COLUMBIA

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Mount Rainier or Mount Tacoma? The controversy that refused to die.
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MOUNT RAINIER *or*

The great name controversy between Seattle and Tacoma.

By A.D. Martinson

In the expanding West of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, intercity rivalries were more than economic; they often included a "landscape moralism," the claim that one's community is superior to all others in matters of location, living quality and scenery. When the factor of scenery is accented by an impressive mountain peak on the distant horizon, easily seen from many communities, then one can begin to understand the intense public relations battle between Seattle and Tacoma over the name of Mt. Rainier, a controversy that newspapers unleashed in the 1880s.

The origin of the name "Mount Rainier" is indisputable. In 1792, Captain George Vancouver of the British Royal Navy named the high mountain (14,410 feet) in honor of his friend, Rear Admiral Peter Rainier. The name or word "Tacoma" is apparently of Indian origin. But its precise meaning is unknown, despite historical evidence which strongly suggests that either "Tacoma" or "Tahoma" is what local Indian tribes called the mountain. It was not until the early 1860s, however, that the name "Tacoma" became widely known to the early settlers in the Puget Sound country. The name first appeared in print when a New York company published in 1862 the impressions and astute observations of Theodore Winthrop, who journeyed through the Pacific Northwest in 1853. The published title was *The Canoe and the Saddle*, although Winthrop called his journal "Klalam and Klickitat—Nature and Natives of the Northwest." In this classic record of travels, Winthrop referred to the mountain as simply "Tacoma," indicating its Indian origin. However, he also stated that the word is a generic term, applicable to all snowy peaks. This impreciseness of meaning may have been the source of confusion between "Tacoma" and "Tahoma," especially among those wanting to rename the mountain in the years of the controversy.

Winthrop's reference to the mountain as "Tacoma" did not precipitate a squabble among the early settlers over the mountain's name. Apparently, they accepted "Rainier" as the official name, and "Tacoma" as the Indian designation without seriously questioning the validity of one name over the other. Also, immediately after the small town on Commencement Bay was named Tacoma, in 1868, there appeared no outward sign of dispute regarding the name of the mountain. Even a Seattle newspaper acknowledged in that year that the founders of Tacoma named the town after ". . .the Indian name for Mount Rainier." But with the coming of the railroad to the Puget Sound area in the 1870s and 1880s, the mountain's name became an issue.

After the Northern Pacific Railroad selected Tacoma for its western terminus, the intercity rivalry intensified. Then, in 1883, in a publicity and advertising medium called *The Northwest Magazine*, the Northern Pacific issued the following statement:

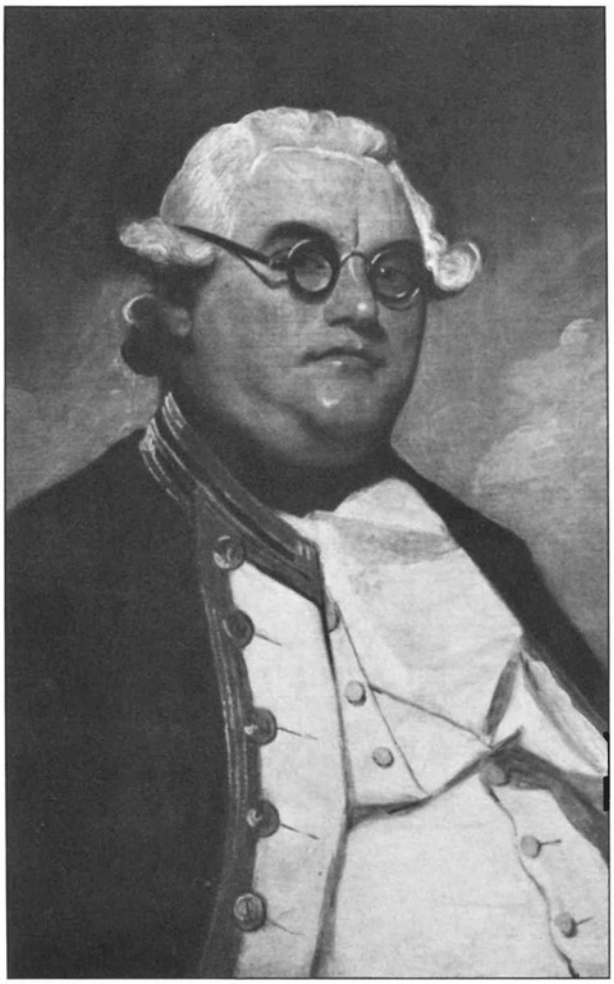
> The Indian name Tacoma will hereafter be used in the guide books and other publications of the Northern Pacific Railroad and the Oregon Railway and Navigation Company, instead of Rainier, which the English Captain Vancouver gave this magnificent peak when he explored the waters of Puget Sound in the last century.

