



Looking Back *Joyce M. Tice*

# History in the Highways

Street or road names often tell a story, or they can be full of humor and whimsy. Many western cities efficiently labeled with names such as Third Street and Fourth Avenue give us neither. Such street names keep us from getting lost, but they're as interesting as cells on a spreadsheet: row four, column three. A recent contest for unusual street names awarded Psycho Path in Traverse City, Michigan, first prize. Now *that's* interesting.

Names like Stony Lonesome Road, where my cousin lives in Williamson, New York, or Hardscrabble Road in Tioga County, Pennsylvania, remind us of the hardships of early settlers. Newtown Hill Road in Mansfield was once the road to Elmira, named so long ago that Elmira was still called Newtown.

In Syracuse, New York, Erie Boulevard runs atop the filled-in Erie Canal, lined now with strip malls instead of towpaths for mules. Many towns have Canal Streets, Railroad Streets, or School Streets commemorating resources that are no longer there. Mansfield's two-block long College Avenue was originally Normal Avenue until the State Normal School became a college in 1927. Although the college became a university in 1983, no further change reflects it.

Hannah's Stump in Cortland County is neither a street nor a road, and no sign marks it as such. Its story is so endearing that the junction of Parker Street and Route 38 in Lapeer Township, New York, is known widely by that name. Long ago a woman named Hannah had been

"keeping company" with her beau for such a long time without a marriage proposal that at one family picnic she climbed up on a stump at the edge of the high cliff there and threatened to jump if he did not propose. He did. Hannah's identity is lost in time but her story lives on.

The name Sanitarium Hill in very rural Sullivan Township, Pennsylvania, seems out of place, but a century ago, it was an accurate description. Dr. Mary Smith and three of her siblings were homeopathic physicians. Doc Mary's brother, Dr. Joseph Smith, practiced in Pittsburgh where he founded a tuberculosis sanitarium. In 1903 they relocated the sanitarium to the Smith family homestead in Tioga County. Doc Mary ran it as physician until her death in 1926, with patients coming from all over the Northeast.

Many street and road names remind us of people who lived on them long ago, and the names usually changed at every intersection. It is a tragedy when names such as Gardner Hollow in Sullivan Township are lost. The road, named for original settlers, became an extension of Reitz Road per PennDOT. Strange Hill, named for the Strange family that had a mill at the foot of the hill in the 1840s, lost its name in the 1980s after almost a century and a half. The road was absorbed into a much longer span with a different name.

Sometimes a road named for a person is shortened in the common local usage. In Endicott, New York, George F. Johnson Highway and Harry L. Johnson Drive are referred to as George F. Highway and Harry L. Drive. I once managed

a garden center on George F. Highway. A lost and confused truck driver called asking to speak to George. When I asked George who? the driver said, "George F. Hwy," doing his best to pronounce it as abbreviated. I told him it was rush hour and George was being run over by several thousand cars.

This is a subject without end, and I will continue it in a future column. I invite you to share with me historic or unusual street and road names in your neighborhood that I can include.

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