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JOHN T. SCHLEBECKER

## THE MANY NAMES OF FARMERS

Sometime in 1965 a college student working at the Smithsonian asked, "What is a farmer?" Since most people think they know what a farmer is, the question was ingenuous, unusual, and rather incomplete. The question should at least have included time and place, and might even have included the commodities involved. Strictly speaking, farmers, as people who raise plants and animals, got their name no earlier than sometime in the reign of Elizabeth I. They had, however, been doing that sort of work under other names for about 10,000 years. In an effort to protect myself should similar questions arise in the future, I began to make a list of the various names of farmers, with as much information as possible on when and where the names were used. I confined my research to English names because it was the only language I knew well.

In the course of fifteen years, the whole project got out of hand. The list now contains 1,515 solid entries with more or less solid definitions. The list also has some 30 additional unidentified and undefined terms which seem to be names for farmers, but which no dictionary or glossary has so far mentioned. Then there are perhaps some 20 words, not counted in the 1,515, which must be included so that the reason for their absence can be noted. The word 'yankee', for example, seems to be agrarian but is not, neither in origin nor in meaning. True, one British dictionary, published shortly after the American Revolution, defined a yankee as "a country lout in New England." Other dictionaries, however, avoid this political and social prejudice.<sup>1</sup>

Since the research was not planned, but only happened, the methodology was uninformed and haphazard. The project proved particularly difficult for one inherently inclined to make original contributions to orthography. Once begun, however, there was no turning back. Anyhow, the first lexicographers could not have been especially trained for the trade. There must have been some other amateurs.

Lexicographers had, from time to time, given some hints about the business, all of which proved useful. Samuel Johnson defined a lexicographer as "a maker of dictionaries; a harmless drudge. . ." Voltaire offered even more useful advice when he defined a lexicographer as "a

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<sup>1</sup> 1811 *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue: A Dictionary of Buckish Slang, University Wit, and Pickpocket Eloquence* (rpt. ed., Northfield Ill.: Digest Books, 1971).

plagiarist.”<sup>2</sup> Both men were quite right. If, as reasonable people know, a dictionary is really a history book, then a historian should be qualified to turn lexicographer.

The research actually took the form of occasional occupational therapy, fitted in incidentally with other more pressing reading and research. Then, in November 1978, I suddenly discovered the word ‘farm-worker.’ An obvious word, overlooked for thirteen years. In this paper I try to explain why I made such an important discovery so late.

The dictionary has a working title: “The Many Names of Farmers: An International Dictionary on Historic Principles of the English Names of Those People, Exalted or Humble, Who Till the Soil, Keep the Forests, Manage Livestock, Harvest Crops, or See that these Tasks are Done.” The subtitle also obviously got out of hand. It is now just an introduction to the dictionary, and a guide to further research.

Some names, such as ‘harvester’ and ‘reaper’, indicate occupations. These once were people. Now, as people, they come last in the definitions, being currently considered chiefly machines. *The Dictionary of Agricultural and Allied Terminology*, published in America in 1962, does not even have an entry for ‘harvester’, and gives ‘reaper’ as a machine only. About the same can be said of several other dictionaries.<sup>3</sup> ‘Forester’ is now an occupation. Once the name meant forest dweller, and, in America, one who cleared a forest. Meaning one employed in and skilled in forestry, the name first appeared around 1847 and seems to have been an American term. By 1879 this use had become the primary use internationally.<sup>4</sup>

Some names show location: ‘swing-rider’, ‘outrider’, ‘neighbor’. Swing-riders were always ‘cowboys’, so their location with the herd was also an occupation. But ‘outriders’, as an occupation, has meant a forager for an army, a traveling court bailiff, a commercial traveler, or just some-

<sup>2</sup> Ambrose Bierce said of the lexicographer: “The natural servility of the human understanding having invested him with judicial power, surrenders its right to reason and submits itself to a chronicle as if it were a statute” (*The Devil’s Dictionary* [1911; rpt. ed. Owings Mills, Md.; Stemmer House, 1978]); Leonard L. Levinson, *The Left Handed Dictionary* (London and New York: Collier Books, 1963).

<sup>3</sup> John Winburne, ed., *Dictionary of Agricultural and Allied Terminology* (East Lansing: Michigan State University Press, 1962); William A. Craigie and James R. Hulbert, comps., *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1938–1944), gives a human harvester as the second definition, and gives only the machine as a reaper; Edward L. Schapsmeier and Frederick H. Schapsmeier, *Encyclopedia of American Agricultural History* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1975), defines ‘reaper’ only as a machine.