That announcement sparked one of the most rancorous, and perhaps longest, controversies in national park history.

The Tacoma newspapers seized the opportunity thereafter to refer to the mountain as "Mount Tacoma," despite the fact that the name "Rainier" was used frequently in those same newspapers between 1868 and 1883. The *Tacoma Daily Ledger* was especially delighted in supporting, after 1883, the name "Tacoma," and for many years it served as the voice of the uncompromising Tacoma campaigners.

There was support from other communities for the Mt. Tacoma name change. Small communities within Pierce County, for example, were generally sympathetic, although such support was not always consistent. Portland, Oregon, was generally a Mount Rainier booster, but during the 1880s a publication in that city called *West Shore* gave its unqualified support to the name change, and the editors commented that too many peaks

MOUNT TACOMA?



Washington State Historical Society

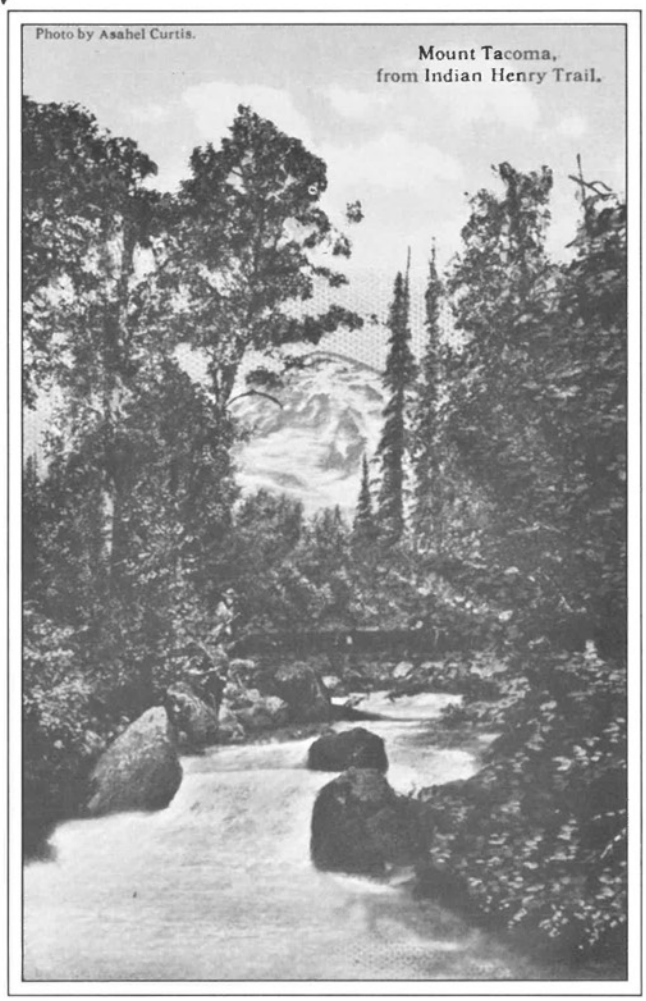
Rear Admiral Peter Rainier. In his journal, Vancouver documents his naming of the mountain after this man: "The weather was serene and pleasant, and the country continued to exhibit, between us and the eastern snowy range, the same luxurious appearance. At its northern extremity, Mount Baker bore by compass N. 22 E.; the round snowy mountain, now forming its southern extremity, and which, after my friend Rear Admiral Rainier, I distinguished by the name of Mount Rainier, bore N. [S.] 42 E." Peter Rainier's part in the American Revolution, when he fought against the colonials, played a part in the desire to change the name of the mountain.

on the west coast have been ". . . burdened with proper names," such as Baker, Hood, Adams, Jefferson and others. A few communities around the Pacific Northwest simply could not decide which name to support, and thus adopted the "safe" route of referring to the mountain as "Mount Tacoma-Rainier."

The reaction to the "Mount Tacoma" movement was swift and loud. Seattle newspapers denounced any attempt to remove the official name while other protests labeled the movement as "historical robbery" at work. The crux of the anti-Tacoma argument was rooted in the assumption that discoverers have the right to name what they discover, and very simply, Mount Rainier is a recorded landmark, discovered and named by Captain George Vancouver in 1792. Aside from that, the forces against renaming the mountain shuddered at the thought of the Tacomans winning the battle. Fear spread among the more hypersensitive, such as those who were concerned about what might be next on the list. The charge of "historical robbery" was thrown back and forth, and while the controversy raged on, it became necessary to refer the whole matter to the United States Board on Geographic Names in 1890. After a thorough investigation, the Board confirmed the name "Mount Rainier" as the rightful title of the great mountain of the Pacific Northwest. The decision changed the attitude of the Northern Pacific, but it only made the Tacomans redouble their efforts.

