By any other name ...

New book by Henry County native, "A Dictionary of Iowa Place-Names," sheds light on the history behind the names of Iowa cities, towns.

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Otley sounds oddly, Plano is plenty plain and Olds is anything but modern, but as Tom Savage can tell you, those towns have fitting titles.

Savage, you see, is the sage of Iowa city names, the genius of Hawkeye state geography, the maestro of Mississippi-to-Missouri monikers. He's also a Henry County native, and he just published one super-nifty book from the University of Iowa Press.

"A Dictionary of Iowa Place-names" is an endlessly diverting collection of the whys behind our wheres.
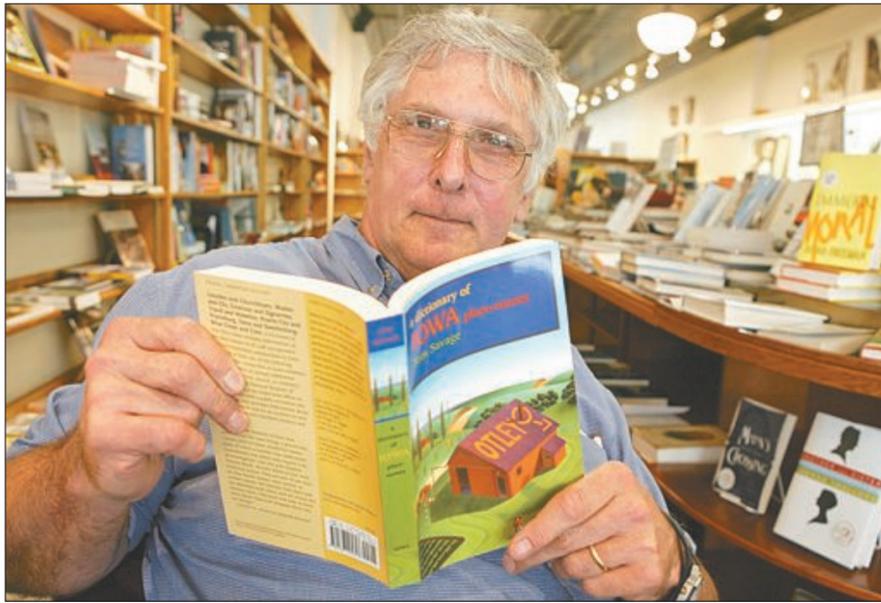
Ever wonder about Imogene? It's named after the daughter of one Capt. Anderson, a town founder. Moscow traces its lineage not to Russia, but to a community in Ohio. And Primghar is a pile-up of the initials of the eight men who started the place.

Then there's Mount Union. It was founded in 1876 on the highest hill in Henry County near a schoolhouse that doubled as a Sunday school. Since the kids came from different denominations, the settlers called it Union Sunday School.

Mini mountain. Union Sunday School. Mount Union.

Savage grew up in the opposite corner of Henry County from Mount Union on a family farm outside Salem. After graduating from Mount Pleasant High School, he bounced between Chicago, California and Iowa City before landing in Muscatine, where he spent better than two decades as a counselor and instructor at the local community college.

Now 62, he owns and runs Muscatine Books and More in the surprisingly vibrant downtown area. For the past five years, he has also collected what some might consider splatter paint for the brain — tidbits on every legitimate town in the state, and some towns that really aren't legitimate.

"I'm not an historian," he said. "I just played one in this book."

Back when Savage was a boy, he used to stare out the windows of his parents' car and ponder the strange names painted on the water towers sliding past, names like Sabula, Haverhill and Hayfield. Two bike rides across the state as an adult stirred new life into that old curiosity.

There was already a book on the subject. "From Ackley to Zwingle: The Origins of Iowa Place Names," by former Iowa State University professor Harold Dilts, came out decades ago. Unfortunately, it's out of print.

"To get it costs people like 50 bucks," Savage said.

When Dilts told him there were no intentions of publishing another edition, Savage figured the time was right for a replacement.

