting, also called the “Hoosier’s Nest,” dates from 1844, or perhaps not. Mote translated, in Blakey’s words, onto canvas “in solid, literal fashion,” the poem’s scene as “a visitor encounters ‘The Hoosier’s Nest’ with towheaded Hoosieroons peering from the cabin door; animal skins decking the walls, livestock grazing in the clearing, and wilderness looming darkly behind all the foreground detail.” The painting disappeared for a time, reemerged, was donated to the State Library, and transferred to the Indiana State Museum. Was it the original, though? Why does the date 1891 appear on it?



The “Hoosier’s Nest,” by Marcus Mote

Monimia Boyd also painted the subject and presented her work to the State Library in 1849. After a critic questioned its merits, so the story goes, her husband cut it from its frame and returned it to his wife. Following her death the work seems to have gone here and there until “for the moment, Monimia Boyd’s painting is, once again, a fugitive.” For Blakey the game was afoot, and were he Dr. Watson, he might have recorded his account as “The Curious Adventure of the Missing Hoosier Icons.”

Happy Birthday

Steve Haller celebrates the 175th anniversary of “The Hoosier’s Nest” with an article in the fall, 2008 issue of *Traces*. He will concentrate, he says, on the connotation of the word hoosier “preceding its general acceptance by the 1840s,” rather than offer a comprehensive survey of the “subsequent litany of positive, negative, humorous and serious references.” A survey appears anyway.

Dunn is the favored source, not unreasonably, and Haller cites Dunn’s observation that hoosier was adopted in Indiana “in spite of prior meanings and taken on with a humorous spirit at a time when westerners (today’s Midwest) were fond of adopting state nicknames and that the ‘double sense’ meaning was essentially gone by the late 1830s.” This in contrast to “Nicholson’s bemoaning the appellation.”

The comments of Carmony, Baker and others searching for the “Holy Grail,” the “origins and meaning of Indiana’s nickname,” also turn up in the birthday homage. So does Finley’s

daughter, who “affirmed that when her father wrote his famous poem the word ‘no longer designated a rough, uncouth backwoodsman, but a self-reliant man who was able to defend his home, and command the respect of his neighbors.’“

For his tribute, Haller has done his research competently. He might have questioned Sanford Cox’s *Recollections* dating the term to 1827, hardly a contemporary account since the book appeared in 1860. But he doesn’t count it as true, either. Examples of the use of the word round out the text. He doesn’t miss the October 26, 1833 item that appeared in the *Cincinnati Republican*, a reprint of an earlier story in the *Indiana Democrat*. He does conclude, however, with a cloying quote (perhaps a certain amount of saccharine is inevitable in discussing the word) from Walter Havinghurst’s *The Heartland* (1962):

“Whatever its origin, the name of Hoosier has had a lasting appeal for Indiana people and has a quite enviable aura. For more than a hundred years it has continued to mean friendliness, neighborliness, and idyllic contentment with Indiana landscape and life.”

“Hoosier” in Use: The Early Years

Many reasonably reliable sources, including the Oxford English Dictionary, cite 1826 as the earliest written appearance of the word hoosier. They offer as evidence a letter dated February 24, 1826 that James Curtis of Holt County, Missouri, sent to his uncle, Thomas Beeler of Indianapolis. Curtis wrote:

... the Indiana hoesiers that came out last fall is settled from 2 to 4 milds of us ...

A research worker in the Indiana State Library discovered the letter, and the Library reported the discovery in the April 1949 issue of the *Indiana Bulletin of History*. The *Chicago Tribune* picked up the story and ran it on June 2, 1949, but improved the spelling and turned “hoesiers” into “hoosiers.”

The letter is real enough, but, as Jonathan Clark Smith points out, for some reason the date is wrong, 1846 rather than 1826. 1826 is not smudged or marred in any way on the manuscript. A curator or librarian, though, has indicated in pencil [1846] on it to correct the writer’s error. Smith observes that Holt County, Missouri, was not created until 1841, named for a man who died in 1840. Further research confirms his dating of the letter. Census records of 1830 and 1840 place James Curtis in Indiana. The letter itself refers to the marriage of C. J. Beeler and Margaret Vondy (born on the Isle of Man) on Thursday, February 5th. February 5, 1846 was a Thursday, and the Holt County Historical Society has published a list of “Marriages Recorded in the Holt County Missouri Courthouse.” One entry reads: G. I. Beeler. Margaret Vandy. 5 March 1846.

A passage in Sanford C. Cox’s *Recollections of the Early Settlement of the Wabash Valley* includes an entry from the diary of a schoolmaster in Black Creek, Fountain County:

Under date of July 14, 1827, the diarist relates a current anecdote about a squatter who gave a false alarm that Indians were coming, in order that he might ride to Crawfordsville

and enter a claim for his land ahead of some speculators he had seen looking it over. Successful in his deceit, he boasted: "There is a Yankee trick for you -- done up by a Hoosier."

The volume, though, published in 1860, is hardly contemporaneous, not the best source for a definitive early use of the word.

Several sources, including the State Library, cite a letter (in the Indiana State Library Manuscript Section) from G. L. Murdock to Gen. John Tipton. In that letter written from Cincinnati and dated February 11, 1831, Murdock replies to Tipton in response to an advertisement and offers to deliver goods by steamboat to Logansport. He concludes, "Our boat will be named The Indiana Hoosier." Dunn had always hoped that earlier references to the word would turn up, but the Murdock letter seems to be the first verifiable instance of its use. In spite of much searching, no one, apparently, has found previous written evidence of the term.

The earliest printed instance of the word Hoosier appears in the Vincennes Gazette of February 19, 1831. A letter to the editor, signed RACKOON, comments on the increasing population of Indiana and concludes: "The 'Hoosher' country is coming out, and the day is not far distant, when some states which have hitherto looked upon us as a kind of outlandish, half-civilized race, will have to follow in our train. Let the 'Half-horse, half-alligator' coun [sic] country look to it."

The Frankfort Argus of September 28, 1831, citing the (undated) Louisville Advertiser, devotes the entire front page and part of the second to a description of "A Republican Barbecue." The barbecue celebrated a victory for Jacksonians in the recent Kentucky elections. Appropriate toasts were drunk, a lot of them, each accompanied by a musical piece, sometimes chosen for praise, sometimes for mockery and derision. The tenth toast was to Gen. John Adair, who had been elected to congress, and the "excellent band" played "The Hooshier March," by A.M. General Adair ("In his return to the ensuing Congress, Kentucky exhibits her lively recollection of and gratitude for his eminent public services") did have an Indiana connection. He had fought in the Indian Wars as a major of volunteers under Colonel (later General) James Wilkinson. Among the engagements were the battles of Ouiatenon in Tippecanoe County (1791) and Kenapacomaqua (1791), on the Eel River near present day Logansport.

"The Hoosher's Nest," by John Finley (1797-1866) appeared as an "Address of the Carrier of the Indianapolis Journal, January 1, 1833." Finley's verse helped popularize the term Hoosier and for many years was thought to be the first written example of it. His spelling of the word (regularized to "hoosier" in later revisions of the work) and use of quotation marks around it suggest that the word, while known, had not yet found its place in the dictionaries of the time. It does not, for example, appear in Webster's 1828 American dictionary of the English Language.

Only months after the "Carrier's Address," the Georgia Telegraph (Macon, Georgia), published, on April 17, 1833, a portion of "The Hoosier's Nest," reprinted from the Cincinnati Chronicle. The item, entitled "The Hoosieroons," begins: "The good citizens of our young sister, Indiana, are pretty generally known throughout the West by the singular appellation of

“Hooshers.” -- The following rhymes, from a young Hoosheroon, convey a very graphical picture of Hoosher life on the frontiers of Indiana.” A section of Finley’s poem follows:

Suppose in riding somewhere West
A stranger found a “Hoosher’s” nest,
In other words, a buckeye cabin
Just big enough to hold Queen Mab in.
Its situation low but airy
Was on the borders of a prairie,
And fearing he might be benighted
He hailed the house and then alighted.
The “Hoosher” met him at the door,
Their salutations soon were o’er:
He took the stranger’s horse aside
And to a sturdy sapling tied;
Then having stripped the saddle off,
He fed him in a sugar trough.
The stranger stooped to enter in,
The entrance closing with a pin,
And manifested strong desire
To seat him by the log heap fire,
Where half a dozen Hoosheroons,
With mush and milk, tin cups and spoons,
White heads, bare feet and dirty faces,
Seemed much inclined to keep their places,
But Madam, anxious to display
Her rough and undisputed sway,
Her offspring to the ladder led
And cuffed the youngsters up to bed.
Invited shortly to partake
Of venison, milk and johnny-cake
The stranger made a hearty meal
And glances round the room would steal;
One side was lined with skins of “varments”
The other spread with divers garments,
Dried pumpkins overhead were strung
Where venison hams in plenty hung,
Two rifles placed above the door,
Three dogs lay stretched upon the floor,
In short the domicile was rife,
With specimens of “Hoosher” life.