An additional incentive to continue the fight was the pending national park status of the mountain, for until the last moment before the park was created in 1899, the official name of the new park remained an uncertainty. A number of other names were being considered, including "Rainier," "Washington," "Harrison," "Paradise," "Cascade," and "Northwest." Tacomans believed their chances as good as any, especially when outside support for the name "Tacoma" came from New York newspapers, universities, the Royal Geographical Society of England, and the Smithsonian Institute.

When a national park enclosing the mountain was created by Congress in 1899, Mt. Rainier became the official name of the park. Mt. Tacoma supporters, however, continued to call the mountain by the claimed Indian name, while referring to the park as simply "Rainier National Park." The following years hardly dimmed their enthusiasm. In 1911, for example, a Tacoma newspaper printed: "It will not be many more years until the great mountain is known as Tacoma. Rainier will appear in parenthesis for awhile, and finally it will be dropped." That same editorial comment charged that it was wrong to use a name that Captain George Vancouver ". . . sought to confer in honor of a friend who had never seen the mountain and for a



Souvenir of Mount Tacoma, Washington. Courtesy of Washington State Historical Society

This advertisement dates from the height of the railroad traffic from Tacoma to "the mountain" (c. 1911-12) on the Tacoma Eastern Railroad, a subsidiary of the Chicago-Milwaukee Railroad.

few years before Vancouver visited the Puget Sound had fought against American independence." The patriotic angle was another tack, one that would pay big dividends during the next decade or so.

In the meantime, Seattle newspapers and other media dismissed the Mount Tacoma campaign as absurd and unworthy of discussion. Yet, it could not be dismissed, largely because it was a factor in the joint efforts of the two cities—mainly business interests wanting to develop the park—to get federal funds. None of the early parks enjoyed much congressional support by way of appropriations, and Mount Rainier was never high on the priority list anyway. State congressmen tried to get funds for the park, but their efforts were hampered by the lack of a united home front, mainly the cooperation of Seattle and Tacoma in promoting, backing and investing in park development. T.H. Martin, a Tacoma businessman who wanted the controversy ended, stated in 1915 that "a congressman could not appear before a committee in Washington and advocate anything without feeling that he ran in danger of stepping on the toes of someone from Seattle or Tacoma." An intercity committee was established in 1912 to act as a lobbying agent for the park, but members recalled the tension during the

