If you are finding it a bit monotonous to put Dateline, Anywhere, U.S.A. on every letter you write, why not consider moving to some place with a more intriguing name? How about Rabbit Hash, located in Boone County, Kentucky -- or Yum Yum, located in Fayette County, Tennessee? Many people are aware of the fabulous variety of placenames to be found in the United States, but few logological studies have been made upon them. The purpose of this article is to give some hint of the many different word studies which might be carried out; perhaps some readers of Word Ways will take up the challenge of an unplumbed field.

Fortunately, little is needed to get started. In this article, for example, I have restricted myself to only three references, available in most libraries: (1) U.S. Official Postal Guide (1931 edition); (2) Rand McNally Commercial Atlas and Marketing Guide (1953 and 1968 editions); (3) Official U.S. Postal Zip Code Directory. The really avid student of placenames may find it necessary to consult older atlases or state gazetteers for long-vanished placenames. For brevity, I use the standard two-letter abbreviations for states authorized for use with Zip Code.

First, let us consider research on the names themselves -- their length, their frequency, their logological patterns. What, for example, is the shortest placename in the United States? Ignoring abbreviations such as VA for Veterans Administration, a search of the Zip Code directory reveals no two-letter names. However, there are at least eight in the 1968 Rand McNally Guide: Ai AL NC OH, Ka VA, O.K. KY, Oz KY, Ti OK and Uz KY. The older edition contains the apparently defunct names Ax ME, Ed KY, Ep KY, Ho TN, Ko TX and T.S. MD; the 1931 Postal Guide adds Ai GA, Ox WV and Vi KY. Undoubtedly the 17 thus far uncovered represent the tip of the iceberg; it is even likely that a single-letter placename can be found in some obscure reference. Proceeding in the other direction, I have counted more than 900 towns with three-letter names. Most are quite tiny -- only 12 had populations exceeding 2500 in 1960, and the largest are Rye NY, Bay OH and Ada OK. Curiously, three-letter names
are unusually concentrated in central Appalachia -- Kentucky, Virginia, West Virginia, Pennsylvania. What is the longest one-word placename in the United States? One candidate is Kleinfeltersville PA with 17 letters, but it is likely that patient research will improve this.

What is the commonest placename in the United States? Here a great deal of research is needed in order to distinguish among the many contenders for this honor: Arlington, Ashland, Auburn, Buffalo, Burlington, Canton, Chester, Clayton, Cleveland, Danville, Dayton, Dover, Eureka, Fairfield, Fairview, Farmington, Franklin, Glenwood, Greenville, Hanover, Hillsboro, Hudson, Jefferson, Kingston, Lebanon, Lincoln, Madison, Manchester, Marion, Milford, Milton, Monroe, Newport, Oakland, Oxford, Plymouth, Princeton, Randolph, Riverside, Salem, Springfield, Troy, Union, Vernon, Warren and Washington. Each of these is known to occur in at least 20 states; is it possible to find a placename in all 50 states?

Some town namers may have been influenced by logology. Renner, SD TX, Semmes AL, Harrah OK and Eleele HI are six-letter palindromes, but they are eclipsed by Okonoko WV, noted by Dmitri Borgmann. He also points out that Apollo PA makes a fine eight-letter palindrome (not intended by the town fathers). However, Adaven, Nevada was surely named with malice aforesight. Long tautonyms are uncommon: besides Yum Yum, there is Pawpaw IL and Paw Paw KY MI WV. It is likely that the people who named Retsof NY, Reklaw TX, Rettil WA, Trebloc MS and Remlap AL strove for the unusual by spelling a common surname backwards. Deliberate reversal-pairs are rare: Orestod and Dotsoro in Eagle County, Colorado and Colver and Revloc in Cambria County, Penna. Nikep MD has a railroad station named Pekin. However, it is probable that Micon and Nocarn VA, Nomad and Damon MI, and Nova and Avon OH are unintentional reversal-pairs, as they are located in different counties.

Those with somewhat different tastes may want to look for groups of placenames of related significance. One’s task is easiest if one defines a finite group of possibilities, such as the chemical elements or the surnames of U.S. Presidents. It is clearly impossible to find placenames for all the elements (although Antimony, Boron, Carbon, Cobalt, Copper, Gold, Iron, Krypton, Lead, Mercury, Neon, Platinum, Radium, Silver, Sulphur, Tungsten and Zinc have been found). It is possible to compose a nearly complete Presidential list. In fact, the only omission is Eisenhower; the best one can do for him is David IA, Dwight IL, Ike MO TX and Ikes Fork WV.