“The Hoosieroons” also appeared reprinted in Atkinson’s Casket with the May, 1833 issue.

On June 28, 1833 the Salem Gazette (Salem, Massachusetts) printed an item, "Where is the East." It reports the comments of the editor of the Portland Advertiser who has just returned from a Southern and Western tour:

Some thirty days ago I was inquiring in Cincinnati for the West, and they said it was among "the Hoosiers" of Indiana, or "the Suckers" of Illinois -- cant names given the residents of these States.

The same article, published as "Excursion to Bangor -- The East" appeared in the New York Spectator on July 8, 1833. The Painesville Telegraph (Painesville, Ohio) also picked up the story of Mr. Brooks, the Portland Evening Advertiser editor, and ran it as "Down East" on July 26, 1833.

On August 14, 1833, the American Advocate (Hallowell, Maine) ran an article under the headline "Opossum Hunting in Indiana." In it the word "hoosier" does not appear, but "hoosheroon" does.

The New-Orleans commercial Bulletin in a section "By the Western Mail" ran a small notation on September 3, 1833, taken from the Florence Gazette of August 23d:

James Brown Ray, Esq., late Governor of Indiana, is about commencing the publication of a newspaper, at Greencastle, Indiana, to be called "the Hoosier."

The United States Telegraph (Washington, D.C.) borrowed from the Pittsburgh Statesman and ran a short piece on September 25, 1833:

"Hoosier" -- "The Hoosier State -- The good citizens of our sister state (Indiana) have been called Hoosiers for some time past at home and abroad, sometimes honorably, and sometimes the reverse -- as the term has become general, it is high time that its origin and definition should be as generally known; before that section of the public lands were regularly surveyed -- many families located and were called squatters -- the surveyors on finding one of these, would ask who's here, and place the name on their map -- the question became so familiar, that on the first view of the smoke of a cabin, the exclamation of another "who's here became equally so, until it eventuated in the general term of Hoosier -- Pittsburgh Statesman

The Virginia Free Press & Farmers' Repository on October 24, 1833 also cites the Pittsburgh paper, paraphrasing the article, but it borrows the item from an issue of the Baltimore American.

References continue to appear the following year. The January 11, 1834 Liberator (Boston Massachusetts) quotes a report from the Indiana Weekly Messenger on a coming National Convention in Philadelphia, of "delegates in favor of the abolition of negro slavery." An agent of the American Colonization Society is to visit Indiana and will impart "... other important facts to us Hoosiers."

On March 3, 1834 the Portsmouth Journal of Literature and Politics (Portsmouth, New Hampshire) reprinted “The Hoosieroons,” which had appeared in the Georgia Telegraph,, taken from the Cincinnati Chronicle. In this case, though, the Cherokee Intelligencer is cited as the source.

The Baltimore Patriot ran a report under the heading From Washington on April 4, 1834 in which the correspondent reports:

The bill will probably pass -- and the Marylanders, Pennsylvanians, Ohioans, Hoosiers and Suckers as they call the Indianians and the Illinois people, on the road, may rest easy -- by the way

The Indiana Journal (Indianapolis, Indiana) reported on May 31, 1834 that “another No. of the Hoosier has been recently received in town, and that it contains quite a bitter complaint about our remark a week or two ago, that it has sunk into repose.”

The American Advocate (Hallowell, Maine) ran on June 18, 1834 under the heading “A Peep at Washington” a description of some of the representatives the reporter saw in the capital. The reporter writes:

What a people we are! What a county is this of ours! I have asked in my travels, for the West, in the streets of the Queen of the West -- a fair city, which was but yesterday a wilderness. They smiled at my inquiry and said it was among the “hoosiers” of Indiana or “the suckers of Illinois.”

On September 13, 1834 the Liberator (Boston, Massachusetts) ran a feature with the lead sentence “The Nomenclature of the West.” It cites the Illinois Pioneer which:

gives us the following list of nicknames adopted to distinguish the citizens of the following states: In Kentucky they are called Corn Crackers; Ohio, Buckeyes; Indiana, Hoosiers; Illinois, Suckers; Missouri, Pukes; Michigan, Wolverines; the Yankees are called Eels. Give us any other name but that which stands for a Missouri man. The Yankees have reason to squirm under their title.

September of 1834 also saw the term appear under various headings, mostly dealing with state nicknames in the American Advocate, Hallowell, Maine (September 17, 1834); the Pittsfield Sun, Pittsfield, Massachusetts (September 11, 1834), the Torch Light, Hagers-Town, Maryland (September 11, 1834; and the New Hampshire Sentinel, Keene, New Hampshire (September 4, 1834).

The term “hoosier” became familiar in newspapers, increasingly appearing in articles from the mid-1830s on. It also began to appear in books, works of both non-fiction and fiction. A number of nineteenth century travel accounts include the word “hoosier.” Charles Fenno Hoffman, poet, novelist and editor set out on a winter tour of the Midwest in 1833. Hoffman recorded his journey in a series of letters published in the American Monthly Magazine and

gathered them together in 1835 as *A Winter in the West*. In letter headed XVII, Door Prairie, Indiana, Dec. 29, 1833, he writes:

I am now in the land of the Hooshiers, and find that long-haired race much more civilized than some of their western neighbours are willing to represent them. The term "Hooshier," like that of Yankee or Buck-eye, first applied contemptuously, has now become a sobriquet that bears nothing invidious with it to the ear of an Indianian.

Joseph Holt Ingraham records in his *The South-West of 1835*:

Here are congregated the primitive navies of Indiana, Ohio, and the adjoining states, manned (I have not understood whether they are officered or not) by "real Kentucks"-- "Buck eyes" -- "Hooshers" -- and "Snorters."

On October 13, 1852 the word made it to the newly established New York Times, referring to Indiana, or at least the apparently dull hinterland:

I am far away from home-land, and, by the decrees of inexorable fate, housed up here for a time, in Hoosier-land. As a matter of course, then, like a true philosopher, I must seize upon every possible expedient as a time-killer, a "blues"-devourer, and comforter in general.

A few months earlier the word had appeared in another Times article, "Kitchen Alchemy," in a slightly different context. There it carried the meaning of bumpkin, without any direct geographical reference.

This story, for example, is told of two Hoosier bloods, at a famous restaurant in Paris. They shocked the inflated chef, a very Napoleon of gastronomy with:

"D--n your eyes! Why don't you bring in the dinner -- and take away that broth, and your black bottle? Who the devil wants your vinegar, and your dish-water, and your bibs, too? Bring us, if you have got it, a whole chicken's leg at once, and not at seven different times! We've been all over Paris to get a beef-steak, and when we got it, it was a horse's rump!"

"Hoosier" in Use: Ad Astra per Aspera, Sort Of

An item with the title "Central America" in Harper's Weekly of February 21, 1857 uses the word hoosier and clearly supposes it to be rightly understood:

The manufacturer of Manchester and the banker of New York fraternize and hob-nob together, and hug each other ad libitum, but the American democrat and the English aristocrat, the hoosier and the feudal proprietor agree together like oil and vinegar, like fire and water.

Ten years later, in 1867, Harper's Weekly featured eight cartoon caricatures with the caption "Citizens of the United States, According to Popular Impressions," illustrations of several regional and racial types: the Yankee, a South Carolinian, a Hoosier, a Kentuckian, a Pennsylvanian, a Mississippian, a Californian and the "Everlasting Nigger."



The mid-nineteenth century language offends, and nothing about the engravings flattered any group. A number of Indianans wrote the magazine to protest the stereotype assigned to them, and Harper's made apologies in November when it published a piece called "Indiana State Fair at Terre Haute." In the J. F. Gooking illustrations, however, to the left the bumpkins still linger, while to the right the artist and editors admitted a more refined group of "real live Hoosiers."

