THE MYSTERY OF BLACK ISLAND

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You have entered a prize contest that requires you to identify small map sections. You are presented with several dozen such sections, photographed from miscellaneous maps of different parts of the United States. Each section is 1" x 1" in size, or even smaller, and shows one or two very minor place names. Your problem is to determine in which state each section is located.

The very first section you decide to try and identify is about half an inch by three-fourths of an inch in size. It shows three exceedingly small islands. The middle one, which is by far the largest of the three, is labeled BLACK ISLAND, in small type capitalized throughout. Northwest of the island group is a much larger name, probably that of the body of water in which the islands are located, in italicized type. You see only the last two letters of this name: -AS. There is nothing else in the map section. Where is BLACK ISLAND?

Since you have participated in map contests before, and are quite familiar with many different atlases, you recognize the type styles shown immediately. They are the styles used in the American Highway Atlas published circa 1961 by the H.M. Gousha Company, then located in Chicago, Illinois and in San Jose, California, but now in Comfort, Texas. The atlas in question has been used in previous map contests, and you have prepared a complete list of all coastal features in that atlas, by going over every map in the atlas, inch by inch. Identifying BLACK ISLAND will be a cinch, and you go to your private index. In minutes, you have found the island -- it is off the coast of Maine, east of Swans Island and south of Mount Desert Island.

Although this is the only BLACK ISLAND in your index, it is obviously not the right one. The shape of the island does not match the shape you see in the map section you are trying to identify; the two smaller islands in the section cannot be adequately explained; there is a slightly larger island to the northwest, Placentia Island, which would have to show between BLACK ISLAND and the -AS name, but which does not; and there is no accounting for the -AS name, the bodies of water between Jericho Bay and Casco Bay.

You look at the Contest Directions, which state that this Blackburn Island, about 60 miles south of Portland, is one of two islands in Casco Bay.

Frustrated, you return to the general index of the H. M. Gousha Company's Highway Atlas. You find fifty sections with -AS names; you find everything; and you find exactly where this island is located.

Differently, you begin a more detailed index of the atlas, you go over every entry for Sound (partial), and you find two of these islands, one being much smaller than the one you are looking for. You find exactly what you are looking for -- the island north of Portland, including the -AS name.

A survey of island formation that was conducted in the late 1940s includes this island, the bodies of water between Portland and Casco Bay, and some others. It is certainly not the right island. You are certain that the island named Black Island, Placentia Island, Casco Bay, is the right one.

You go back to the Contest Directions, which state that this Black Island, about 60 miles south of Portland, is one of two islands in Casco Bay.
bodies of water northwest of BLACK ISLAND being Blue Hill Bay and Jericho Bay, both of them minor inlets of the Atlantic Ocean. In addition, the Gousha map abbreviates the word ISLAND to ID.

You look long and hard at the map of Maine, but the fact remains that this BLACK ISLAND cannot be the right one. You do notice that, about 60 miles to the northeast, also along the coast of Maine, there are two bays with names ending in -AS: Machias Bay and Little Machias Bay. An interesting coincidence, but nothing more!

Frustrated in your initial attempt to identify BLACK ISLAND, you turn to the most comprehensive indexes of physical features available to the general public: those included in recent editions of the Rand McNally Commercial Atlas and Marketing Guide. Each commercial atlas indexes an estimated 22,000 such features, though in the form of fifty separate state indexes. Going through all fifty indexes, you find exactly one BLACK ISLAND: the one in Maine. No other seems to exist.

Different atlases and gazetteers include different places, and you begin a more extensive search. In the 1914 edition of the commercial atlas, you discover three small islands south of Florida, in Barnes Sound (part of Florida Bay), west of Long Island. The middle one of these islands is designated BLACK ISLAND. This island seems even smaller than the one in your section, and there is no explaining the -AS name, although you notice the Marquesas Keys about 105 miles to the southwest, and the Dry Tortugas about 145 miles southwest. A survey of other atlases adds nothing to the picture except the information that some old atlases give the name Marquesas as Maronesas, and some recent atlases appear to identify the group of islands that includes this BLACK ISLAND as the Black Betsy Keys. You can never be certain, because the appearance and position of very small islands varies from one atlas to another. Reluctantly, you forget about Florida.

Going further back, you examine the 1893 edition of Rand McNally & Co.'s Enlarged Business Atlas and Shippers' Guide, predecessor of today's commercial atlases. In Georgia, you make a discovery. Off the coast of the mainland, southwest of Sapelo Island, between Herds Island and Wolf Island, there is a third BLACK ISLAND. This time, however, there isn't even a remote resemblance between the atlas island and your map section. The major islands surrounding this BLACK ISLAND are absent from your section, and the -AS name cannot be explained.

Your patient search continues. In The Official Atlas of the Civil War, published by Thomas Yoseloff, Inc. in 1958, you find several
maps showing a BLACK ISLAND off the coast of South Carolina, east of James Island, south of Charleston and north of Folly Beach. This makes your fourth BLACK ISLAND, but you are no closer than before to identifying your map section; as usual, nothing matches.

You investigate gazetteers as well as atlases. In a government gazetteer of the coastal areas of Alaska published around 1940, you find listed three different islands called BLACK ISLAND! One is south of Herbert Graves Island, near the southwest shore of Chichagof Island (not to be confused with Chirikof Island, also in Alaska). A second is south of the Behm Canal, in Revillagigedo Channel. The third is northwest of Hassler Island, in the Behm Canal.

