The Net Lake Enigma

After discussing the South Cape Mystery in our previous issue, we asked readers to attempt solving another enigma of similar complexity:

"Identify that city or town in the United States or in one of its territories which is named ERIN and which is most nearly due south of another such city or town by the name of NET LAKE, determining the relative north-south relationship precisely in terms of degrees and minutes of longitude."

Like the SOUTH CAPE vs. SAN ANTONIO problem, this is a problem simple on the surface but incredibly involved in reality. If you have been struggling to solve it, but fruitlessly, take heart—we are about to lift the veil on our own epic encounter with ERIN and NET LAKE.

Our first maneuver, naturally, is to consult the 1965 Edition of The Times Index-Gazetteer of the World, a reference book that lists the exact latitudes and longitudes of about 345,000 localities in the world, in convenient, compact form. Let us copy all the ERINS and all the NET LAKEs given in that gazetteer, compare the longitudes specified, and select the pair of places most nearly in perfect north-south alignment. Simple, isn't it?

Well, not quite. The gazetteer lists only 2 American ERINS, one in New York, the other in Tennessee, and lists no NET LAKE at all, anywhere in the world. The situation is ominously reminiscent of SOUTH CAPE and SAN ANTONIO, and we embark on an extensive search through atlas indexes, checking for both of our names.

IMBER "e"L ERIN, like SAN ANTONIO, yields readily to our efforts, and we gradually accumulate a file of 18 ERINS, ranging from one in Virginia to two in Texas, as far as progression westward across the United States is concerned. Mindful of our earlier experiences, we consider the possibility of an ERIN in one of the territories of the United States, past or present, but none comes to light.

The case of NET LAKE, however, is just as disturbing as was that of SOUTH CAPE. A thorough check of scores and scores of atlases published during the past century fails to uncover even a single community named NET LAKE. Forewarned by the fact that SOUTH CAPE turned out to be a cape rather than a city or town, we immediately consider the possibility that NET LAKE is really a lake, qualifying under the loose definition of a "city or town" as any geographic location, whether a collection of human habitations or a physical feature.

Atlases do not index physical features as comprehensively as they do cities
and towns, but we give the project the old college try. The Rand McNally Commercial atlases, in recent years, have indexed something like 22,000 physical features in the United States, and other atlases include shorter lists, so that we do have material to work with. Unfortunately, a thorough search fails to locate any lake called NET LAKE, either.

What next? During the course of our searches, we have repeatedly run across a place called NETT LAKE. This is the name of a small town in northern Minnesota, at the western edge of St. Louis County, on the border of Koochiching County. It is on the eastern shore of a lake also called NETT LAKE. The greater part of the lake is in Koochiching County. Is it possible that the NET LAKE for which we are looking is merely a spelling error for NETT LAKE?

It is possible, but seems improbable. Still, in the absence of any genuine NET LAKE, let's see what kind of a match we can effect between NETT LAKE and one of the many ERINS at our disposal. The fact that the names NET and NETT are identical in pronunciation makes it easier for us to accept the spelling discrepancy.

The town called NETT LAKE is at a longitude of 93°05' West. The lake called NETT LAKE covers a substantial area, and where an area is involved, we would seem to be free to measure the longitude of any point within the area. Accordingly, we determine that the eastern edge of the lake has a longitude of about 92°57' West, and the western edge a longitude of about 93°10' West. We had to be a little sneaky to obtain these measurements, but anything is fair in love, war, and contesting. You see, the position of the lake called NETT LAKE varies just a little in different atlases, so we made a number of different measurements, in order to obtain the easternmost and the westernmost longitudes that could possibly be claimed for the lake, to increase our chances of finding an excellent alignment with one of our ERINS.

Our file discloses one ERIN in Jasper County, Texas, at a longitude of 94°00'. Compared with the western edge of the lake, this involves a difference of 50 minutes. A second ERIN appears in St. Croix County, Wisconsin, at a longitude of 92°30'. Compared with the eastern edge of the lake, this involves a difference of only 27 minutes. This second ERIN is interesting, in a way—Wisconsin is generally thought about as being east of Minnesota, yet the ERIN in it comes close to being exactly south of a point in Minnesota. A third ERIN turns up in Rice County, Minnesota.

Computing the longitude of this third ERIN is troublesome. Quite a few atlases do not appear to list it at all, and many of those that do list it in the index fail to show it on the map. We eventually discover that the town is also known as TENOD, appearing on some maps under that name, and we actually find the name ERIN on a few very old maps. Its exact longitude is 93°15', for a difference of only 5 minutes with the western edge of our lake.