Herman Melville writes vividly of a character in *The Confidence Man* (1857):

It was a rather eccentric-looking person who spoke, somewhat ursine in aspect; sporting a shaggy spencer of the cloth called bear's skin; a high peaked cap of racoon-skin, the long bushy tail switching over behind; raw-hide leggings; grim stubble chin; and, to end, a double-barreled gun in hand -- a Missouri bachelor, a Hoosier gentleman, of Spartan leisure and fortune, and equally Spartan manners and sentiments; and, as the sequel may

show, not less acquainted, in a Spartan way of his own, with philosophy and books, than with woodcraft and rifles.

Walt Whitman in a letter to Nathaniel Bloom and John F. S. Gray describes Abraham Lincoln:

I think well of the President. He has a face like a hoosier Michael Angelo, so awful ugly it becomes beautiful, with its strange mouth, its deep cut, criss-cross lines, and its doughnut complexion.

In 1869 and by then established in the national vocabulary, the term shows up in a bit of children's literature, under a variant, "hoojer." In Sophie May's *Dotty Dimple Out West*, young Dottie is going out West from Portland, Maine with her father to visit relatives in Indiana. On the trip, she speaks to a fellow traveler:

"I'm going to tell you something. Did you ever go to Indiana?"

"No."

"Didn't you? They call it Out West. I'm going there. Yes, I started to-day. The people are called Hoojers. They don't spect me, but I'm going. Did you ever hear of a girl that travelled out West?"

and later:

"I'm glad not to be a Hoojer," said Dotty, with a severe look at her cousin Horace. "You don't ever see such bad men in the State of Maine. The whiskey is locked up; and I don't know as there is any whiskey."

"Down East is a great place, Dotty! Don't I wish I was a Yankee. I mean a 'Publican.'"

"But you can't be, Horace," returned little Dotty, looking up at him with deep pity in her bright eyes; "you weren't born there. You're a Hoojer, and you'll have to stay a Hoojer."

Although the term "hoosier" was firmly fixed in the American idiom, Edward Eggleston fixed it further with the publication of *The Hoosier Schoolmaster*. The episodic novel, published in 1871 but set a generation earlier, describes the experiences of Ralph Hartsook, a young man in his first year of teaching in Flat Creek, Indiana. Eggleston's skillful use of dialect lends a genuine tone to the work, without detracting from the characters, who, while rustic, perhaps considered crude by outsiders, are in their own ways rather sophisticated. Nor does Eggleston betray his characters into stereotypes. He treats them with respect and sensitivity. "Hoosier" seems to carry a piece of its old meaning, but to Eggleston countryman does not equal lout. And the term also substitutes for Indianan, albeit one then living on the near-frontier. The book, now among the overlooked classics, or near classics, became a considerable success and made Eggleston's reputation as a writer.

During the 1930s the Federal Writers Project collected slave narratives which were later assembled and microfilmed in seventeen volumes as *Slave Narratives: A Folk History of Slavery*

in the United States from Interviews with Former Slaves. Among the typescripts is the interview Samuel S. Taylor conducted with Allen Johnson, then about 82, of Little Rock Arkansas. Mr. Johnson said, among other things:

A slave was supposed to pick a certain mount of cotton I have heard. They had tasks. But we didn't pick cotton. Way back in Georgia that ain't no cotton country. Wheat, corn, potatoes, and things like that. But in Louisiana and Mississippi, there was plenty of cotton. Arkansas wasn't much of a cotton state itself. It was called a 'Hoojer' state when I was a boy. That is a reference to the poor white man. He was a 'Hoojer'. He wasn't rich enough to own no slaves and they called him a 'Hoojer'.

Johnson's account confirms, providing the transcription is accurate, the varying spellings and pronunciations of the word "hoosier." (John Finley, after all, had originally written it as "hoosher.") His crisp definition also suggests that the term was well-known in the south and that it applied, if not to a rough mountaineer or backwoodsman, at least to a lower stratum of white society.

Robert Morgan, born (1944) and raised in western North Carolina, also uses the "hoojer" variant in his poem "Man and Machine, The sense is more or less the same sense as Mr. Johnson, although Morgan's "hoojer" is a bit more boorish.

Winters Luther lived only for his truck,
banging down the dirt road to Chestnut Springs
for booze and women. But that was just
occasional. Most days he'd brag at the store
about his pickup, or be trading for another
with even thicker tires, more horsepower
and chrome, a gun rack in the window.
At home he'd maybe tune a little,
oil the plates of the planter.
But off the machine he was just
another stocky hoojer, yelling
to make up for his lack of size
and self-esteem, adding fat and blood
pressure...

In contrast to Johnson and Morgan, Kurt Vonnegut uses the term in its more contemporary meaning. It carries no heavy baggage, no sense of a unschooled rustic or loutish, poor white trash. There is no mountaineer left, no boob, no hick, no boatman, merely a neutral name, one that Hazel bears with (perhaps too much) heartland pride and gushing exuberance. Indiana's native son writes in the chapter "Bicycles for Afghanistan" in *Cat's Cradle*:

Crosby asked me what my name was and what my business was. I told him, and his wife Hazel recognized my name as an Indiana name. She was from Indiana, too.

"My God," she said, "are you a *Hoosier*?"

I admitted I was.

“I’m a Hoosier, too,” she crowed. “Nobody has to be ashamed of being a Hoosier.”

“I’m not,” I said. “I never knew anyone who was.”

“Hoosiers do all right. Lowe and I’ve been around the world twice, and everywhere we went we found Hoosiers in charge of everything.”

“That’s reassuring.”

“You know the manager of that new hotel in Istanbul?”

“No.”

“He’s a Hoosier. And the military-whatever-he-is in Tokyo...”

“Attache,” said her husband.

“He’s a Hoosier,” said Hazel. “And the new Ambassador to Yugoslavia...”

“A Hoosier?” I asked.

“Not only him but the Hollywood Editor of Life magazine, too. And that man in Chile...”

“A Hoosier, too?”

“You can’t go anywhere a Hoosier hasn’t made his mark,” she said.

“The man who wrote Ben Hur was a Hoosier.”

“And James Whitcomb Riley.”

“Are you a Hoosier, too?” I asked her husband.

“Nope. I’m a Prairie Stater. ‘Land of Lincoln,’ as they say.”

“As far as that goes,” said Hazel triumphantly, “Lincoln was a Hoosier, too. He grew up in Spencer County.”

“Sure, I said.

“I don’t know what it is about Hoosiers,” said Hazel, “but they’ve sure got something. If somebody was to make a list, they’d be amazed.”

“That’s true,” I said.

She grasped me firmly by the arm. “We Hoosiers got to stick together.”

“Right.”

“You call me ‘Mom.’”

Not Quite Useful Sources: Two and a Half Examples

In his column of October 29, 2002, “Stating your Case for the Stupidest State,” Dave Barry wrote under a heading of “state stupidity”:

For nickname stupidity, no state challenges Indiana, which proudly calls itself “The Hoosier State,” even though nobody has a clue what “Hoosier” means. It could be a Native American word meaning “Has sex with a caribou.”

Some ten weeks later he apologizes in his own fashion in a column entitled “Hey! Hoosier daddy, Indiana?” Aiming to set the record straight, Barry offers to “clear up this issue once and for all, here, according to the letters I received...” Seven explanations of the term, sent to him by readers, follow. With mock, that’s-what-they-said-didn’t-they innocence he combines the information sent him and archly concludes:

So from now on, when you hear people proudly refer to themselves as “Hoosiers” you will know exactly what they are referring to: an inquisitive, one-eared, hill-dwelling Ohio River contractor, large for his kind, who has a lot of trouble with pronunciation but does NOT have sex with caribou. Who WOULDN’T be proud?!

Further following up on the “Stupidest” column, Berry tells us about a letter pointing out that New York has an official state muffin. It does, effective August 10, 1987. Title 6, Section 84 of the New York Code decrees: “The apple muffin shall be the official muffin of the state of New York.”

Mike Royko, the Chicago columnist, enjoyed poking fun at Indiana. He has a lot of fun in his June 3, 1982 piece, “Hicks Get Their Licks.” In reply to objections to his comments on the Indianapolis 500, he writes, in part:

I quite accurately said: “For most males in Indiana, a real good time consists of putting on bib overalls and a cap bearing the name of a farm equipment company and sauntering to a gas station to sit around and gossip about how Elmer couldn’t get his pickup truck started that morning....”