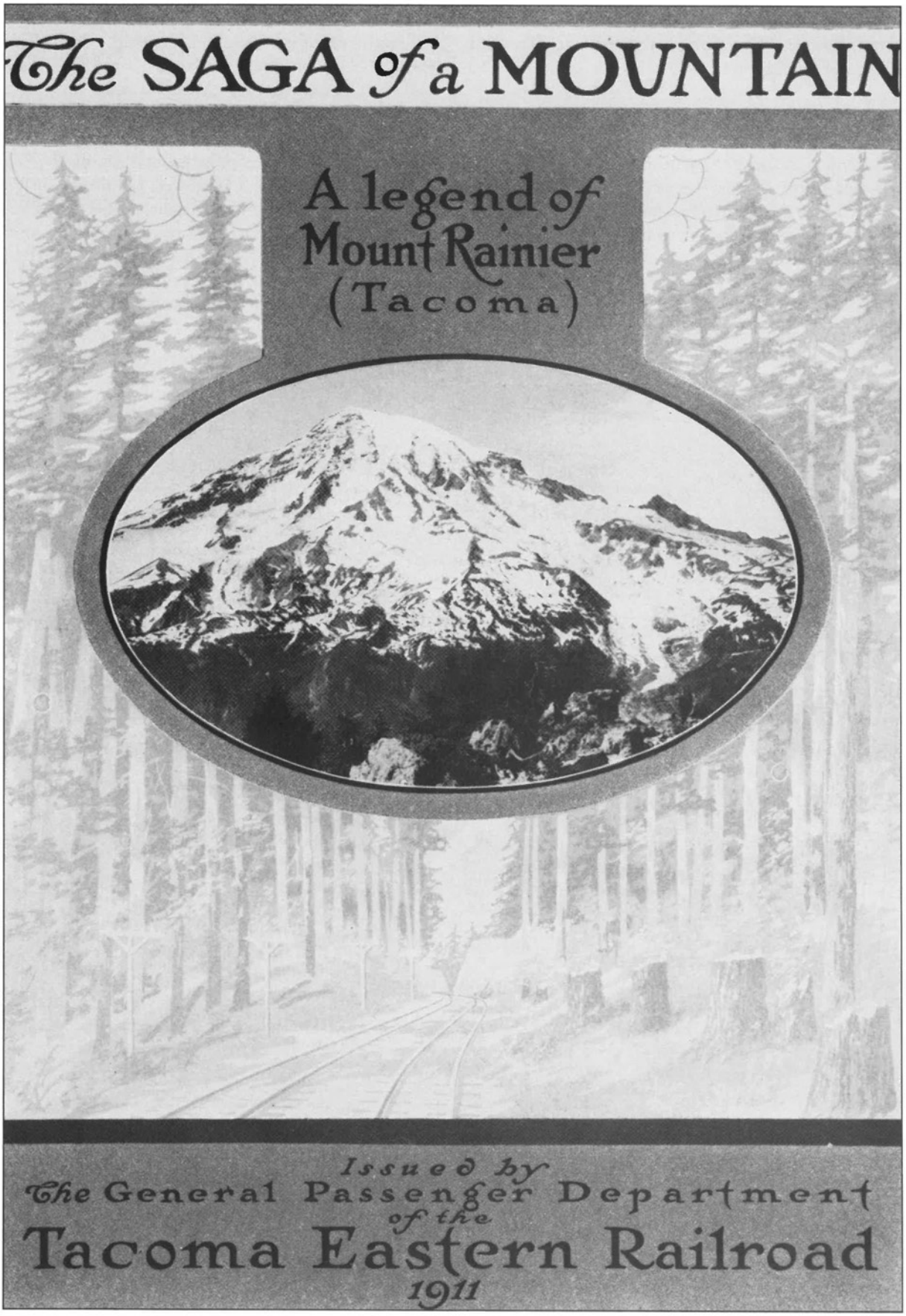
After a thorough investigation, the Board confirmed the name "Mount Rainier" as the rightful title of the great mountain of the Pacific Northwest.

organization meeting. Seattle delegates sat on one side of the room, and the Tacoma delegates on the other. One delegate remembered that, after he mentioned the name "Rainier" in a discussion, he ". . .glanced around to room to see where the brick was coming from."

Mount Tacoma supporters looked hard for every possible endorsement. They cited a speech made by the noted James Bryce, British Ambassador to the United States from 1907 to 1913, who stated that he wished Mount Rainier would be called by ". . .the more sonorous Indian name, Tacoma." Many Tacomans wished Congress had shown as much wisdom when Mount Rainier was chosen as the name for the new national park, and not just a few wished there had been even stronger protests sent to the nation's capital at the time. While Congress was not very well informed, the Tacomans assumed, at least there appeared to be more hope from the White House. Both Theodore Roosevelt and William Howard Taft were claimed as "Mount Tacoma" supporters.

More importantly, the presidential years between 1900 and 1920 created a "spirit of the times" that provided a convenient rationale to the Mt. Tacoma advocates in pressing their demands for the name change.

Starting with Teddy Roosevelt's administration, and continuing through the Taft and Wilson years, the Progressive Movement in America emphasized reform and American values. Through it all, there was always a strong patriotic appeal which carried notions of moral superiority over other lands and people, especially those of Europe. The fierce anti-European feelings of World War I fed the Mt. Tacoma movement with new ammunition. The name "Rainier," they shouted, was un-American. Conveniently dismissing the fact that England was fighting along with the U.S. for democracy during the war, the Mt. Tacoma campaigners pointed out that Rainier was the name of a British naval officer who fought against the American colonies in their desperate fight for freedom. Besides, asked one editor, what business did Captain George Vancouver have in



1792 to name practically everything in sight as he sailed up and down the Puget Sound:

I am glad that Vancouver lived in a time when transportation was slow and a time-consuming matter, for I dread to think what he would have done today, in an airship, swooping over a continent before anyone else arrived, and, in his large, liberal way, naming rivers, mountains, lakes and other scenic wonder-spots after particular friends of his, or as complimentary tributes to his superiors.