<sup>4</sup> Craigie and Hulbert, comps., *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles; The Encyclopaedic Dictionary: A New and Original Work of Reference to all the Words in the English Language . . .* (London, 1879–1888); Philip B. Gove, ed., *Webster’s Third New International Dictionary of the English Language Unabridged* (Springfield and London: Merriam-Webster, 1961).

one who travels around on horseback. As a cowboy, the outrider rode beside the herd, or now rides around inspecting the range. Most lexicographers and etymologists do not believe that 'neighbor' once meant a nearby farmer, but I and some others do. And of course, there is the earliest meaning of 'forester', which indicated the location of the person, not his occupation.<sup>5</sup>

Some names indicate status chiefly: 'squire', 'serf', or 'sharecropper'. 'Squire' is treated by most dictionaries as chiefly or only British in an agrarian sense, and the *Dictionary of Agricultural and Allied Terminology* does not mention squires. Nevertheless, the word was used in America in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries to mean the owner of a large estate or plantation, and is so used even now, historically.<sup>6</sup>

The name 'serf' has a curious history. It means, in English, a slave who is also bound to the soil. The word apparently first entered the language from the French in 1433, but ceased to be used to describe Englishmen after 1611. By then the condition it described had completely ended. The word continued in use to describe people in other countries well into the nineteenth century, and, of course, is still used historically. When used historically to refer to people in Britain, the word which is really wanted for the centuries before 1483 is 'villein'. But historians seem to prefer 'serf', possibly because it is shorter and apparently more readily understood by laymen. Serfdom was a status, not, strictly speaking, an occupation.<sup>7</sup>

<sup>5</sup> Ramon F. Adams, *Western Words: A Dictionary of the American West* (Norman: University of Oklahoma Press, 1968); Gove, ed., *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*; for 'outrider' see William Little, H. W. Fowler, J. Coulson, comps., *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1933); Nathan Bailey, *Dictionarium Britannicum: Or a More Compleat Universal Etymological Dictionary Than Any Extant* (London, 1730); Joseph Wright, *The English Dialect Dictionary* (New York and London, 1898-1904); Noah Webster, *The American Dictionary of the English Language* (New York, 1828); Craigie and Hulbert, comps., *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles*; Peter C. Watts, *A Dictionary of the Old West, 1850-1900* (New York: Knopf, 1977); for 'neighbor' see William N. Parker and Eric L. Jones, eds., *European Peasants and Their Markets* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1975).

<sup>6</sup> Gove, ed., *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*; no agrarian meaning in Craigie and Hulbert, comps., *A Dictionary of American English on Historical Principles*; Winburne, ed., *Dictionary of Agricultural and Allied Terminology*; I. H. Adams, *Agrarian Landscape Terms: A Glossary of Historical Geography* (London: Institute of British Geographers, 1976); for American use, see 'Squiresarchy', *Handbook of World History* (New York: Philosophical Library, 1967); Sydney V. James, *Colonial Rhode Island: A History* (New York: Scribners, 1975); James K. Paulding, *Letters from the South, Written During an Excursion in the Summer of 1816* (1818; rpt. ed. New York: AMS Press, 1973).

<sup>7</sup> Little, Fowler, and Coulson, comps., *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*; M. M. Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society: An Economic History of Britain in the Middle Ages* (London: Weidenfeld and Nicholson, 1972); Adams, *Agrarian Landscape Terms*; Webster, *The American Dictionary of the English Language*.

For about a century, sharecroppers grew cotton or tobacco chiefly, but their condition was economic and social, rather than a particular occupation. 'Sharecropper' could be a pejorative term, and can still be so used even though sharecropping no longer exists. It died somewhere between 1960 and 1975. Sharecropping began after the American Civil War, and, as might be expected, is not even mentioned in the *Shorter Oxford Dictionary* or *Agrarian Landscape Terms*, both British publications. Eric Kerridge used the word to describe seventeenth-century English tenant farmers in his *The Farmers of Old England*, but he obviously borrowed the word from American English. As he used it, the word clearly did not mean what it meant in America. Although personally free, sharecroppers could be bound to the soil. Like serfs and slaves, however, sharecroppers managed to escape now and then.<sup>8</sup>