Royko, of course, is only warming up. He happily mocks the “defenders of the faith,” meaning those with a higher opinion of Indianapolis (and Indiana) than his. And naturally he gets around to the word “hoosier,” by way of the Hoosier Dome. He almost can’t wait.

Do you know why they’re called Hoosiers?

There are two explanations. One is the one they prefer, and it’s not accurate. The other is accurate and they don’t like it.

The Hoosiers will tell you that the word “hoosier” came from the tendency of early Indiana settlers to say “Who’s here?” when somebody rapped upon their cabin door. Over the years, their habit of saying “Who’s here?” evolved into something that sounded like “Hooshere?” And finally “Hoosier.”

(That could explain why so many settlers kept going west when they got to Indiana.

Who’d want to stay in a place where everybody was yowling: “Hooshere? Hooshere? Hooshere?”

The most reputable scholars, which are the only kind I deal with, say the word “hoosier” came about this way:

The early settlers of southern Indiana were mainly unwashed, uncouth mountain folk from Kentucky. They were usually referred to as “a hoojee” or a “hoojin.” As in: “Quick lock up the girls and the livestock -- there’s some of them hoojees and hoojins comin’.”

As years passed, the words ‘hoojee’ and “hoojin,” meaning a dirty person,” according to one reference book, evolved into “hoosier.”

Bill Bryson confesses in his Notes from a Big Country that he has begun to read license plates while driving. He particularly enjoys the state slogans. Seeing “You’ve got a friend in Pennsylvania,” he turns to his companions and asks, “Then why doesn’t he call?” About Indiana he observes:

Indiana, meanwhile calls itself the 'Hoosier State' and has done for 150 years. No one has ever satisfactorily deduced (possibly because who after all cares?) where the term comes from, though I can tell you from experience that if you mention this in a book 250 people from Indiana will write to you with 250 different explanations and the unanimous view that you are a dunce.

The Usual Suspects

Who's Here?

"Who's here?" (or its variants, "Who's yer?" or "Who's yere" or "Who's 'ere?" or "Who's heyer" or "Who's there?") is the most popular theory explaining Indiana's nickname. It seems travelers in Indiana hailed rustic cabins with "Who's here?" Or the residents of the cabins called out to voyagers, sometimes arriving at night, "Who's here?"

In some accounts the travelers are surveyors. In others the travelers are Hoosiers themselves, always curious to know who is in the cabins they encounter. Occasionally they try the latch and inquire of those inside who they are. "Who's here?" asked from inside or out, naturally slid into "Hoosier" and hence Indianans became known as "Hoosiers."

Most reference sources record this theory. Some, like Allan Wolk's *The Naming of America*, buy it completely. Mr. Wolk states without discussion of alternatives that the nickname of Indiana "came about, according to folklore, when the early pioneers used to greet night callers by saying, 'Who's yere?'" Basil Freestone, apparently uninterested in research, perpetuates the error in *Harrap's Book of Nicknames and their Origins*. This "comprehensive guide" states that the term derives from the "demand by early settlers to night callers: Who's yere?" and cites Allan Wolk as its authority.

The *World Book Encyclopedia* rather unkindly begins its entry for Indiana with "Indiana is a small state with a large population." It continues to explain that it is called the Hoosier State, although "Historians do not know the origin of this famous nickname" which "may come from 'Who's here?' -- the Indiana pioneer's traditional greeting to visitors -- or from husher -- a slang word for a fighting man who could 'hush' all others with his fists." Thus does the *World Book* enlighten the reader.

Samuel Hoosier

Samuel Hoosier, Sam Hoosier or just plain a man named Hoosier (in one account Howsier), it is said, built the canal at the Falls of the Ohio near Louisville. He preferred to hire men from the Indiana side of the river, because he found them to be harder workers than those from Kentucky. These men became known as "Hoosier's men" or "Hoosier men." Eventually the term shortened to "Hoosier" and "Hoosiers" and generalized into a term for all residents of Indiana.

That no such canal builder has ever been found (and Dunn searched vigorously for him) in no way discourages those who prefer this explanation. The Writers' Program compilers of *Indiana: A Guide to the Hoosier State* insist, after dismissing other theories, that "perhaps the most likely version springs from the fact that in 1825 there was a contractor on the Ohio Falls Canal at Louisville named Samuel Hoosier." Like other sources that find this theory attractive and term it "probable" or "most likely," the writers offer no proof of the builder's existence, and in their case, after ending the single paragraph on Indiana's nickname, they move swiftly on with their narrative.

Politicians in particular like the theory of hard-working Indianans. Governor Evan Bayh used it on a quiz show ("Bayh Shows he's a Hoosier Quiz 'Kid'") where he explains the term "hoosier" as deriving from the canal builder, Samuel Hoosier, who "favored workers in Indiana and they became known as Hoosiers." With state pride in his heart and politics in his mind, Bayh continued, "We'd like to think it's synonymous with good workers."

Senator Vance Hartke also favored the Samuel Hoosier story and introduced it into the *Congressional Record*, where it appeared with the heading "Hoosiers Wear Name With Pride."

To be fair, Richard Hudnut, Mayor of Indianapolis, bravely bit the bullet in his autobiography *Minister/Mayor*. While discussing the building of the Hoosier Dome (later the RCA Dome, after the sale of naming rights, and still later demolished), Hudnut concedes that the term has a pejorative meaning, "implying country bumpkin or frontier hick."

Governor Robert Orr ("First Hoosier' Gets in Last Word") avoided taking a position on the origin of the term "hoosier" by stating that "even Webster doesn't deign to delve too deeply into the meaning." The Governor further wishes the term "remain a mystery," because "that is far more exciting." He seems to find it more exciting still to extol "Hoosier hospitality" and to inform the world that Webster's defines hospitality in an excellent fashion.

Hussar

The name of Colonel John Jacob Lehmanowky (or Lehmanowski) usually attaches to the "Hussar" theory. Lehmanowsky, a veteran of the Napoleonic wars, lectured on his wartime experiences, and as he did, he pronounced the word "Hussar" as "Hoosier." A variant has it that those listening to his "Wars of Europe" talks heard "Hoosier" when the Colonel uttered "Hussar." A second variant proposes that those repeating the word "Hussar," while boasting of their prowess as fighters, mispronounced the word as "Hoosier." The Reverend Aaron Wood buys the into Lehmanowky tale and records it as absolute truth:

The name "Hoosier" originated as follows: When the young men of the Indiana side of the Ohio river went to Louisville, the Kentucky men boasted over them, calling them "New Purchase Greenies," claiming to be a superior race, composed of "half horse, half alligator, and tipped off with snapping turtle." These taunts produced fights in the market-house and streets of Louisville.

On one occasion a stout bully from Indiana was victor in a fist fight, and having heard Colonel Lehmanowsky lecture of the “Wars of Europe,” who always gave martial prowess to the German Hussars in a fight, pronouncing hussars “hoosiers,” the Indianian, when the Kentuckian cried “enough,” jumped up and said: “I am a Hoosier,” and hence the Indianians were called by that name. This was its true origin. I was in the State when it occurred.

The Reverend may have been there, as he says, but he fails to take into account that Lehmanowsky did not settle in Indiana until 1833, and that the term “hoosier” was in use before his arrival. (Dunn, 1907)

Hoosa

Most accounts of the “Hoosa” theory merely mention “Hoosa” as “an Indian word for corn,” that precise phrase, and never identify which Indians or cite any authority. Other accounts add the detail that boatmen carrying corn downriver were called “hoosa men,” hence hoosier. Mike Lessiter in *The College Names of the Games* cites Governor Wright’s claim (although other sources place the Governor in the “Who’s here?” camp) that “the term was derived from the Indian word, hoosa, which meant corn and that the Indiana flatboaters utilizing the Ohio and Mississippi rivers came to be known as hoosa men.” Often the Hungarian patriot Louis Kossuth appears in the “Hoosa” story, because, apparently, he was told while visiting the state that “Hoosier” derived from “Hoosa.”