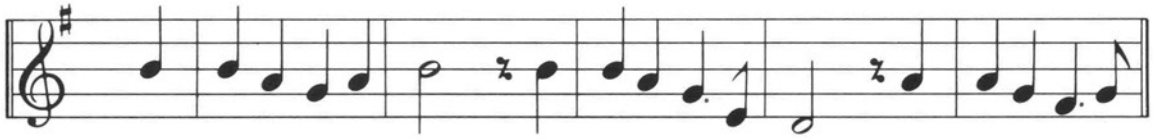
Early in 1917, through the work of Tacoma legislators in influential positions, the Washington State Legislature passed a joint memorial calling for a second hearing by the United States Board of Geographic Names. After that, a mountain committee and the Commercial Club of Tacoma raised funds to enable "Mount Tacoma" delegates to travel to Washington, D. C., to present their case. They adopted as their theme, "Justice-to-the-Mountain." Faced with a frightening situation, the "Rainier" defenders went to work and carefully laid their plans to refute point-by-point the opposition's arguments before the Board.

On May 2, 1917, for the second time in 27 years, the Geographic Board heard the conflicting evidence and then took plenty of time to mull it over. Nine days later, on May 11, the Board announced that it would take no action on the proposal

"MT. RAINIER"

(ALIAS MT. TACOMA)

Words and music by
George Gaffney.



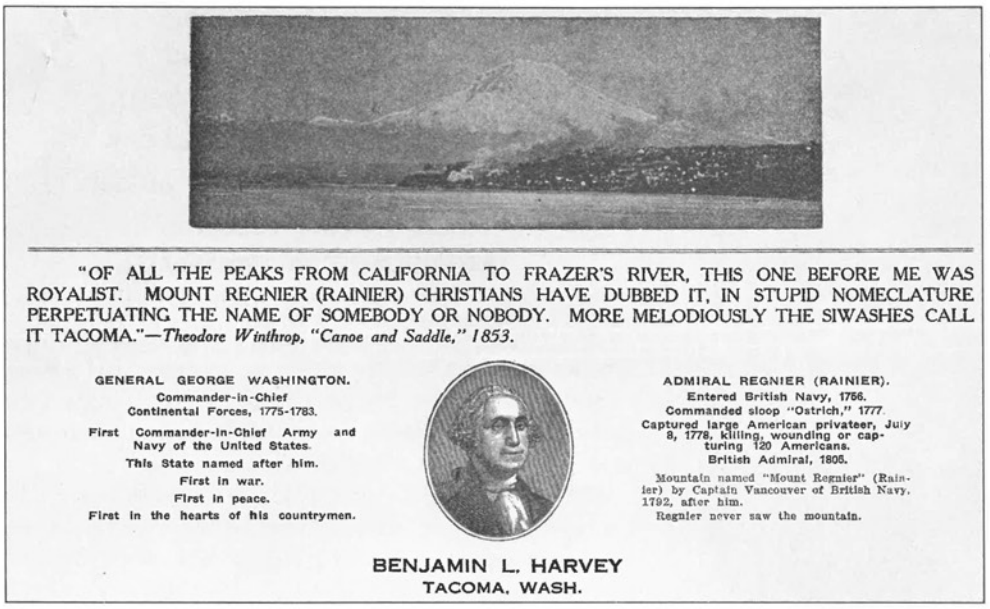
Courtesy of JoAnn Taricani

Two rival towns I know,
They merry march along,
They prosper and they grow,
Their progress non prolong.
In many things they do agree it's true,
Although they differ on this point of view,
As to the name,
So great with fame
Of a mountain king endowed with grandeur,
lofty and sublime,
Tacoma does him claim, as namesake with great pride,
O'er this Seattle feigns displeasure hard to hide;
And so one day,
'Midst this affray,
Thus this mountain king spoke up and
these stern words was heard to say.

(Chorus)
Now fair Tacoma child, come listen here
I wish you this would understand;
My name is not Tacoma but Rainier,
For so we're taught in all our land.
It's so! exclaims Seattle with a leer,
Tain't so! retorts Tacoma with a sneer.
It's Mt. Rainier, Seattle remonstrates,
A twinkle in her eye.
It's not, Tacoma hotly postulates
In posture to defy.
And so this case is standing yet this day.
And when to settled be
I venture not to say.

Tacoma will not budge
For this do not her blame;
We do not care a smudge,
To us it's all the same;
Her sprightly mood admire and enjoy
We care not such fond notions to destroy,
But will agree,
Fast friends to be,
For the road to fame and greatness
leadeth always on that way,
We'll set all petty strifes a rumbling on their go,
And in the future everlasting friendship grow,
So with good will
Our hearts we'll fill,
While this mighty king to Miss Tacoma
these words murmur still.

