On Searching For Three-L Lamas

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A one-L lama, he's a priest;
A two-L lama, he's a beast;
But I'll bet you a silk pyjama
You never saw a three-L lama.

Ogden Nash

It is a generally accepted premise in logology that English words do not contain triplets of the same letter. As Ogden Nash points out, one does not expect to encounter English words containing LLL—or, for that matter, EEE or SSS. Recently, I had occasion to peruse a listing of tetragrams derived from the Second Edition of Webster's International Unabridged Dictionary and found that these triplets apparently do occur in English words. The list was obtained by putting every word in the dictionary on IBM punch cards and then sorting for four-letter groupings. The results are printed in alphabetical order and show EEER, LLLE and SSSH each appearing in at least one English word. Was this a machine error, or do such words actually exist?

By diligent combing of the list, it is possible to add one more letter to each chain by searching for the tetragram ending with the triplet. In this way we find that we are looking for words containing CEEER, ALLLE and ESSSH. We also find that there is a word with OSSSH.

In all cases it seems likely that we are dealing with compound words made up of a word ending in a doublet and a suffix appended without a hyphen. For example, ALLLE suggests a word ending in ALL with the attached suffix -LESS. Indeed it turns out that the word we are seeking is WALLLESS (having no wall), which occurs below the line in Webster's Unabridged Second Edition. Why this spelling is acceptable is unclear since WALL-LIKE and GALL-LESS are both hyphenated and since no other contemporary dictionary allows this spelling.

In the case of ESSSH and OSSSH, a suffix which comes to mind is -SHIP indicating office or position, and a little searching reveals that HEADMISTRESSSHIP
appears above the line as a regular spelling for the directress of a girls' school. On the other hand, the Random House Dictionary gives the spelling as HEAD-MISTRESS-SHIP and the Oxford English Dictionary gives HEAD-MISTRESS-SHIP.

OSSSH presents somewhat more of a problem. The only common word ending in OSS which could be used with -SHIP is BOSS; however, Webster's gives only the spelling BOSS-SHIP. Likely constructions might be made with CROSS as in CROSS-STITCH and CROSS-SECTION, but all such words are invariably hyphenated. Even more perplexing is the chain CEEER. A possibility might include the suffix -ER; however, words ending in CEE are relatively rare, especially those which might employ this suffix. Further searching of the original list for tetragrams ending in CEE reveals that the letter before the C must be A, C, M, N, O, R, U, X or Y. Of these, N and R seem the most probable; nevertheless, no solutions have thus far come to light. The problem then is left to the reader: can words be found containing OSSSH or CEEER?

Reference