



The Second Blow-Hole

I've mentioned before that when I was a kid my family lived in a little town near Shreveport LA called Homer, where my dad worked at a paper company on the outskirts of town. Just beyond this factory was an area on top of a low hill which at one time must have been a clay or sand quarry. On long hot summer weekends, sometimes my folks would drive me and my brother and sisters up there and we would run up and down the piles of eroded red soil, playing cowboys and cowgirls, and would swim in the pools of questionable water that collected in the low spots. As I say, this place was on the top of a hill, so we called it "The High Place." We were a creative family.

I don't think that's an official topographic designation, High Place. It reminds me of the time I asked my mother in law, who had been raised on a dairy farm, what the little hill was called that runs up to the main floor of a barn. She looked at me funny and said, "The Barn Hill."

My father-in-law had a few more obscure usages up his sleeve. Once he referred to a particular cluster of trees on his farmette as being "Just north-east of the second blow-hole."

So I've been thinking about Barn-Hills and High-Places and Blow-Holes and other such topographic handles, and it occurred to me that many references to land forms are found in folk songs (not to mention folk singers' names, like Anne Hills, Dale Evans, Greg Greenway...) Some songs that immediately spring to mind have land forms in their titles: **Down In The Valley**, **Shady Grove**, **Home on the Range**, **the Banks of the Yarrow**, **Down in the Willow Garden**, **The Farmer in the Dell**, **She'll Be Comin' Round the Mountain**, **Brennan on the Moor**, etc.

And of course many old songs, particularly those from England, Ireland, and Scotland, have geographic features somewhere in the lyrics. Here are a few examples, many of which were found in the database of the Digital Tradition website (www.mudcat.org/). Most definitions are from **onelook.com**.

From **Hermit of Eskdaleside** (trad):

When the primrose decks the sweet shaw

copse and the lark salutes the sky...

A COPSE is a dense growth of bushes. So is a SHAW.

From **The Drovers** by Keith Marsdean:

We stumbled through marsh, bog and fen...

From **onelook.com**:

MARSH: low-lying wet land with grassy vegetation; usually is a transition zone between land and water; **BOG**: wet spongy ground of decomposing vegetation; has poorer drainage than a swamp; **FEN**: low-lying wet land with grassy vegetation; usually is a transition zone between land and water...

But then I came across the following, on the International Carnivorous Plant Society FAQ (www.sarracenia.com/faq/faq4120.html):

People commonly describe wetlands with words like pond, bog, marsh, fen, and swamp, thinking these are mostly interchangeable. Actually, there are careful definitions for each of these names. The only problem is that a hydrologist may use one set of definitions, while a botanist may use another, and an ecologist may use yet another.

From **Shepherd of the Downs** (trad):

A shepherd of the downs, being weary of his port / Retired to the hills where he used to resort

DOWN: 1 a gently rolling hill. 2 (the Downs) ridges of undulating chalk and limestone hills in southern England

From **The Bonny Irish Maid** (trad):

For there's not a bird in yonder bush nor or flower in yon green glade...

GLADE: a tract of land with few or no trees in the middle of a wooded area

From **Loch Lomond** (trad)

'Twas there that we parted in yon shady glen / On the steep, steep side o Ben Lomond

GLEN: a narrow secluded valley

BEN: a high mountain

But there are oh so many such words. There's a cnap, a cnoc, a clach. There's a crag, a croft, a cruach, a clum; a fall, a fell, a firth. A heath, a howe, a shaw, a stob, a stac, a stuc. There's a swale and a sward, a tor, a tom, and tarn.

Many of these words seem to be Scottish; it's no wonder a land so in love with the details of its topography would invent a game so dependent on them as golf, with its traps, hazards, roughs, doglegs, and greens.

Maybe I just don't know where to google, but I can find almost no songs about snow formations, which, in Wisconsin, abound for a good part of the year. And I happen to have a good candidate for a snow formation song, if anyone feels the need to write one:



Sometimes in late winter, when piles of plowed snow are beginning to melt on sunny days, you can find what I like to call Slush Mesas. These occur when a snow pile is partly shaded by an object like a piece of cardboard or an old glove, or by a clump of grass that has been thrown up by a snowplow. The sun beams down and melts the snow on all sides of this object, but the object itself shades the snow under it. Gradually a column of sorts is left standing, leaning to the south, toward the sun. Above are some pictures of this snow form, taken in the ideal Slush Mesa spring melt of 2001, waiting for someone to write a song about them. Well, I suppose they aren't STILL waiting...

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