(Chorus)



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This letterhead dated October 7, 1912, illustrates the strong feelings and intense patriotism of many pro-Tacoma name advocates, as evidenced by the early twentieth century movement to Americanize the mountain. Benjamin L. Harvey was a Tacoma-area author and amateur linguistic historian and a leading pro-Tacoma name advocate.

to remove the name "Rainier" from the mountain. In commenting on the decision, the Board's Secretary, C. S. Sloane, stated:

> No geographic feature in any part of the world can claim a name more firmly fixed by right of discovery, by priority, and by universal usage for more than a century. So far as known, no attempt has ever been made by any people in part of the world to change a name so firmly established.

As if rehearsed, the die-hard "Mount Tacoma" boosters reacted to the decision with outspoken defiance. The *Tacoma News* sarcastically headlined an editorial, "The Mountain Re-Rainiered," and promised that the struggle was not over.

Many Tacomans were convinced that the U.S. Geographic Board had exceeded its authority in overruling the legislature of the State of Washington. Some expressed the opinion that the state should have ordered the Board to make the change instead of merely requesting it to do so.

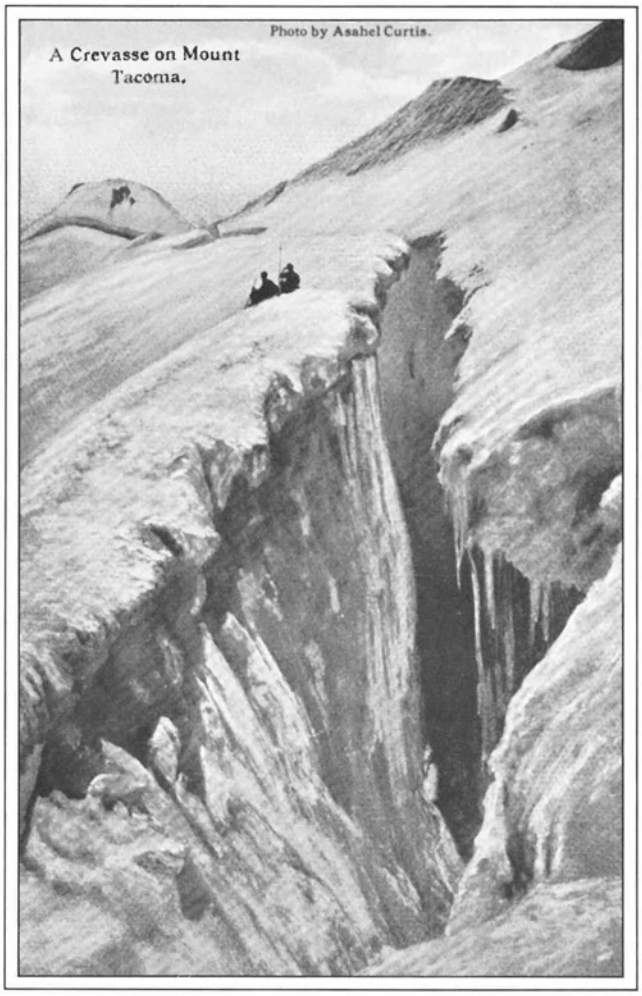
Warming up to a final campaign which would be carried to Congress itself, a Tacoman in 1921 sent a letter to the Admiralty in London with a point-blank request to check Vancouver's log to see if it had been altered to include the name "Rainier." F. C. Learmonth, Rear Admiral and Hydrographer of the British Admiralty, flatly denied the possibility in a return letter, pointing out that the name "Rainier" appears several times in Vancouver's log as published. Apparently well aware of the controversy over the mountain's name, Learmonth took the precaution to forward a copy of his letter to the U.S. Board on Geographic Names.

The attempt to discredit the Vancouver log was a "shot in the dark." Far more serious was the two-time rejection to change the mountain's name by the U.S. Board on Geographic Names. And so it became clear to the "Mount Tacoma" leaders that the only and perhaps last chance left was in Congress. In 1924, Senator C. C. Dill of Washington introduced in the United States Senate a resolution to change the name to "Mount Tacoma." During the debate on the Senate floor, Senator William Borah of Idaho forced Dill to define the nature of local support for the name change. Dill seized the opportunity to argue that there was an overwhelming desire by the people of the State of Washington to call the mountain "Mount Tacoma." He named several leading cities whose newspapers and mayors fully supported the name change, including the city of Seattle!

The claim of strong Seattle support for "Mount Tacoma" was stunning news. Everybody knew that Seattle had always been an impregnable barrier to the Tacoma cause. But Dill was telling the truth because Mayor E. J. Brown of Seattle had announced his support of the "Mount Tacoma" movement, and he informed Dill of his position via a telegram. It was a publicity stunt and it inadvertently helped the Mt. Tacoma effort.