Some names show a condition: 'bumpkin', 'hick'. These are names assigned by others, since bumpkins and hicks rarely so describe themselves. The terms do not show occupation, nor status, nor particular location. A squire can be a bumpkin, like Squire Western in *Tom Jones*. The term 'country bumpkin', found here and there, suggests that bumpkins can also be urban bumpkins, else why the redundancy of 'country bumpkin'? The word 'hick-town' suggests that hicks can be found in towns, or that entire towns can be inhabited chiefly by hicks.<sup>9</sup>

On the other hand, a 'peasant' can be very sophisticated, quite non-hick. Robert Burns's "To a Mouse: On Turning up Her Nest with the Plow, November, 1785," is a sophisticated poem. It not only gave John Steinbeck a title (*Of Mice and Men*), but may well be a classic example of its genre. Burns never gave up farming, and throughout his life boasted that he feared no rival with plow or with scythe.<sup>10</sup> The names 'hick', 'bumpkin', and others like them merely indicate an unfortunate condition brought on by too much rustication. The words do not specify any particular occupation or place, but they are, or were, agrarian.

<sup>8</sup> Winburne, ed., *Dictionary of Agricultural and Allied Terminology*; Fowler and Coulson, comps., *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*; Adams, *Agrarian Landscape Terms*; Eric Kerridge, *The Farmers of Old England* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1973); Sylvia J. Cook, *From Tobacco Road to Route 66* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1976); Schapsmeier and Schapsmeier, *Encyclopedia of American Agricultural History*.

<sup>9</sup> 1811 *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*; Eric Partridge, *A Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English* (New York: Macmillan, 1961); Godfrey Irwin, *American Tramp and Underworld Slang* (New York: Sears Publishing Co., 1931); Henry Fielding, *The History of Tom Jones, a Foundling* (1749; Franklin Center: Franklin Library, 1978), 254, 269–71, 773–75, 794–95; Cook, *From Tobacco Road to Route 66*.

<sup>10</sup> Robert Jamieson, *Burns in His Youth and Burns in His Maturity* (Belfast, 1878), 7–8, 10–15, 17, 19, 23.

Since dictionaries are histories, historic developments should be considered. When did a word enter the language, and when did its meaning change? 'Clown', as a name for a farmer, probably derived from clump or knob, or possibly the Latin *colonus* (colonist, farmer). (*The Oxford English Dictionary* does not think much of *colonus*, but mentions it anyway.) The word may have entered the language about 1450 meaning 'peasant'. In literature the earliest reference seems to be 1563. At first it carried no meaning of contempt or depreciation. As late as 1622 in New England the word had no deprecatory meaning. Meaning one without refinement or culture, the word appeared as early as 1583 in English. Americans seem to have been slower to catch on, but by 1738 Poor Richard could explain: "He is no clown that drives the plow, but he that doth clownish things." 'Clown' no longer meant simply 'farmer'.<sup>11</sup>

Sometime in the late seventeenth or early eighteenth century 'clown' also came to mean an "ill-bred man, churl." Still, around 1785 William Cowper could write of "The clown, the child of nature without guile." The clown was always chiefly a rustic, a countryman, and this use continued among American tramps and criminals into the twentieth century. The current chief understanding of 'clown' began to develop as early as 1600 when a stage character playing a country buffoon appeared. In time this character overtook and replaced the earlier agrarian meaning. In literature, 'clown' ceased to be used to mean a rustic about 1865. True, Thomas Macaulay used the word to mean 'rustic' as late as 1885, but then Macaulay was a bit of a pedant. (Sydney Smith said of Macaulay, "He not only overflowed with learning, but stood in the slop.")<sup>12</sup>

Just when 'clown' came to mean a harlequin or circus clown is uncertain, but Dickens used the word in such fashion in *The Old Curiosity Shop* in 1840. Perhaps the great Joseph Grimaldi (1779–1837) brought about the change in the 1820s. Grimaldi liked to play Harlequin and Pantaloons as well as a clownish bumpkin, and he was immensely popular. Because of him, to this day the nickname for a circus clown is "Joey." However it happened, 'clown' almost completely replaced the earlier words 'jester' and 'buffoon'. The word began to take on some of its original agrarian sense when Emmett Leo Kelly (b. 1898)

<sup>11</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary, Being a Corrected Re-Issue . . .* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1970); Paul L. Lord, *The Sayings of Poor Richard . . .* (New York, 1890).