Hoose

The English dialect work “Hoose” means “roundworm,” a disease of cattle which gives the animals a peculiar look. Many sources cite this explanation, and Dunn in his *Indiana and Indianans* gives a concise description: “The symptoms of this disease include staring eyes, rough coat with hair turned backward, and hoarse wheezing. So forlorn an aspect might readily suggest giving the name ‘hooser’ or ‘hoosier’ to an uncouth, rough-looking person.” Dunn does not believe it for a moment, though, and moves on to other matters.

Who’s Ear

Dunn (1907) quotes the poet James Whitcomb Riley as saying in a conversation, “These stories commonly told about the origin of the word ‘Hoosier’ are all nonsense. The real origin is found in the pugnacious habits of the early settlers. They were vicious fighters, and not only gouged and scratched, but frequently bit off noses and ears. This was so ordinary an affair that a settler coming into a bar room on a morning after a fight, and seeing an ear on the floor, would merely push it aside with his foot and carelessly ask, ‘Who’s year?’”

Many sources credit Riley with making up the story himself, because he had tired of explaining the origin of “Hoosier” to the curious. Dunn merely reports the tale and adds,

bemused, that “this theory is quite as plausible, and almost as well sustained by historical evidence, as any of the others.”

In later years the story transferred to football. Murray Spurber writes that Knute Rockne, the legendary football coach of Notre Dame, when asked about the origin of “Hoosier,” replied in terms of his team and its fighting spirit: “After every game, the [Notre Dame] coach goes over the field, picks up what he finds, and asks his team, ‘Whose ear is this?’ Hence Hoosier.” Coach Forrest “Phog” Allen gives the same sort of story: “When scrimmaging these Indiana boys would grind their opponents’ heads into the earth with disastrous results. After the scrimmage, players would go about picking up the loose ears of their opponents and saying, ‘Whose ears?’ Ever since, Indiana teams have been known as Hoosiers.”

Houssière

The best sources on “Hoosier” give at least a passing mention to the suggestion that the term may derive from the French word meaning “holly plantation” or “bushy places.” Since the ending -ier is rare in English and common in French, the reasoning must have run, it would only be sensible to look to the language of those who pioneered the wilds beyond the British colonies. Even a French source, however, cannot credit “houssière.” Etienne and Simone Deak in their *Grand Dictionnaire d’Américanismes* define “Hoosier” as a “mauvais ouvrier (ou ouvrier incompetent)” or a “sabot (quelqu’un qui travaille comme un sabot).” Four other definitions follow: “Gardien de prison; Visiteur dans une prison; Rustre, pequetot.” In translation the terms are familiar: poor worker (or incompetent worker); someone who works very badly; prison guard; prison visitor; rustic, hick.

Hoozer

Under the entry “Hoozer” in William Dickinson’s *A Glossary of the Words and Phrases Pertaining to the Dialect of Cumberland* appears the phrase: “Said of anything unusually large.” This Cumberland dialect term interested Dunn, who states “Although I had long been convinced that ‘hoosier’ or some word closely resembling it, must be an old English dialect or slang word, I had never found any trace of a similar substantive with this ending until in this publication, and, in my opinion, this word ‘hoozer’ is the original form of our ‘hoosier.’ It evidently harks back to the Anglo-Saxon ‘hoo’ for its derivation. It might naturally signify a hill-dweller or highlander as well as something large, but either would easily give rise to the derivative idea of uncouthness or rusticity.” (Dunn, 1907)

Dunn attempts to strengthen his case by citing the number of Cumberlands (plateau, mountain, river, gap, Presbyterians) in the South and by noting that many of the settlers of the Cumberland Plateau came from Cumberland County, England. “Thence,” he says, “it was probably brought to us by their migratory descendants, many of whom settled in the upper Whitewater Valley -- the home of John Finley.” Most serious works cite Dunn, and they include the “hoozer” possibility. Dunn may be right, but his opinion should not lead the Morris in

their Morris Dictionary of Word and Phrase Origins to state baldly, without discussion, that the word comes from the “Cumberland dialect word hoozer, meaning anything unusually large.”

Huzza!

Among the tales Irving Leibowitz recounts in *My Indiana* is that of Ohio River boatmen who liked to “jump up and crack their heels together and shout ‘huzza!’” on levees in Southern cities. Baker and Carmony mention the theory, too, in their *Indiana Place Names*, but they refer to the cry as “an exclamation of early settlers.” Mencken, commenting on the “Huzza!” suggestion, writes that “in 1851, when the Hon. Amelia M. Murray, the English novelist, visited Indianapolis, she picked up the story that the term originated in a settler’s exclaiming ‘Huzza!’ upon gaining victory over a marauding party from a neighboring state, but Dunn, in 1907 dismissed this as ‘moonshine.’”

Husher

Bartlett’s 1848 *Dictionary of Americanisms* suggests that “the word ‘hoosier’ developed in New Orleans from the western slang expression ‘husher,’ a ruffian whose deeds or violence could silence his foes.”

For his *Hoosier Folk Legends* Ronald L. Baker drew on the manuscript files of the WPA files of the Federal Writers Project for Indiana and from the Folklore Archives at both Indiana State University and Indiana University. He presents nine stories under the heading “Hoosier: Origin of the State Nickname.” The first story involves Kentuckians returning with accounts of the new land available in Indiana. “Many of their listeners were the Pennsylvania Dutch, who had always lived in a mountain region.” They regarded the stories as exaggerations and said, “Well, he’s a hoosier (meaning a husher, a silencer).” The second concerns flatboat men where “were big enough to hush any man,” hence hushers.

In *The Family Cyclopaedia of Useful Knowledge* F. M. Lupton does not give much of a tale. He simply states that “the word is a corruption of husher, a common term for bully throughout the West.”

Ross F. Lockridge cites “hushers” as Ohio rivermen who could still or “hush” their opponents. He also recalls the “Who’s yere?” query to cabin callers. “Whichever its origins,” he concludes, “the term Hoosier was meant to describe the rough and sturdy backwoodsman of early Indiana...” Similarly, John S. Farmer in his *Americanisms Old and New* notes that husher “was a common term for bully throughout the West.” Boatmen from Indiana,” he goes on, “enjoyed fighting on the levee at New Orleans.” One victor in a fight “sprang up, exclaiming in a foreign accent, ‘I am a hoosier, I am a hoosier.’” New Orleans papers reported the case and “transferred the corruption of the epithet ‘husher’ (hoosier) to all the boatmen from Indiana, and from thence to all citizens.” Although the story seems to amuse him, Farmer finds this theory “hardly more satisfactory” than the others.

Chapter One of Heath Bowman's *Hoosier* opens with the heading "What's in a Name?" Bowman explains in story. He begins with the Ohio River and embroiders the adventures of Indiana boatmen in New Orleans, where the men hear hurled at them the taunt "Hoozers!" from loafers on the docks. "The boys from Indiana took their measure. They knew what 'hoozer' meant: it was a common term throughout the South, whence most of them originally had come. It meant somebody who was tall and green and gawky, and ripped his side of meat apart instead of using a knife -- things like that." The story continues, dramatically, with a brawl. When one of the Indiana boys returns home, he finds himself in another fight. Victorious, he says, "We don't take to no argefying. We're Hushers." He explained further, "It means we kin 'hush' any rip-tail, scrouger in this-hyar county. We're half-men, half-alligators. We're Hushers."

Unusual Suspects

Huissier

A number of letters concerning the term "Hoosier," prompted by the NCAA basketball tournament, appeared in the *Wall Street Journal* in the spring of 1987. One of them, from Carter Eltzroth, declared that the term "hoosier" is "of course, a corruption of the French huissier, a minor magistrate in 18th century Vincennes." Huissier -- or Hoosier -- first applied to the magistrate, then to "any Frenchman, and finally any non-Indian. As Americans settled in Indiana, the name was applied to them..." The "huissier" explanation, another attempt to explain the -ier ending, is extremely unusual and seems belong to Mr. Eltzroth alone.

Hosier

Glen Tucker offers his own explanation for the term "hoosier." "The Hoosiers were," he writes, "those who wore hats made by the Hosier Brothers" in Clarksburg, now Rockland, in Johnson County. Mr. Tucker refers to other possible derivations, but for him, he will "take for the present the chapeau route." Mr. Tucker seems the only person going in that direction.