The Portland *Oregonian*, a staunch defender of the name "Rainier," picked up on the publicity stunt angle by severely criticizing Brown while expressing concern to its readers that perhaps the Seattle mayor had suffered some kind of mental collapse. The Portland newspaper also printed that Brown's support of the Dill resolution was "just about the last straw." Brown retaliated by writing a letter to the *Oregonian* telling that newspaper to mind its own business.

At any rate, Senator Borah was satisfied with the Mount Tacoma "evidence," and the upshot was U.S. Senate approval in 1924 of Joint Resolution 64 to change the name to "Mount Tacoma." The resolution was sent to the House, where it was referred to the Committee on Public Lands for deliberation. Tacomans felt victory within their grasp, and a new outpouring



Souvenir of Mount Tacoma, Washington. Courtesy of Washington State Historical Society

of "justice-to-the-mountain" literature deluged the press. Among other things, rumors circulated that, since the name "Rainier" is associated with a brand of beer, perhaps in the past members of the U.S. Board on Geographic Names may have been bribed with a carload of the Seattle brew.

That allegation no doubt sprang from a small publication that appeared in 1924 under the title, *The Violence Done By Perpetuating the Name of Mount Rainier.* Its author, S. K. McKown, used inflammatory expressions to remind readers that the mountain's official name, Rainier, honors a British sailor who was promoted for "doing us all the damage in his power in the critical hours of our infant struggle for existence." McKown wrote that he was not a swearing man, but if he were, he would cry, "To hell with the man Rainier from Mount Tacoma."

In this last ditch effort, the city of Olympia jumped into the fracas when its chamber of commerce and the county historical society published a book called *The Great Myth—"Mount Tacoma."* The name change effort was labeled a cause "based on one of the greatest fictions of modern times."

At the end of the book, a reprinted article published in New York pointed out that Congress should not even consider the

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name change, and if Congress approved the resolution, then "about three-quarters of the names we now have in the Postal Guide" should also be changed. Congress then could repeal the entire English language in the United States and substitute a more patriotic Indian one, perhaps Sioux.

On January 15, 1925, the U.S. House Committee on Public Lands ended the long suspense by voting 9 to 4, with 5 abstaining, not to approve of the name change. Committee members from Kansas, Colorado, California and Wisconsin voted in favor, while representatives from Idaho, Utah, Missouri, California, Michigan, Vermont, Arkansas, South Carolina and New Mexico voted against. Still, it was not until 1939 that the Tacoma Chamber of Commerce finally passed a resolution of its own, urging all Tacomans and city organizations to accept the name Mt. Rainier. It was a long and bitter fight, and no one can be sure that some mysterious power might not still come and breathe new life into the old controversy.

In hindsight, it seems strange, perhaps silly, that Seattle and Tacoma spent an inordinate amount of time trying to prove which one owned Mt. Rainier. By the same token, beneath all the flimflam carried out in the newspapers and other publications, the controversy showed some enduring western characteristics: local pride, developmental patterns and, above all, love of landscape.

Arthur D. Martinson is professor of history at Pacific Lutheran University and author of a history of Mount Rainier National Park.

EDITOR'S NOTE

The old controversy came to life again in 1979. Tacoman Roger Pitsinger submitted a proposal to the State Board of Geographic Names to change the names of Mount Rainier, Mount St. Helens and Mount Baker. Had the board agreed to the proposal, the name of Rainier would have been changed to Tahoma. Mike Parker, then mayor of Tacoma, supported the new name, but there seemed to be little public support otherwise.

In fact, the board received many letters in favor of the old name, including one from Floyd Short, mayor of the Thurston County town of Rainier. He thought people in that town who had grown up with the name would be upset if it were changed. Officials of Rainier Bank and Rainier Brewery said they would not drop the name even if the change were made.

However, the proposal was unanimously rejected on the grounds that no new evidence had been presented to support the name change. Robert Hitchman, a member of the Geographic Names Board, said, "The final authority is the public itself. If they won't accept it, then no ruling by a public body is going to make any difference."

"Mt. Tacoma" as an Indian Symbol

Native American placenames represented patriotic sentiments.

By Brian W. Dippie

In naming the American land settlers used many sources, many of them Indian. What was native had appeal for the nationalist, though there was always something ironic in this borrowing. It acknowledged that the Indians were the first Americans, the original owners of the land, conquered and dispossessed by the white pioneers who had commemorated them by retaining their names. But why acknowledge those who had opposed the white man's advance and been swept aside in the name of progress? Why honor the Indians?

