



# What's in a Name?

By Stephen Lyon Wakemen Greene

**I**F YOU THOUGHT “SMITH,” “JOHNSON,” “WILLIAMS,” “JONES” AND “BROWN” were the USA’s most common surnames, you’d be right on the money. Notice their English, Irish, and Scottish origins.

Spanish surnames, while absent from the list, are coming on strong since the turn of the century. Sooner or later, “Garcia” or “Rodriguez” or “Lopez” or all three are going to push their way into the top contenders. Coming up right behind them are Asian names like “Lee” which benefit from the fact it is also an Irish name. Japanese names are written in Kanji, which are characters usually Chinese in origin but Japanese in pronunciation. Compared to other East Asia languages, these names are remarkably varied, over 100,000, because they date only to the 19th century, following the Meiji restoration. In the beginning, Japanese people could choose their names at will.

The origin of surnames like “Smith” or “Wright” is obvious: two handyman names. Not so apparent unless you speak Welsh is “Jones,” which stands for “God is gracious.” First names “John” and “Giovanni” mean roughly the same thing in their respective languages. Frequent girls’ names include “Emma,” “Olivia” and “Ava.” The popularity of that last one goes back to the 1940s when Ava Gardner was lighting up the silver screen.

You’ll never see the name “Lucia” with an accent mark over the “i” in California. The name itself is fine; it’s that darn squiggle that’s illegal. In Tennessee, the supreme court of that state ruled “Messiah” was not an appropriate name. It’s a title.

My great-great-great-great-grandmother, Nancy Avey (1784-1866), had a profusion of names. Attached to her genealogy is this warning: “NOTE: Avey is also spelled Evey, Eby, Abey, Abee, Abi, Abie, Aby, Abye, Aebi, Aebich, Aeby, Eabi, Eaby, Eavy, Ebbe, Ebby, Ebe, Ebee, Eben, Eber, Ebey, Ebi, Beich, Ebie, Eby, Evi, Evie, Evy, Ewi, Ewie, Ewy and Uebi.” I default to ‘Avey’ since that’s apparently the way Nancy spelled her family name when she married Pastor John Emmert in 1802.

One of the worst name problems belongs to my Lyons family on my mother’s side who migrated from Kentucky to Missouri in the mid-19th century. The head of the family then was “Humberson” or perhaps “Umberson” or maybe “Newberson.” The problem was those initial letters which, when scrawled on a census form, were construed as one of the three above. Humberson, just to pick one of the three, wasn’t prone to settling down. No sooner than moving to Missouri, he took off for the 1849 Gold Rush in California. Returning several years later to Missouri with nary a nugget in his pocket, but with some nasties in his body, he died from yellow fever and was thrown into the Mississippi River.

His son, James P. Lyon (1834-1862), didn’t last much longer. True to his rural Kentucky roots, he joined the Confederate Army early in the war and died in a Montana valley after accidentally shooting himself with his own rifle. A nearby mountain was named in his honor.

Now, you may think such a person would be an unlikely candidate to have his name passed down to a Yankee great-great-grandson, such as me. But, apparently, that thought never entered my mother’s mind. She appended

“Lyon” to my middle name to go along with “Wakeman.” Two middle names was a tradition in both of my parents’ families. Whether it had arisen as a pretense for patrician heritage is unknown, but it is an inconvenient anomaly for statisticians and machines alike in this computer age. That other name was as suspect as “Lyon” because it involved the last name from my great-great-grandmother on my mother’s side, Mary Anne Wiechmann (1834-1906) whose moniker had been anglicized into “Wakeman” by Alpha Wigglesworth Toole (speaking of names, that’s a dilly, isn’t it?) in the late 1930s when the misdeeds of the Nazis had made any German name such as hers suspect.



Alpha Wigglesworth Toole

How could my mother be the same woman who so ardently had defended her acquired family name, “Greene,” from anyone who dared besmirch it by leaving the “e” off the end? And did I mention her outrage at anyone who named her father “Harry” instead of “Harrie” or her youngest son “Jeffrey” instead of “Geoffrey?”

Despite my mother’s insistence