Have we reached the end of the trail? Maybe, maybe not. We can't help being bothered by three things: (1) the spelling discrepancy; (2) the fact that we had to use a lake instead of a town in our comparison; and (3) the 5-minute longitude difference, which is 5 minutes short of perfection. Only one course of action is open to us—we must continue the search, redoubling our efforts.

WORD WAYS
Gazing reflectively at the map of Minnesota—the map on which our best match to date appears—we suddenly stumble on a most curious thing. In Anoka County, there is a town by the name of LAKENETTA or LAKE NETTA. Its longitude appears to be about $93^\circ13'2''$, for a difference of only $1\frac{1}{2}$ minutes with the ERIN still further south in Minnesota. Moreover, LAKENETTA is just south of a small lake, not named on the map we are examining, which extends westward to longitude $93^\circ15'$. Can we find an atlas in which LAKENETTA is designated NET LAKE? Does the lake on the southern shore of which the town is located also bear the name of LAKE NETTA, or possibly of NET LAKE? The possibilities that unfold before us are almost unbelievable—a perfect match seems to lie within our grasp!

Energetic investigation reveals that the name of the lake is COON LAKE, entirely useless in our quest. There is no evidence of any sort that the town was ever called NET LAKE. Here is an ideal match that might have been, but simply isn't. We must continue searching.

In a special atlas for the state of Wisconsin, Guide to Fun in Wisconsin (Clarkson Map Company, Kaukauna, Wisconsin, 1966), we come upon a tiny lake actually bearing the name NET LAKE. It is in the southeastern portion of Iron County, at a longitude of $90^\circ01'11''$ West. Here is a possible breakthrough, if we can capitalize on it. Consulting our file of ERINS discloses one in Calhoun County, Mississippi, at a longitude of about $89^\circ04'$. We can't be certain of the exact longitude because the place is not shown on the map. We are told only that this ERIN receives its mail through the town of Atlanta, in neighboring Chickasaw County. However, the approximate longitude difference involved in the new match is 5 minutes, and an error of even several minutes can't save the pair, as compared to the matches that we have already established. We must move on.

Iron County, Wisconsin reminds us of Iron County, Michigan. In several atlases, we have noted a NET RIVER, a river in Iron County, Michigan. Is it possible that this river flows out of or into a tiny lake called NET LAKE? Possible it certainly is, but intensive investigation fails to unearth any supporting evidence.

A bright idea finally occurs to us. A "formist" friend of ours, a member of The National Puzzlers' League, owns priceless word lists, sorted by letter length, compiled from strange reference books, including numerous atlases and gazetteers. We ask him to check his lists for a NET LAKE in the United States. Sure enough, he has one on his lists, but all he can tell us is that the name appears in the index to Steier's Atlas of Modern Geography, published by Justus Perthes' Geographical Institute, Gotha, Germany, Tenth Centenary Edition, 1925.

We rush to a large library and obtain a copy of that atlas. Yes, it shows a NET LAKE—the same lake already familiar to us as NETT LAKE, in northern Minnesota. Strange, is it not, that a foreign atlas should contain a place name not found in American atlases? We decide to check other foreign atlases, and find NETT LAKE spelled as NET LAKE both in the Atlante Internazionale del Touring Club Italiano, published by the Touring Club Italiano, Milan, Italy, Fifth
Edition, 1938, and in The Encyclopaedia Britannica, 11th Edition, 1910-1911. Each of these three European reference works shows the lake, spelling it NET LAKE, but does not show the town of NETT LAKE east of the lake. If the lake can be spelled either with one T or with two T's, does the same go for the town?

We now examine large American atlases that do not index physical features. In Hammond's New World Atlas (Doubleday-Doran, Inc., Garden City, New York, 1939) we find the lake given as NET LAKE, but the town east of it as NETT LAKE! We make the same discovery in The New World Loose Leaf Atlas (C. S. Hammond & Company, Inc., New York, New York, 1929). Investigating further, we learn that, at some time in the 1930's, the United States Board on Geographic Names rendered an official decision in favor of the spelling NETT LAKE. Apparently, this decision concerned only the lake, not the town, explaining why we have found variations in the spelling of one name but not of the other.