<sup>12</sup> *The Oxford English Dictionary, Being a Corrected Re-Issue . . .*; Frank Muir, *An Irreverent and Thoroughly Incomplete Social History of Almost Everything* (New York: Stein and Day, 1977), 153.

invented the cartoon character Weary Willie, and then later introduced him as a circus clown. Many people have enjoyed the misery of the old, tired, itinerant farmworker.<sup>13</sup>

Another historical problem arises when a word ceases to represent any living person. "Franklin", meaning a wealthy landowner, ceased to mean anything current by the seventeenth century. The former 'franklins' are difficult to identify, although the people were not obliterated. As the franklins disappeared, 'farmworkers' suddenly appeared in the sixteenth century. Most dictionaries refuse to define the word 'farmer-worker', probably because it is too obvious. Such neglect makes it hard to trace.<sup>14</sup>

The next problem in selecting the names of farmers involves deciding what words are English. English in all its varieties has over 450,000 words. If pushed to A.D. 1100, and all obsolete and archaic words added, then English might well have over 800,000 words. The use of some of these would verge on pedantry. Still, scholars have recently revived some, and properly so.

"The Many Names of Farmers" may not enrich our vocabulary, but it contains a good plenty of obsolete words. Adding the obsolete to the total, no other language comes close in numbers of words. English permits great precision and subtlety. It is also rich in rhymes and alliterations, which everyone can use, not just poets.<sup>15</sup>

The roots of English words are roughly 60 percent German and 40 percent Latin, but, of course, not really. Everything, including Greek, got thrown into the pot. Sir Walter Scott observed that Saxon is used when the thing involves work, like 'calf', and Norman-French when it is a matter of pleasure, like 'veal'.<sup>16</sup> The mixture came about through a variety of events, including the Norman conquest of Saxon England. The last heavy dose of French apparently came in with the return of Charles II in 1660. Americans added words from several languages, notably Spanish, but also Dutch, Yiddish, and Algonkian, to mention a few, plus some original contributions: 'front-stoop' out of Dutch,

<sup>13</sup> *The Encyclopaedic Dictionary*; Bailey, *Dictionarium Britannicum*; Carl Bridenbaugh, *Fat Mutton and Liberty of Conscience* (Providence: Brown University Press, 1974); Lord, *The Sayings of Poor Richard*; Noah Webster, *A Compendious Dictionary of the English Language* (1806; rpt. ed. New York: Bounty Books, 1970); Irwin, *American Tramp and Underworld Slang*; *The Oxford English Dictionary, Being A Corrected Re-Issue . . . ; Dictionary of National Biography* (New York and London: Oxford University Press, 1967-1968); *Who's Who in America* (Chicago: Marquis, 1978).

<sup>14</sup> Little, Fowler, and Coulson, comps., *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*.

<sup>15</sup> Gove, ed., *Webster's Third New International Dictionary*; on alliterations, see Stella Brook, ed. and trans., *Piers Plowman* (New York: Barnes and Noble, 1975), 11-12.

<sup>16</sup> *Ivanhoe* (Boston: Ginn and Co., 1934), 32.

'succotash' out of Algonkian or some such, and 'jazz' out of New Orleans.

Canadians added French and Gaelic, and 'cannuck' may be one of these. No one knows for sure. Once upon a time, 'cannuck' was respectable, and may still be. It meant a strong, skilled woodsman or logger. Then outsiders made it derogatory. Now the word seems to be coming back as a respectable name like 'yankee'. Only now 'canuck' seems to have only one *n*. No one has explained the reason for the new spelling.

Australians threw in some original words. 'Murrumbigee whaler' sounds like it might be partly aboriginal. A 'Murrumbigee whaler' was a 'swagman' who did not always seek work, but was not an out-and-out 'sundowner'.<sup>17</sup> South African has different words, too. South African also has some slightly different, or additional meanings for words. 'Attorney', for example, means, among other things, the manager of a plantation.<sup>18</sup>

All of this is English, and, some place or other, good English. Sometimes, however, words seem to be foreign, but then again, not. Some words, foreign once, seem quite at home in English. 'Habeus corpus', 'radius', 'peon', and 'bracero' come to mind. At what shadowy point did they become English? This is particularly a problem in medieval and legal English. 'Customarius', for example, is treated as an English word by one lexicographer, but is given as Latin and translated as 'customary tenant' by another.<sup>19</sup>

An equally difficult question revolves around obvious compounds. If all obvious compounds entered the dictionary they might add at least another thousand words by themselves, and possibly more. Examples include 'pea picker', 'apple knocker', 'cotton picker'. The general rule followed was to leave the word out if its parts were already included. Thus 'farmworker' was excluded because it seemed too obvious. Then reading revealed that it was a recent and unusually significant addition to the language. It turns out that 'farmworker' is not so obvious after all.

