



The author at the Rum River,
Wahkon, Minnesota.

To Change a Name

By Thomas Ivan Dahlheimer

In Minnesota, “the land of ten thousand lakes,” there is a large and beautiful lake named Mille Lacs. Its outlet river is named Rum. The Sioux name for the Rum River is Mdo-te-Mi-ni-Wakan, translated as mouth (of river) + water + sacred. According to historical documents found in *Minnesota Geographic Names* (Upham, 1920), white explorers gave the Rum River its current name in the late eighteenth century by way of a “punning translation” that “perverted the ancient Sioux name Wakan” (348). When the white men performed the punning translation, they did so by mistranslating Wakan in the Sioux’s compound name, turning a word that means sacred (or spirit) to mean an alcohol spirit, the alcohol spirit rum. Hence the word spirit, which has different definitions, was used in a punning way to mistranslate the sacred Sioux name for the river.

Because the name Wakan is derived from the sacred Sioux name for their Great Spirit, Wakan-Tonka, the Rum River’s current name indirectly desecrates the Sioux name for the Great Spirit. In a *St. Paul Daily Pioneer* article from 1868, the Rum River name is listed, along with some other geographic names, as “profane.” When referring to the Rum River’s name, an excerpt from the article reads, “The ‘profane name’ was already in use by some in 1861, as was the animosity toward the native people of Minnesota” (Wendel, 1868).

Twenty-five years ago I became aware of the profanation of the Sioux name for the Rum River while researching the

worldview behind the word *wakan*, which since the late 1960s has been embraced by the counterculture as part of a movement toward global unity and environmental sustainability. In 1983 I attended the Tekakwitha Conference held at St. John’s College in Minnesota. This is a Catholic Native American conference representing over 300 tribes, and there I heard missionary priest Stanislaus Maudin present a paper on the juncture between the Sioux concept of *wakan*—the term itself has been adopted by many other Indian tribes—and the Catholic Church’s globalization movement aimed at uniting humanity within a single united culture. Since attending that conference, I have been active within the Catholic Church’s countercultural movement to promote respect for indigenous peoples and the environment as well as for the unity of all humanity.

My efforts to show due respect for the sacred word *wakan* led me to seek a change in the derogatory name of the Rum River. I laid the foundation for establishing my Rum River name-change movement by contacting Minnesota’s Department of Natural Resources (DNR) in 1997 as well as by educating citizens in the communities along the river. Officials in the DNR explained to me the name-change process and the need to build a support base. In April 2003, I officially established a nonprofit corporation, Rum River Name Change Organization, headquartered in Wahkon, Minnesota, and created a web site at <http://towahkon.org>.

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Twenty years of work within the Catholic Church, intercultural organizations, and indigenous communities gave me the experience and contacts I needed to inform my fellow citizens along the river and throughout the state of Minnesota. I first approached the Upper Sioux, a band of Mdewakanton Sioux, one of four bands living in Minnesota. The ancestors of this band bestowed the original name of Mdoteminiwakan to the river. This group endorsed the name change, as did Cankdeska Cikana Community College, a Sioux college established to bring higher education opportunities to the people of the Spirit Lake Sioux; the Mendota Mdewakanton Community; the National Environmental Coalition of Native Americans; Joe Day, the executive director of the Minnesota Indian Affairs Council; Indian activists Russell Means and Don Wedll; and Pat Albers, chair of the University of Minnesota's American Indian Studies department.

I then contacted religious leaders. The first was Father Matthew Fox, a leader of the Catholic Church's global-culture movement. Archbishop Harry Flynn of the Archdiocese of Minneapolis and St. Paul endorsed the effort, along with 30 pastors of Christian churches located within the Rum River area. In my effort to change the river's name, I have found that there is almost unanimous support among Christian leaders of all denominations. Much of this has to do with heightened awareness of the catastrophic consequences of white settlers introducing and selling alcohol to Indian people. There is an element of "white guilt" in this appeal, along with a desire to make restitution and to help indigenous peoples free themselves from the plague of alcoholism. Beyond that, the religious leaders see that the harmful effects of alcohol and alcoholism are a problem not only in Indian communities but also among non-Indian residents of the state.

Finally, I contacted organizations concerned with multicultural education, human rights, and historical preservation. These included KOLA, an international Indigenous human rights organization; the United Nations' Secretariat of the Permanent Forum on Indigenous Issues; the National Association for Multicultural Education (NAME); the National Trust for Historic Preservation; and the Indian Affairs Committee of the Minnesota Historical Society, which endorsed the name change on March 30, 2004. The highly respected Minnesota Historical Society is a powerful ally in the campaign to change the river's name, and its support is crucial to moving local and state authorities in the direction of renaming the river the Wahkon River.

Geographic name change efforts like this one parallel recent efforts to rename team mascots. Some of those have succeeded, though the more high-profile ones, like the Cleveland Indians baseball team, have failed. Our strategy for getting the river's name changed is similar to the strategies of those who seek to change an offensive name of a high school team, for instance—assemble a base of support among Indian activists and organizations, educators, and community groups—though the individual groups approached may differ. In terms of community groups, the Rum River Name Change Organization has concentrated on religious groups for a variety of reasons, including my own

background working with the Catholic Church, the important place of the Catholic Church and other churches in the area, and the controversial nature of a river named for a frequently abused alcoholic beverage.

Nonetheless, obstacles remain. No campaign like this is a sure thing. Initially, the Wahkon City Council opposed our efforts on fiscal grounds, citing the cost of changing signs during a statewide economic crisis. The Mille Lacs band of Ojibwe violently forced the Mdewakanton Sioux out of their ancient homeland centuries ago, and some Mille Lacs fear that the name change would cause the Mdewakantons to acquire a renewed appreciation of their heritage, leading to demands to establish a shrine or museum in the Mille Lacs area. Getting the support of the Mille Lacs for a name change will take time. In fact, the entire process takes time. While a resident can try to have a place name changed by getting a petition signed by at least 15 registered voters in each county where the natural resource is located (in this case the Rum River runs through four counties, and the West Branch Rum River through three counties), each county board must decide to schedule a public hearing in which all four boards will meet together in a single place, with approval of a name change contingent on approval of a majority of the county boards. (The name change of the West Branch Rum River requires a separate meeting of three county boards.) The Minnesota DNR then has to approve the name change, as does the federal board on geographic names. The county level is the most crucial, and I plan to submit my petition once my support base is large enough to guarantee the county commissioners' approval.

In the past few decades, many people like me have become active participants in our nation's multicultural movement on a variety of levels—in local communities as well as in academia. Through multicultural education and activism people learn to understand and appreciate others more, and in doing so, they grow as people. Those who have been introduced to other cultures through multicultural education have acquired a respect for the culture and history of the diverse groups that make up this nation, and many have become the leaders of movements to redress the problems of the past like derogatory names. I believe that it is primarily due to our nation's popular multicultural movement located in schools, churches, and community organizations that many derogatory team and place names have already been changed, and because of this process we have become a better nation. 📖

References

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