The largest readily available map of Alaska is the Rand McNally Imperial Map of Alaska, measuring 48" x 34". It is easy enough to find all three locations on this map, but none of the three islands is shown on the map -- evidently, all three are too small -- and there is no accounting for the -AS name. Casually, you notice a Cape Douglas and a Dark Island northwest of Kodiak Island. If Dark Island were also known as BLACK ISLAND, and if there were other small islands near Dark Island .....

You give further thought to your private Gousha index. There is another approach possible. Why not compile a list of all oceans, seas, gulfs, bays, sounds, inlets, and channels with names ending in -AS, and then examine them on Gousha maps, as well as other maps, to see if a BLACK ISLAND is near one of them? The idea is excellent, and you get to work immediately. With the aid of your index, you find six potential candidates: Matanzas Inlet, Florida; Little Machias Bay, Maine; Machias Bay, Maine; Tawas Bay, Michigan; Hatteras Inlet, North Carolina; and Aransas Bay, Texas. You study all six bays and inlets with extreme thoroughness, in many different map sources. You do not find a BLACK ISLAND in or around any of them.

Since the map section is so obviously a Gousha product, you send a copy of it to the headquarters of the Gousha Company in Texas, and ask for assistance. The reply is a disappointing one. You are informed that, while the type styles shown in the map section are, indeed, used by Gousha, they are popular faces also used by other publishers, so that there can be no certainty of finding this particular map section on a Gousha map. Furthermore, even if it is from a Gousha map, the job of looking for it is impossible. The Gousha Company has a large library full of its own map publications, and examining its contents in quest of this BLACK ISLAND would be a colossal task, quite out of the question.
A new thought occurs to you. Perhaps the map section is from a very detailed map showing part of a very wide river the name of which ends in -AS; the Arkansas River, for instance. Certainly, there are many, many islands in the rivers of the United States, and BLACK ISLAND could be one of them. If the river were unusually wide at the point where BLACK ISLAND was located, its banks might not show in the little map section tantalizing you.

Unfortunately for your cause, most maps are very lackadaisical in identifying river islands by name. A particularly sad case is the enlarged map of the St. Louis district included in the Gousha atlas. Shown on this map are portions of the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers. A careful count reveals 44 islands in the two rivers, not a single one of which is named! By looking into other atlases, you can learn the names of some of them -- Bryan, Pelican, Cora, Ellis, Skinner, Mobile, Chouteau, Mosenthein, Cabaret, Arsenal. That's ten of them; what are the names of the other 34 islands? Is one of them a BLACK ISLAND? Who knows?

Yet another line of inquiry bubbles up from the depths of your tormented soul. The sponsor of the contest has asked you to identify the state in which each map section is to be found. Investigating other map sections in the series, you discover that one of them is in the District of Columbia, which is not a state. If this slight deviation from the rules is possible, may not a somewhat greater deviation be possible? Could one section, such as the BLACK ISLAND section, be from a present or former possession of the United States, or from a Canadian province? In your desperate situation, you are ready to grab at any straw, and you commence a new search.

Two islands named BLACK ISLAND quickly appear in Canada. One is in Manitoba, near the southern end of Lake Winnipeg (not to be confused with Lake Winnipegosis, which sounds like a medical condition). The other is off the coast of Labrador, seemingly in or near Hamilton Inlet (you have only the latitude and longitude to go by, listed in a large gazetteer -- the island is not shown on the largest maps at hand). Neither island can be made to match your map section, by any stretch of the imagination.

Diligent research discloses a BLACK ISLAND in Antarctica. It is along the coast of the Ross Sea, which is also the location of the American "Little America" base. Unfortunately, it happens to be right next to Scott Base, belonging to New Zealand, making it impossible to construe BLACK ISLAND as being American.

Ever stranger ideas intrude themselves on your consciousness. One of the larger islands in the Philippines is Negros Island, and
"Negros" means black in Spanish, though in the plural. Northwest of Negros Island is Luzon Island. Near the southern coast of Luzon Island is the municipality of Batangas, on Batangas Bay. Maps of Oceania show the Philippines as very small islands, and those islands were formerly a possession of the United States. If a map could be found on which Negros Island was called BLACK ISLAND... You dismiss the thought as unworthy of further consideration.

Whither next? There are many far more detailed maps of the United States to be examined. To begin with, there are the 626 sectional topographic maps covering the United States inclusive of Alaska, prepared by the United States Geological Survey, all of them showing details not found in the largest atlases ever published. Backing them up are thousands of topographic quadrangle maps, in which the details are so magnified that you can see individual houses as points on the map.

Should you ever finish checking all of the topographic maps without finding your BLACK ISLAND, you can go on to checking equally comprehensive sets of World Aeronautical Charts; official county highway maps; hydrographic maps; city street maps and suburban maps; National Forest Reserve maps; Coast and Geodetic Survey Maps published by the United States Department of Commerce; and many other map collections. After all, BLACK ISLAND can be anywhere, such as in the center of a small pond in a forest somewhere.

In the course of your continuing map investigation, your mind makes a note of a small, unnamed island in Lake Mead, in southern Nevada. For no consciously discernible reason, that island begins to fascinate you. What is its name, anyway? A new search through a long series of conventional map sources produces no reply; most maps don't even show that island.

Some subconscious factor inside you will not let you rest. You go to large map libraries and consult topographical and other detailed maps of the Lake Mead area. Lo and behold, there is the island, and it just happens to be named BLACK ISLAND. It is near the western end of Lake Mead, south of a small bay designated as Las Vegas Bay. Not only that, but the shape of the mapped island is almost identical with the shape shown on your tantalizing map section, and it has smaller islands near it also conforming to your map section.

A mind-shattering realization comes over you: yes, you have actually found the BLACK ISLAND you set out to find! The mystery of BLACK ISLAND is no more!