Hauser, Hooser, Hoosier

Randall Hooser promises to chronicle the "migration of the Hausers (pronounced Hooser) of the seventeenth century America to 1833." He does, in some detail. Along the way he notes that the "au" in the family surname is pronounced in their Alsatian dialect as "oo." Some of the Hoosers, he continues, who had originally settled in North Carolina, "began migrating into Indiana starting in the 1820s." After a discussion of Moravians and slavery and Hoosers moving west, he reviews the various theories about Indiana's nickname. He proposes a new theory: "The Hauser-Hooser/Hoosier Theory" and concludes:

It is my assertion that the original term Hoosier was first coined to tease North Carolinians from Hausertown willing to follow the migration of the Hoosers into Kentucky and more importantly Martin Hauser (Hooser) as he pioneered a family name into the state of Indiana.

Hooser follows up with an online document, “Does Anyone Want to End the Hoosiering of Hoosier?” He castigates Dunn for dismissing the family name possibility as the origin of the term “Hoosier.” He is unhappy that Dunn “chose not to accept any spelling derivations of the family name of Hoosier”. He notes that Dunn did revisit the issue, but the new information he had received led him nowhere. “For the record,” he explains a “little bit about Adam Hoozer of Yadkin County North Carolina.” At birth Adam was a Hauser, but later anglicized his name. “Due to Anglicization, four predominant versions of the Hauser name evolved: Hooser, Hoozer, Houser and Hoosier.” He also mentions, italicized and in brackets:

[Our standing Hooser family question has been the same for most of this decade: Does the extra “I” in Hoosier stand for INDIANA??]

He is kidding. Isn’t he?

Anatoly Liberman cites the present writer and two other relatively recent contributors to “hoosier” lore. He does so because, “all three authors, though extremely well-informed, missed a work that, in my opinion, deserves attention. Before revealing the deserving effort, Liberman reviews the literature, the usual commentary on the origin of “hoosier.” Then the moment is at last at hand. The work in question is the article by Randall Hooser in *Eurasian Studies Yearbook*. While Liberman wishes to draw attention to Hooser’s assertions, to make it “part of the debate,” he does not take sides. And if others wish to demolish, as he puts it, “his cautious defence of the Hooser theory, this is fine; etymology is a battleground.”

Hoojee, Hoojin

In his *Dictionary of Phrase and Fable* Brewer finds that Hoosier “probably [derives] from hoosier, a mountaineer, an extension of hoojee, hoojin, a dirty person or tramp. The south of Indiana was mainly settled by Kentucky mountaineers.”

It is unclear what Brewer means by “an extension of hoojee, hoojin.” Does he have it backward? The *Dictionary of American Regional English* records variants of hoosier as hoosher, hoogie, hoojy, hoodger, hoojer, hushier, and hooshur, not the other way around. But if Brewer’s hoojee and hoogie are equivalents, a new vista opens in the use of hoosier and its “extensions.”

The *Random House Historical Dictionary of American Slang* has an entry for hoogie and explains: [perh. a phonetic spelling of a var of HOOJAH; perh. directly an alter. of HOOSIER] Black E. a white person -- usu. used contemptuously. There are two related entries in *Juba to Jive: A Dictionary of African-American Slang*, edited by Clarence Major:

Hoogies n. (1940s) white people; same as “honky”; (CM, CW Gayle Jones, “White Rat,” p. 375.) Kentucky use.

and

Hoosier; Hoogie n. (1940s-1950s) a word sometimes applied to white racists in the midwest; redneck; hillbilly; filthy, uncouth person; rustic person (FGC, DARE, p. 1091.)
SU, MWU

The citation to “White Rat” (1977) is to a widely reprinted short story by the Kentuckian Gayl Jones (yes, Gayl), in which a light-skinned Black man speaks of his life:

“I don’t like to walk in no place where they say, ‘What’s that white man doing in here.’ They probably say ‘yap’ -- that the Kentucky word for honky. ... and when we go to some town where they don’t know ‘White Rat’ everybody look at me like I’m some hoogie ...”

A similar use appears in *Truth Crushed to Earth: The Legacy of Will Parker, a Black American Revolutionary* by Harry W. Kendall, although in this case the reference may be more akin to Mr. Johnson’s statement in *Slave Narratives*. Based on an incident in Pennsylvania in 1851, Kendall’s historical novel has as its protagonist Will Parker, a fugitive slave. Part of the dialog includes the exchange:

“A hoojie?” Charles said.

“Mean white folks like that one. He’d turn us over to the patrerrrollers quick as he’d look at us if he knew we was running.”

And Kendall spells the word “Hoojie,” surely the first cousin of Brewer’s “Hoojee.”

Huzur

Dunn noted the existence of a Hindustani word huzur, “a respectful form of address to persons of rank or superiority.” It appears in the Oxford English dictionary as: “huzoor hAzur. Also 8 huzzoor, huzur. [a. Arab. hudur (pronounced in India as huzur) presence (employed as a title), f. hadara to be present.] An Indian potentate; often used as a title of respect.” The trouble with this etymology is that there were very few potentates or persons notable for rank or superiority in southern Indiana (New Harmony perhaps excepted) in the early nineteenth century.

Hoosieroon

The suggestion that “hoosier” derives from “hoosieroon” illustrates how a reference work (if that is what it is) can sometimes go preposterously wrong. The entry under “Hoosier” in Albert Barrere and Charles G. Leland’s *A Dictionary of Slang, Jargon and Cant* cites Bartlett who cites the *Providence Journal*, which contained the husher theory. That, the authors say, “has the

appearance of being an after-manufacture to suit the name.” It continues, again citing Bartlett, with the “who’s yere?” theory. Here the entry takes a peculiar turn:

However, the word originally was not hoosier at all, but hoosieroon, or hoosheroon, hoosier being an abbreviation of this. I can remember that in 1834, having read of hoosiers, and spoken of them, a boy from the West corrected me, and said that the word was properly hoosieroon. This would indicate a Spanish origin (Charles G. Leland).

Hoosier Bait

Occasionally stories link the origin of Indiana’s nickname to “Hoosier Bait” (“a kind of gingerbread,” according to Dunn) or “Hoosier cake” (“a Western name for a sort of coarse gingerbread,” again according to Dunn, “which, say the Kentuckians, is the best bait to catch a hoosier with, the biped being fond of it.”). In some tellings a Louisville baker named Hoosier baked the treats that so pleased Indianans. Moonshine is probably too generous a term to describe this theory.

Who’s Your Daddy?

Ronald Baker includes “Who’s Your Daddy?” in his *Hoosier Folk Legends*: “Do you know how Indiana got the nickname Hoosier? When it was first settled everyone ran around saying, ‘Who’s your daddy? Who’s your daddy?’” Baker offers no comment on the entry, and rightly so. The less said about it, the better.

Whoosher

Under his entry for “Hoosier” Richard Thornton offers the use of the word from Florio and Torriano’s 1659 dictionary: “Ninnatrice, a rocker, a stiller, a luller, a whoosher or a dandler of children asleep.” It is hard to see a relationship between the “whoosher” and “hoosier,” and Mencken observes “there was obviously no connection between this whoosher and hoosier, especially as “the earlier American etymologies all sought to connect the term with some idea of ruffianism.”

Harry Hoosier

Although Dunn rejects derivation from a patronymic, he did explore the possibility that “Hoosier” came from “Black Harry” Hoosier. In a 1995 article in the *Indiana Magazine of History* William D. Piersen of Fisk University again raised the question and pleaded the case for the Methodist preacher.

Piersen reviews the common theories about the origin of the word “hoosier,” beginning with those in Bartlett’s 1848 *Dictionary of Americanisms*. He gives each its due and rightly dismisses

most of them. That task completed, Pierson gets down to his real work, attempting to prove that the term came eponymously from Harry Hoosier, a black evangelist “who accompanied the Reverend Francis Asbury and other Methodist preachers on their traveling rounds.” He gives what details he can of Hoosier’s life and says, “Before his death in 1806, Hoosier’s homiletical gifts had made him a renowned camp meeting exhorter, the most widely known black preacher of his time, and arguably the greatest circuit rider of his day.”

Hoosier, he continues, was particularly disliked by Virginia Baptists for preaching against Calvinist predestination. He links that thought to attitudes towards frontier Methodists who “were also denigrated for calling into question the virtues of racial slavery.” “Therefore,” he deduces, “it does not seem at all unlikely that Methodists and then other rustics of the backcountry could have been called ‘Hoosiers’ -- disciples of the illiterate black exhorter Harry Hoosier -- as a term of opprobrium and derision. In fact, this would be the simplest explanation of the derivation of the word and, on simplicity alone, the Harry Hoosier etymology is worth serious consideration.”