The Indian-head penny and buffalo-Indian nickel illustrate our young nation's ironic fondness for depicting the American love of liberty using a symbolic representation of the essence of American wilderness—the Indian.

These questions were particularly pertinent during the republic's first century, when Indian wars were an ongoing fact of western life, and they cut to the heart of white Americans' ambivalence about Native Americans. On the frontier, Indians were commonly viewed as bloody savages, red devils delighting in murder, scalping and torture. At the same time, as the purest products of the American wilderness, they served as national symbols representing an instinctive love of liberty. A visitor to Washington, D.C. in the early 1860s would have encountered a bewildering mixture of Indian symbols. In the Capitol rotunda, a bas relief of William Penn treating with amicable natives faced another showing Daniel Boone dispatching two ferocious foes. The Indian represented America's past. Ferdinand Pettrich's sculpture *The Dying Tecumseh* (1856)—one of many treatments of a dying Indian symbolizing the fate of his race—occupied a place in the Capitol. The Indian also represented America's present, the frontier moment. Horatio Greenough's 1837 *Rescue* group, showing a towering frontiersman subduing a struggling warrior about to tomahawk a helpless mother and child, was installed in the Capitol in 1853. And the Indian represented America's future as civilization displaced savagery. Thomas Crawford's allegorical Senate pediment *Progress of Civilization* (modeled in 1854 and erected nine years later) showed an emblematic America surrounded by her white children literally crowding a cluster of Indians toward a yawning grave.

Common to all three symbolic meanings was a single assumption: the Indian was a vanishing race, part of the past, futilely resisting progress in the present, doomed to extinction in the near future. But vanishing Indians were not the only symbolic Indians to be found in Washington. Another sculpture by Thomas Crawford crowned the Capitol. It showed liberty in her traditional gown, but with an American touch: a headdress of feathers symbolizing American freedom, born of the woods and rivers that shaped natives and newcomers alike, transforming transplanted Europeans into something else, a distinctive people, hardy, self-reliant, independent and liberty-loving. The figure of an Indian princess had long personified America, anticipating the befeathered Liberty atop the Capitol. And so the ambivalence. The Indian might be destined to disappear before white civilization, but the Indian also symbolized what would make that new civilization American.

Reaching into his pocket, that visitor to Washington in the 1860s might have fingered a coin or two with Indian motifs. Since 1854, a homely Liberty had been sporting an Indian headdress on the one- and three-dollar gold pieces, and the Indian-head penny had gone into circulation five years later. It would have still been jingling in the pockets of those who engaged in the debate over the merits of the names Mount Rainier and Mount Tacoma, since it remained in circulation long after the government stopped minting it in 1909. And certainly those who brought the debate to a head in the 1920s and '30s were familiar with another tribute to the First American, the buffalo-Indian nickel (1913-38). Its designer, James Earl Fraser, gave memorable form to the idea of the vanishing race in his eloquent statue of an Indian slumped forward on a drooping pony, *The End of the Trail*. In his nickel, Fraser commemorated the past and linked it to the present. Indian names on the land did the same. Rainier-Tacoma disputants may not have reflected much on the symbolism of the pennies and nickels in their pockets, but the issue between them was analogous to what Fraser meant when he said of his buffalo-Indian head design: "All I tried to do was to express in these symbols—*America*, instead of merely copying some Greek temple or god." Or, he might have added, honoring some dead "British sailor."

Brian Dippie is a professor of history at the University of Victoria, writes frequently on art of the American West and is author of The Vanishing American: White Attitudes and U.S. Indian Policy (1982).

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The great train/automobile race to Ashford from Tacoma.

Front cover: *The Pacific Brewing & Malting Company, headquartered in Tacoma, adhered to the host community's view by referring to "Mt. Tacoma" in its advertising. The cover image is taken from a Pacific Beer serving tray. The company went out of business in 1916 with the onset of prohibition in Washington. The label was later purchased by Rainier Brewing Company after the end of national prohibition in 1933. (Courtesy of Bill Mugrage, Lynnwood; the Society also wishes to acknowledge the support of the Rainier Brewing Company Foundation.)* ***Back cover:*** *Ever enterprising and resourceful, Thea Foss (a member of the WSHS Hall of Honor) provided the inspiration and at least half of the driving force behind the conception and growth of the Foss Launch and Tug Company. From a modest beginning as a rowboat rental business serving recreational boaters in Tacoma, Thea and her family eventually developed a fleet of launches and tugboats working up and down the Pacific Coast. (Courtesy of Foss Maritime Company)*