The Britannica atlas section is fully indexed as part of the general index to that encyclopedia. How did we overlook NET LAKE in our original search, a search that included the 11th Edition of the Britannica? We check the index again, and find that NET LAKE is not in its proper alphabetical position, between NETHYBRIDGE, Scotland and NETLEY, Hants. Instead, it has been listed as NET, Lake, Minnesota, between NESZLER, Victor and NET (fabric). We didn't look for it there. How many other indexes are set up unalphabetically? We go through innumerable sources for a second time, checking for NET instead of NET LAKE, but to no avail. Nothing new comes to light.

In 1906, the United States Geological Survey published the Fourth Edition of A Dictionary of Altitudes in the United States, by Henry Gannett (Bulletin No. 214, Government Printing Office, Washington, D.C.). Listed in this large reference book are thousands of odd locations around the country, not found elsewhere. We plow through the many indexes of the book, looking for a NET LAKE. The quest, as almost always, is fruitless.

We remember something. A few years ago, we laboriously compiled an index to the physical features and other unconventional places named on the maps of the American Highway Atlas, prepared by the H. M. Gousha Company, Chicago, Illinois, and San Jose, California, printed and distributed by the I. S. Berlin Press of Chicago, Illinois, and sold by the Follett Publishing Company, also of Chicago. No edition date is shown in the atlas, but it appears to be of circa 1961 vintage. We turn to the “Lakes” section of our 40,000-card index, and find a NET LAKE listed as being shown both on Page 45 and on Page 92 of the Gousha atlas. Both pages turn out to show maps of Minnesota, and it takes only a few minutes to locate NET LAKE: a microscopically small lake in Pine County, on the border of Carlton County, a few miles east of the town of Nickerson. Since it is north of a portion of St. Croix County, Wisconsin, where we have found an ERIN, intense interest focuses on the new NET LAKE. Unfortunately, the Gousha atlas, like many road atlases, does not provide any latitude-longitude indications, and the ERIN in Wisconsin is not shown on Gousha maps.

Studying the map on which NET LAKE appears, we notice that NET LAKE is in an erin in Wisconsin. McNally (arriving at 2:10, precisely speaking) established a word surgery.

One of the words is spelled with one T, and the other with two T's. Does this situation extend to its semantic relationships?

Come to think of it, we always thought that there is a connection between these two words.

Are there really two ways of spelling this word?

Once upon a time, we might have said that we are facing a word error. Now, we say “slippery word error.”

While it is often the case that words have final meaning, we think that the moon’s given name is officially established and truck used for any word error.

The four-letter word that research on...
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is in an exact vertical line with KARLSBURG, a town in Burnett County, Wisconsin. We measure the longitude of KARLSBURG in one of our Rand McNally Commercial atlases, as equivalent to the longitude of NET LAKE, arriving at a figure of 92° 30'. This is exactly the same longitude previously established for the ERIN in St. Croix County, Wisconsin. ERIN, Wisconsin, is precisely south of this NET LAKE in Minnesota. We have found an ideal solution to the problem posed—we have penetrated the NET LAKE enigma.

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FROM "U" TO "V"

One of the most difficult feats in English verbal acrobatics is to take a word spelled with a "U" and to change that "U" to a "V," producing an equally legitimate word. To our knowledge, just about the only candidate for such word surgery was VALUE, which can be transformed into VALVE.

Comes now Marty Fingshut of Toronto, Ontario, Canada, and points out that there are numerous word pairs of like caliber. His best discoveries:

- LEU (a Romanian coin)
- LEV (a Bulgarian coin)
- MOUÈ (a pouting grimace)
- MOVE
- ROUÈ (a debauchee or rake)
- ROVE
- TAU (letter of the Greek alphabet)
- TAV (letter of the Hebrew alphabet)

Are there any examples involving more common words?

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O MARIA, MY MARIA!

Once upon a time, Ripley's Believe It or Not discovered the word SLOUGH, seemingly unique for being pronounced in three different ways, depending on its semantic value. If we are talking about a marshy, reedy pool or backwater, we say "sloo"; referring to an area of soft, muddy ground, we say "slou"; speaking of the cast-off skin of a snake, we say "sluf."

While it is easy enough to find other three-way words, and even four-way words, it is almost impossible to match the simple elegance of SLOUGH. We have finally succeeded with the word MARIA. Pronounced "ma-ree-a," it is a girl's given name; sounded "ma-ree-a," the word designates the dark plains on the moon's surface; voiced as "ma-rye-a," it is short for BLACK MARIA, a truck used for hauling prisoners off to jail.

The four-way word? It is OS, but we'll let you do the required dictionary research on it yourself. Happy hunting!