Pierson then backtracks to take into account the use of the term “hoosier” meaning “redneck” throughout the South. He links Methodists and rednecks, proclaiming “Methodists would have been equally likely targets for such scorn, and connecting them to Harry Hoosier, even if he had preached in the middle and northern states, would have been considered funny in 1800.” Pierson is hopeful that his explanation “would explain several problems that the other etymologies cannot.” He goes on, trying to pile up the evidence more in the fashion of a persuasive speech than scholarship. The article concludes in peroration “Such an etymology would offer Indiana a plausible and worthy first Hoosier -- ‘Black Harry’ Hoosier -- the greatest preacher of his day, a man who rejected slavery and stood up for morality and the common man.”

There is more, although you sense the author has never quite believed his own arguments: “It is also likely that in improving the reputation of Hoosiers in general, the citizens of Indiana have brought the meaning of “hoosier” back closer to its worthy origin.”

Stephen H. Webb, a Wabash College professor, supports Pierson’s thesis, ending his article, “Without even knowing it, Indiana has preserved Harry Hoosier’s name; it is one that does them honor.” Earlier, however, he had to admit “... the evidence for the connection between his name and Indiana’s nickname is circumstantial, which leaves room for skepticism.”

A Bit More about Harry

In his *Harry Hosier: Circuit Rider* Warren Thomas Smith attempts to reconstruct “from countless sources” the life of Black Harry Hosier, a “horseman for the Lord.” That Harry was black there is no doubt. “He was small,” Smith quotes a source, “very black, keen-eyed, possessing great volubility of tongue.” That as a preacher he was eloquent is beyond question. Of him Benjamin Rush, among other things a signer of the Declaration of Independence, observed, “Making allowances for his illiteracy, he was the greatest orator in America.” The spelling of his name is less certain. While Smith uses Hosier throughout his volume, he notes the variants: Hoosier, Hoshur, Hossier. He also draws from the unpublished journal of William Colbert (1764-

1835), who writes the name as: Henry Hoshur, Harry Hoshur, Hanry Hoshure, Black Harvey, Henry Hersure and Henry Hosure.

The name aside, Hosier, it seems, did preach in Virginia and North Carolina to both Black and White gatherings, in the company of White representatives of Methodism like Francis Asbury and Thomas Coke. It also seems he spent more time in the middle states: Delaware, Maryland, Pennsylvania, New Jersey and New York, with tours of New England.

Smith never suggests any connection between the circuit rider's name and Indiana or frontier congregations or any other eponymous group, not even as an interesting side light to the primary story. And Hosier's activity, especially in his prime, seems to have been beyond the area from which the early settlers of southern Indiana came. Harry Hosier died in Philadelphia in 1806.

Along the River



“The Jolly Flatboatmen” by George Caleb Bingham

Many of the stories about the word “hoosier” contain the common thread of the Ohio. Samuel Hoosier constructs his canal to allow navigation around the Falls of the Ohio at Louisville. “Hoosa men,” run their corn downstream to market. Along the banks “Hushers” still brazen taunts with brawny fists. Brawls, resulting in the victorious “Huzzah!” occur between Hoosiers and Kentuckians, each from across the water. Fights, again resulting in “huzzah” or even “Hussar,” continue all the way to New Orleans.

The river tales reinforce the idea that the term “Hoosier” belonged in the early nineteenth century to the rough men (and women) of the Ohio Valley, notably those in the newly settled areas to the

West of Kentucky, meaning southern Indiana. Accepting the term, as Finley did, Indianans adopted it as its own, and it spread to mean residents of the state.

Southern Scorn, Local Pride and River Culture

In his article “Not Southern Scorn but Local Pride” Jonathan Clark Smith questions the idea that “the word [hoosier] had been term of contempt in general use in the South before it became specific to Indiana.” He notes the incorrect date of 1826 on the letter often cited as the first written appearance of the word and discovered no evidence of the term before February 11, 1831, a fact significant in his attempt to link the word Hoosier to the river trade.

Dunn had dismissed the speculation that rough-looking boatmen had acquired the “insulting nickname” during their travels in the south. In fact, Smith writes, Dunn “may have had the origin and the effect reversed.” He links the term to “pride and river transport” and finds connections the Wabash, the Wabash and Erie Canal (“Canal Hoosier”) and the name of a new steamboat (“The Indiana Hoosier”). He further cites an article from the Wabash Herald of July 8, 1831 mentioning the “Hoosiers (as the boatmen term them)”, which, he concludes, “not only identifies the original meaning as a farmer-boatman from Indiana but also the word’s origin in the Ohio River commerce culture.”

Dr. Smith’s suggestion seems to be that the term somehow grew up in Indiana around 1830 and spread outward from the state rather than being imposed from outside, the vehicle of dissemination being the tough boatmen making their way down to New Orleans. (Although not mentioned, Abraham Lincoln in 1828 was among the flatboat sailors.)

Smith, “challenging the conventional paradigm of a southern insult,” does point out the lack of early documentary evidence of “hoosier” as a derogatory term. He does not, however, in considering pride discuss the possibility that his raw boatman (ripstaver, scrounger, screamer, Bulger, ringtailer) might exhibit pride of a different kind by embracing an insulting term and proudly tossing it back into the face of any taunter. “Yeah, I’m a Hoosier. Want to make somethin’ of it?”

Down the River to Saint Louis

While “hoosier” may still be heard in areas of the south in its original, disparaging meaning of “uncouth rustic,” the term seems to be slowly losing currency. One important pocket of linguistic resistance, however, remains. Thomas E. Murray carefully analyzed the use of “hoosier” in St. Louis, Missouri, where it is the favorite epithet of abuse. “When asked what a Hoosier is,” Murray writes, “St. Louisans readily list a number of defining characteristics, among which are ‘lazy,’ ‘slow-moving,’ ‘derelict,’ and ‘irresponsible.’” He continues, “Few epithets in St. Louis carry the pejorative connotations or the potential for eliciting negative responses that hoosier does.” He conducted tests and interviews across lines of age and race and tabulated the results. He found the term ecumenically applied. He also noted the word was often used with a modifier, almost redundantly, as in “some damn Hoosier.”

In a separate section Murray speaks of the history of the word and cites Baker and Carmony (1975) and speculates on why Hoosier (in Indiana a “neutral or, more often, positive” term) should remain “alive and well in St. Louis, occupying as it does the honored position of being the city’s number one term of derogation.” A radio broadcast took up where Murray left off. During the program, “Fresh Air,” Jeffrey Lunberg, a language commentator, answered questions about regional nicknames. He cited Elaine Viets, a Post-Dispatch columnist (also quoted by Paul Dickson), as saying that in St. Louis a “Hoosier is a low-life redneck, somebody you can recognize because they have a car on concrete blocks in their front yard and are likely to have just shot their wife who may also be their sister.”

In his *What it Takes: The Way to the White House*, Richard Ben Cramer writes about Richard Gephardt’s early political success in Saint Louis, where he was an alderman between 1971 and 1976. Gephardt was one of a group of younger politicians challenging the old order, and apparently they mocked the “old farts” using the favored local term of disrespect:

After Board meetings, the other Young Turks would sit down to lunch, plan next weeks’ mischief. They’d laugh about the old “Hoosiers” on the Board. (South to a certain line, those people had been in the city for years -- they were the Hoosierocracy; a bit further out lived the Hoosiesie; and way out, with the pickups and three wheelers, were the Hoositariat.) Those Friday lunches were cackling self-congratulations for all they’d put over on the old farts ... hah! Never knew what hit ‘em! (Cramer, p. 680)

Hussars Ride Again

John Ciardi states the origin of “hoosier” must most probably remain “forever in doubt.” Dunn comes to nearly the same conclusion. Raven McDavid observes in an article with the provocative title “Would You Want Your Daughter to Marry a Hoosier?” that “Unfortunately there is little solid evidence on hoosier before it was transplanted to North America.” The lack of a definitive derivation means the old stories never quite die. They linger in state folklore. They survive in family lore. They appear in letters to the editor anytime a newspaper publishes an account concerning the word. They rise as amusing frauds meant to entertain or as favorites to be repeated when an occasion arises or as opportunities to satisfy some personal or political agenda.