A farmworker is one who does farm work for pay, chiefly in money. Such a worker is personally free, but does not own a farm, nor rent one. Apparently no one knows when the word entered the language, but 'farmer', meaning one who rents a farm, came in about 1487. 'Farmer',

<sup>17</sup> Harold Wentworth and Stuart B. Flexner, *A Dictionary of American Slang* (New York: Crowell, 1967); J. S. Gunn, *The Terminology of the Shearing Industry* (Sydney: University of Sydney Press, 1965); Ian W. Walker and Keith Bellows, *The Canuck Book* (Don Mills, Ont.: General Publishing Co., 1977).

<sup>18</sup> Arthur C. Barnes, *The Sugar Cane* (New York: Wiley and Sons, 1974); Jean Branford, *A Dictionary of South African English* (Cape Town: Oxford University Press, 1978).

<sup>19</sup> Bailey, *Dictionarium Britannicum*; Adams, *Agrarian Landscape Terms*.

meaning one who *farms* a farm, came into use about 1599. Farmworkers came on the scene with the invention of up-and-down farming, when the improvers took over many small holdings, thus forcing small-holders into the status of farmworkers. This happened roughly between 1565 and 1590. Quite possibly, therefore, the word 'farmworker' may be older than the name 'farmer' in the sense of one who works on a farm.

No one needed the name 'farmworker' as long as serfs existed, but serfdom died between 1575 and 1611. The end of feudalism and the beginning of improved farming, both taking place mostly in the reign of Elizabeth I, brought about the need for the name 'farmworker' to indicate a person who previously had not existed. Previously farm work had been done by serfs, but free, landless farmworkers did not exist under feudalism.<sup>20</sup> Robin Hood and his Merry Men were free enough, but they did not, strictly speaking, work.

Franklins, at first called 'francolani', were wealthy, personally free, landowning farmers. The name 'francolani' may have originated as early as the eleventh century. A law of 1247 ordered all francolani to be knighted, but many, perhaps even most, managed to avoid the onerous and expensive dignity. Their name became 'franklin' in the fourteenth century, and as 'franklin' or 'franklyn' appeared in works by Chaucer. Edmund Spenser used the word in his *Faerie Queen*, written between 1590 and 1596. This was possibly the last use in its original sense of wealthy freeholder. For some time in the seventeenth century the name 'franklin' apparently meant 'free tenant', but since all in England were free by 1611, the distinction of a 'free tenant' became unnecessary.

Some franklins may have become 'yeomen', but if so, they took a step down. Yeomen, "freeholders with land worth 40s who voted and served on juries," had been around since 1400. They existed along with the franklins, who, however, had much more wealth. Franklins may have become 'improvers', or 'gentlemen farmers', rather than 'yeomen'. Yeomen became numerous in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, their ranks swelled by free serfs and successful tenant farmers. So, the term 'yeoman' remained a useful word denoting a farmer with a small amount of land, and continues to be so used into the twentieth century. The name 'franklin', in contrast, served no useful purpose and became obsolete.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>20</sup> Little, Fowler, and Coulson, comps., *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*; Kerridge, *The Farmers of Old England*; Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*.

<sup>21</sup> Postan, *The Medieval Economy and Society*; Little, Fowler, and Coulson, comps., *The Shorter Oxford Dictionary*; *The Encyclopaedic Dictionary*; Kerridge, *The Farmers of Old England*; Adams, *Agrarian Landscape Terms*; Percy W. Harris, *The Truth About Robin Hood* (Mansfield, Eng.: W. & J. Linney, 1973).

This study, "The Many Names of Farmers," amounts to a round-about way of studying the history of agriculture. The approach is perhaps tedious, but it is a slightly different methodology. It may, if persisted in, yield modest results. By observing how names change one can see how life on the farm changed. Furthermore, it sometimes helps to know what a name really meant when it shows up in the historical record.