Apparently, so did the people at University of Iowa Press. He sent them a summary of his idea and a few rough pages, and they sent right back a reply. When the manuscript was done, they would take a look.

Savage got serious. He started his research with a book in the Muscatine library listing every Iowa post office from 1838 to 1986.

From there, he migrated to other libraries and other primary materials, including histories of long defunct railroads. After all, in the early days of the state, if the trains didn't follow a town, then towns followed the trains.

All told, Savage wracked up 598 sources in his bibliography. He limited his work to towns that appear on the Iowa Department of Transportation road map published in 2006. The transportation department, in turn, included only those towns that met at least two of the following standards: 25 residents or more; a retail business; an annual celebration or festival; a school, church or cemetery; a building on the National Register of Historic Places; a post office; or an association with a public recreation site.

Those requirements explain why, for example, Trenton in Henry County gets an entry, but Sawyer in Lee County does not. (A friend of the little guy, Savage did stick a list of former counties, towns and post offices in the back of the book.)

When conflicting stories arose about a town's origin, he tried to include both, keying on the one that seemed most plausible.

"There were three things I wanted to answer," he said. "When, where and why if I could."

He succeeded with the regularity of the Iowa seasons. Just take the listing for Burlington: "The town was surveyed in 1834. John Gray, who had participated in the planning of the town, named it in honor of Burlington, Vermont. Burlington was incorporated on June 10, 1845." Or Augusta: " ... Started as a post office called Gibson's Ferry on April 19, 1836. The name was changed to Augusta, possibly for Augusta, Georgia, on September 22, 1837. The post office was closed on January 31, 1938, but the community has survived. Augusta is not incorporated."

Savage finally put his manuscript in the mail last summer, some four years after his effort began. Back came pages of questions and clarifications from his editor, many dealing with railroads and their proper names.

"Because railroad fanatics are absolute," Savage explained.

Loren Horton, one of the deans of Iowa history scholars, was so impressed by the effort he asked to write the book's foreword. The honor was lost on Savage until he found out the State Historical Society of Iowa calls its top local history prize the Loren Horton Community History Award.

"I can recognize an expert when I see one," he said.

Finally came a coincidence — so perfect it seems almost providential — that closed the book on the book's creation. The people at University of Iowa Press told him they had found the ideal cover art: "Otley," a painting in acrylic on masonite tile by Des Moines-area artist Alan Lampe that had won the Best of Show award at the 2006 Iowa State Fair.

Savage saw the painting and had to agree. Depicting green hills, fields and, in the foreground, a giant red barn with the word "Otley" and a directional arrow for airplanes painted on the roof, it seems made for "A Dictionary of Iowa Place-Names." Even the style evokes the patron of Iowa painters, Grant Wood, but with a clarity for the digital age.

Wanting to know more, Sav-

age went to Lampe's Web site. There a pair of paintings jumped out at him. One was titled "Oakland Mills" and the other "Fire Above Lowell." Hmm? Two Henry County references.

Turns out Lampe was raised in Houghton, just a few miles from Savage's childhood home. Both men still have family in the area.

"Maybe we met somewhere along the line and didn't know it," said Lampe, a shy-sounding fellow who works as a graphic designer for an advertising firm.

They've met in person now. Lampe came over to Muscatine for a book signing just last week.

"A Dictionary of Iowa Place-Names" is out and available with a 2007 copyright date. Savage doesn't know how many copies were printed, but he's heard from friends who have seen it in the stacks of Barnes & Noble and other bookstores around the state, and he has plenty for sale at Muscatine Books and More. Send him a check and he'll send back an autographed collection of answers — about the Toole behind Toolesboro, the homesteaders at Homestead, and a dog that got hit by a train and gave a town its name.
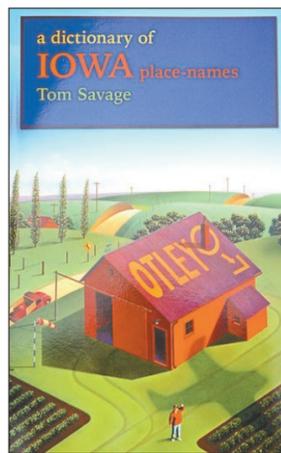
(Why spoil the fun by specifying the town here?)