In his search for a mascot for Indiana University athletic teams, Professor Eugene Eoyang of IU went looking for an answer to “What’s a Hoosier?” in Kosciusco County. He found that “the most plausible explanation” for the word hoosier lies in its connection with Thaddeus Kosciuszko, the Revolutionary general for whom the county is named, and somehow by extension with hussars, European regiments of light cavalry. Kosciuszko, though, did not have much to do with hussars or with cavalry of any kind. Trained as an engineer, he achieved distinction by building fortifications and arranging defensive lines. He was so successful at his job that no one, including George Washington, wanted to risk him in a field command.

The hussar story has been around for a long time. Most researchers have identified it with Colonel John Jacob Lehmanowky, rather than Kosciuszko and dismiss the idea of hussar giving birth through mispronunciation to hoosier. Professor Eoyang, though, is untroubled by other opinion. He also rejects all but his favored definition of the word “hoosier” by lumping them together with James Whitcomb Riley’s “Whose Ear?” comment. Riley jested, and everyone knew it.

Eoyang finds proof of the word’s origin in a Civil War anecdote. By then, however, the term had been in common use to designate an Indianan for thirty years. Still, he insists that an incident involving an Indiana regiment moving a “massive rock” while a “splendid Massachusetts regiment disdains to soil their hands” confirms his point. If anything, the account suggests another explanation, the Samuel Hoosier theory, which turns on a Hoosier’s willingness for hard work. The modest appearance of the burly Indiana commander “wearing a common soldier’s blouse and slouch hat” also brings to mind the definition of a “hoosier” as a mountain man, countryman or rustic. If anything it is the natty Bay Staters and their lieutenant who seem best to fit the usual image of hussars.

The Ax, not the Saber

Why did Indianans accept the “self-reference” as Hoosiers? Eoyang asks, before wandering off into comments about poor grammar, with the unspoken suggestion that the name might just have been less than flattering. He might have asked the Methodists or the Quakers. Both groups took what began as a term of derision and embraced it as their own. He might have consulted Jacob Dunn or John Finley, the “Hoosier’s Nest” poet himself, who wrote:

With feelings proud we contemplate
The rising glory of our state
Nor take offense by application
Of its good-natured appellation.

The word hoosier has a no martial or aristocratic past. Serious sources, like the Dictionary of American Regional English, record its usage to designate a rustic, rube or hick. In the nineteenth century a stock Hoosier character, outfitted in laughable rural fashions, is a standard butt of humor. (Occasionally, though, the unsophisticated fellow provides a biting observation of his own, exposing with country smarts big city hypocrisy and foolishness.)

More than a century ago Dunn concluded, after considerable research, that hoosier had obscure but certain Anglo-Saxon roots, and he did not shy from its definition as a rough countryman. Why, then, did Professor Eoyang invent a Hoosier hussar and propose it as a university mascot? To be fair, Eoyang slickly transforms his soldier into common “grunt” with true Midwestern values, but he then turns him back into a mounted warrior and calls for experts to dress him in splendid uniform.

Why deny “hoosier’s” origin in a one-time term of opprobrium, accepted with good nature, probably because it was once mostly true and cast by those who weren’t much better?

Of course Professor Eoyang may be teasing. He may be guying poor, gullible Hoosiers with a tall tale of exalted descent, humorously imitating those genealogical hucksters who offer a coat of arms to anyone with a family name. If he is serious, though, one wonders why he cannot accept the worthy Hoosier without frogs, braids and epaulettes. Why not honestly honor the one who swung the ax, not the saber? Why not investigate thoroughly enough to discover Raven McDavid's statement that "hoosier" was "a term suggestive of the raw strength of the frontier, of the yeoman farmers in contrast with the alleged refinements of plantation and mercantile society."

Kosciuszco, engineer that he was, would not have appreciated Eoyang's feeble foundation. As a fervent democrat and egalitarian, he would have deplored Eoyang's promotion of hoosier to a rank it did not deserve and never needed.

The State Seal

Lovers of the hussar story might have done well to consult the Indiana State Seal which features a man with an ax. Part of the Indiana Code. Section 1-2-4-1 (Acts 1963, ch. 207, section 1) states:

The woodsman is wearing a hat and holding his ax nearly perpendicular on his right. The ax blade is turned away from him and is even with his hat.

While state law defined the seal in 1963, "the earliest recorded use of a seal for the Indiana Territory is on court documents signed by Governor William Henry Harrison in January 1801." (Bennett and January) That seal and later seals also consistently portray a woodsman and his ax.



1800



1963

Screwin' cotton in Mobile Bay and Rednecks and Wool Hats

The term hoosier turns up in a sea shanty, “Lowlands or My Dollar an’ a Half a Day”

A white man’s pay is rather high. Ch: Lowlands, lowlands, away my John! Five dollars a day is a hoosier’s pay, Five dollars a day is a hoosier’s pay. A black man’s pay is rather low, Ch: My dollar an’ a half a day

According to Stan Hugill in his collection *Shanties from the Seven Seas* southern dock workers sang the shanty while “a-screwin’ cotton all day.” (Hugill, p. 69) The word “screwin’” refers to the “screws used to ram tight bales of cotton down the holds of cotton traders.” Hoosiers in this case are the rough, working class whites laboring at a difficult task beside their black counterparts.

Music also interests Patrick Huber in his masters thesis “Rednecks and Woolhats, Hoosiers and Hillbillies: Working-Class Southern Whites, Language and the Definition of Identity.” Before discussing country songs he observes:

No group of Americans, except perhaps African-Americans, have had more derogatory terms heaped upon them than rural, southern white working people: Arkie, clay eater, conch, corn-cracker, cornpone, cracker, dirt-eater, hillbilly, hoosier, low-downer, mean white, Okie, pea-picker, peckerwood, pinelander, poor buckra, poor white, redneck, ridge-runner, sandhiller, tacky, tar heel, wool hat and perhaps the most opprobrious slur, poor white trash. This, of course, does not exhaust the list. (Huber, p. 5)

It turns out he concentrates on the word hillbilly, but he has made the point that all the terms, including hoosier, are contemptuous references to Southern white working people. Usage of the term was not limited to whites themselves. It crosses racial lines as in quotation taken from Susan Tucke’s *Telling Memories among Southern Women: Domestic Workers and their Employers in the Segregated South*: Althea Vaughn, a Southern cook and maid, bitterly recalled her while employer’s daughter-in-law. “I couldn’t stand her for nothing in the world. She [was an] old redneck hoo’ger, those kinds that were’t used to nothing.”

Don’t Stop Them

If Eoyang’s hussars can ride again, settlers will continue to call “Who’s here?” from their cabins, and visitors will ask the same question of the house. Sam Hoosier’s men will dig his canal, and hushers will tromp their opponents, sometimes shouting “Huzza!” to mark their victories. Boatmen will deliver corn down the river. Ears will be picked up from barroom floors and playing fields. People will wander through bushy places or holly plantations, perhaps with a wild look about them. Bakers will offer gingerbread to those hungry for the sweet. Preachers will preach the Methodist gospel to their backwoods congregations. Bailiffs, hatmakers, dirty tramps, Indian potentates and Spanish hoosieroons will populate Indiana’s hills, hollows and flatlands. Ninatrices will lull babies to sleep, and young children will inquire about their fathers. You cannot stop them, and sometimes, although not always, you may not want to.

Would You Rather Be a Puke?

During the first decades of the nineteenth century, states acquired popular nicknames. Whatever the reason for this particular mania, those nicknames achieved a measure of acceptance. Walt Whitman used them in his poetry to evoke the strength and variety of the hearty men and women who made up a growing nation. They tumbled from his pen more than once, not as words of fun, but as words of admiration. Many of the names, like “Tarheel” or “Tar Heel” (itself capable of two interpretations), fell victim to local boosterism and often survive without negative connotations or much context as names of college and university sports teams.

Whitman and boosters aside, the nicknames did not always suggest the finer qualities of the states. Ohioans are “buckeyes,” which sounds innocent, but would one want to be a “leatherhead” (Pennsylvanians) or a “sucker” (Illinoisans) or a “clam catcher” (New Jerseyans) or a “beethead” (Texans) or a “weasle” (South Carolinians) or a “bug eater” (Nebraskans)? And who would want to be a “puke” -- the nickname for Missourians? By contrast, “hoosier” seems, if not exactly historically flattering, tolerable enough.

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