

A Yankee Notebook

How Etna, N.H., (May Have) Got Its Name

DECEMBER 26, 1984

WILLEM LANGE

FOR THE VALLEY NEWS

ETNA — The names of towns, where they came from, and why, can be a fascinating study.

Who, for example, were the now-forgotten lovers of antiquity who baptised the villages of upstate New York? There is a Rome, which is not far south of Carthage, north of Ithaca, Ilion, and Attica, west of Troy, and east of Mycenae. A trip across the state can cover in one day most of Europe and Asia Minor, parts of South America, and several centuries, as well.

The state of Maine is an entirely different story. When the Missouri Compromise of 1820 lopped it from what was till then northern Massachusetts, the upcountry burghers were stuck for imaginative ideas for place names. So they opened a world atlas and just went right through it, naming their towns Denmark, Madrid, Norway, Paris, and Poland.

Etna, New Hampshire, appears to have been named equally capriciously. But there is a certain Yankee terseness and brevity to it that those of us who live here appreciate anew whenever we write our address — Etna, N.H. Imagine the writer's cramp that must strike the

Falls, Minnesota, or Van Deusenville, Massachusetts!

The word itself — Etna — has fewer meanings than letters. Crossword puzzlers will recognize it as the answer to the clue, "small stove." Geologists know it as an active volcano in eastern Sicily, 10,705 feet in altitude. And that's all . . . unless you count a girl I once knew named Edna, who married a German. After that, she was always "Etna."

Virtually all New England towns were originally situated on brooks that ran year-round, and the steeper, the better. Water power was required to turn sawmills, grist mills, and other wheels of industry.

Hanover was no exception. Though the most interesting part of town sprang up on a pine-covered gravel flat near the confluence of Mink Brook and the Connecticut River, around what is now the Dartmouth College green, there was no power available at that site. The "industrial" section of town grew instead around the falls and rapids of Mink Brook, about four miles upstream from Hanover Village.

The first mills at the falls were a grist mill, built in 1769, and a sawmill. They apparently prospered, and a thriving village grew up along the brook. For obvious reasons, it was called Mill Village.

statewide communications and commerce increased, it became painfully clear that there was another Mill Village elsewhere in New Hampshire. Mail, and even travelers, to one or the other of them were sometimes misdirected. So when a federal post office was established in Mill Village (this one) in 1884, there arose the opportunity to give the village a new name.

It is at this point that historians of the subject begin to diverge. Professor John Lord of Dartmouth, who died in 1926, says in a posthumously-published history of the town that the village "was called 'Etna' by the desire of the inhabitants, the name being suggested by Miss Laura A. Camp . . . for what reason I have been unable to ascertain."

A much brighter possibility was suggested by one Polly Camp, a member of a family that, according to Lillian Bailey of Hanover Center, "has been around here for ages." Lillian once knew Polly Camp, who had been a resident of Mill Vaillage in 1884 when the name was changed.

According to her version, the deed was done by George W. Bridgman, the postmaster, who was then also in the first year of a 40-year career as town clerk. Faced with the need to come up with something distinctive and new, he sat back in his office

insurance company calendar on the wall. You guessed it — the Aetna Insurance Company. Because the company represented what were then the best of American virtues — solidity, liquidity, and longevity — he lifted the name, but dropped the "A" because he felt the complicated spelling might confuse the unlettered.

And that, apparently is all there is to it. Etna the village has remained, for just 100 years now; and so it will probably continue, unless the government decides to substitute ZIP codes for place names, in which case it will become simply "03750 plus 4 digits."

Etna, New Hampshire, by the way, is not the only New England village by that name. There's another in Maine, not far west of Bangor. Folks there, however, seem to be in a bit of confusion about the origin of the name. The postmaster (04434), for example, gave me this think piece when I talked with him recently: "Folks say the name came from the volcano in Italy, but they dropped the "A" to make it easier to spell."

Eyah . . .

Willem Lange lives in Etna. His VALLEY NEWS column, "A Yankee Notebook," appears here every

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