For Savage, new challenges await. He and his wife are already working on a history of the Muscatine business district, complete with a sordid murder-suicide involving competing jewelers. He's also contemplating another place-name dictionary, this one on Iowa's abandoned communities.

Two questions about his first book remain: How much does he remember? And did any towns get left out?

To the first, Savage tells people not to put him "in a Trivial Pursuit situation." The information is in his brain, but it can take a little while to come out.

As for the second — well, he isn't saying. But who knows?

Maybe one day soon, he'll have to take a trip down the road to Woodbury County — to a little place called Correctionville.

John Lovretta/The Hawk Eye
Muscatine author Tom Savage, who grew up in the Henry County town of Salem, with his book "A Dictionary of Iowa Place-Names" last week at Muscatine Books and More.

What's up with What Cheer?

When folks talk to Tom Savage about his new book, "A Dictionary of Iowa Place-Names," there's one town that always comes up — What Cheer. Here's the answer straight from the text: "What Cheer was originally named Petersburgh after Peter Britton, who established the town in 1865. When the town applied for a post office, the postal department rejected the name Petersburgh. Major Joseph Andrews, a local politician, succeeded in getting the name changed to What Cheer in 1879. The name probably stems from the old English greeting or expression of happiness brought from England to New England, and then on to Iowa. Reportedly the term was used by a Scotch miner when he discovered a seam of coal near the town. What Cheer was incorporated on February 27, 1880."

Brian Morse/The Hawk Eye
"A Dictionary of Iowa Place-Names" includes references to hundreds of Iowa cities and towns, including these in Des Moines, Lee, Henry, Louisa and Van Buren counties.

John Lovretta/The Hawk Eye
The cover of "A Dictionary of Iowa Place-Names"features a painting by Houghton native Alan Lampe, who now lives in the Des Moines area.

Five towns, five stories

Yarmouth
Des Moines County

Yarmouth was established in the late 1870s and named for Yarmouth, England. In 1881, the La Vega Post Office that was nearby was closed, and mail service was moved to the "new village" of Yarmouth. The town is not incorporated.

Salem
Henry County

Salem was planned in 1836 by Aaron Street Jr. and Peter Boyer and was formally established on March 30, 1839. The community was the first Quaker settlement west of the Mississippi and became an important station on the Underground Railroad. Salem, the Hebrew word for peace, was a popular name in the Street family. This community was one of four towns around the country that the Streets named Salem. The town was incorporated on Jan. 24, 1885.

Montrose
Lee County

The location originally was the site of an Indian settlement called Cut Nose village. In 1832, Capt. James White developed an outpost at the site. He then sold his property to the U.S. government in 1834 as a military post. The fort was named Ft. Des Moines. When the fort was abandoned in 1837, David Kilbourne founded a town at the site. He called it Mount of Roses, referring to the profusion of wild roses growing in the area. The ownership of the site apparently was in dispute, as there was a lawsuit against Kilbourne, which he lost. The town was surveyed again, and title to the site was distributed to the victors in the suit. The name Montrose evolved from the name Kilbourne had given the town. It was incorporated in 1857.

Columbus City
Louisa County

The original Columbus City was established as a midpoint on the road from Burlington to Iowa City. Due to land disputes, the town site was moved to its current location in 1841. The name was drawn from Columbus, Ohio, since some of the settlers were from there and hoped that naming their new town with the same name would yield success similar to that of the Ohio city. Columbus City was incorporated on November 26, 1870.

Bonaparte
Van Buren County

Bonaparte was established in 1837 and called Meek's Mills. In 1841, the lots were resurveyed, and the name was changed to Bonaparte. There was a town site called Napoleon on the other side of the Des Moines River that was never developed. William Meek was responsible for the names of both Bonaparte and Napoleon as he was an admirer of the French emperor. The town was incorporated on Jan. 31, 1899.

Source: "A Dictionary of Iowa Place-Names"