Washington AR CA CT GA IL IN IA KS KY LA ME MA MI MS MO NB NH NJ NC OK PA RI TX UT VT VA WV
Adams CA IL IN KS KY MA MN NB NY NC ND OK OR TN WI
Anyone for Vice-Presidents? For starters, there's Agnew CA NB WA WI.

Far greater creativity may be exercised if the boundaries of the subject-matter are somewhat vague. Possible topics are almost endless; I have compiled lists of colors, birds, fruits, flowers, trees, wild animals, livestock and poultry, and past and present automobiles. For illustration, consider astronomical placenames:

All life flows ultimately from the sun, so it is fitting that many communities bear its name. We note Sun LA MS WV, Rising Sun...
MD, Morning Sun LA, Sunrise LA NC WY, Sunset AZ AR ID LA ME SC TX WA, Sundown NY, Sunlight WV, Sunshine LA ME WY and Solar UT. Finally, Louisiana is the greatest sun-worshipper as this state is represented four times. The surface of the sun contains Sunspot NM, and its outer atmosphere is the Corona AL CA NM SD TN. Similarly, solar activity produces Northern Lights PA or Aurora AR CO IL IN LA KS ME MN MO NB NY NC OH OR SD UT WY. The light of the sun (or its absence) produces Dawn MO OH TX VA, Dusk WV, Light AR VA, Darker WV, Day AR CA FL KS MO, Night KY OH, Daylight TN, Twilight SD WV, Noontday GA TX, Starlight PA and Midnight MS. The second most important celestial body is the moon, represented by Moon KY SD VA, Half Moon NC, and Crescent IA. When the moon passes in front of the sun, a solar eclipse occurs (Eclipse VA was within the path of totality for the solar eclipse of March 7, 1970). The sun is surrounded by planets, including Mercury NV TX, Venus AR FL KY MO NB NM PA SC TX WV, Earth TX, Mars PA TX, Jupiter FL, Saturn TX, Neptune MN NJ TN and Pluto TX WY. (Dmitri Borgmann was the first to point out the surprising association between the planets and Texas; however, Pluto and Mars were listed in a 1927 Rand McNally Atlas and apparently no longer exist.) Can anyone find a community named Uranus? The closest approach is Urania MI LA. Moving out beyond the solar system, one finds Star ID MS NB NC OK TX (and Etoile KY TX), Bright Star AR, Nova OH, Rising Star TX, Morning Star AR IN SD TN VA and Evening Star AR. Specific stars are also named: Northstar MN, North Star OH, Polaris MT, Vega GA MI NY OH TX, Altair TX, Arcturus MN and Spica KS. A group of stars form a constellation A Z such as Ursa (Major) IL, Southern Cross MT and Orion IL KS OK MI. The most encompassing of all astronomical names is Cosmos MN . . .

Card-players have several possibilities:

The four suits are represented by Clubb MO, Diamond AK GA IN LA MO OH OR PA WA WV WY, Heart (River in ND and Butte in MT), and Spade TX and Spades IN. The denominations are given by Ace TX, King AR KY NB NC TX, Queen NC PA, Jack AL LA MO, Joker WV and King and Queen Courthouse VA. When playing with Cards TX one must first shuffle and Cut TX before making a Deal NJ. Poker players need Luck WI to win the Jackpot NV . . .

Shifting gears once more, it is possible to regard a list of place-names as a specialized dictionary of English words. Is it possible to write sentences, stories or poems using only place-name words? Such literary creations are closely related to lipograms (which forbid the use of words like this). Is it possible to see the use of place-names?
the use of words containing a specified letter such as E). They are likely to sound like telegraph messages because of the absence of placenames such as a, an and the; more important, the dictionary is rather deficient in verbs but rich in nouns and adjectives. As a small illustration of what might be done, consider the following message written entirely with the names of three-letter towns:

Fat Sam Hoy Saw Sly Tom Orr Add New Red Ace, Sip Tea, Win Bet.

Perhaps one should compile a short dictionary of the most useful placenames.

Finally, one can collect placenames as examples of authentic American folk art, admiring each name on its own merits. I list below a collection of especially striking or incongruous names. An article on the etymology of these names would make fascinating reading.

Waterproof LA
Sleepy Eye MN
Sandwich MA
Droop WV
Cut and Shoot TX
Hygiene CO
Yankeetown FL
Ah-gua-ching MN
What Cheer IA
Thousandsticks KY
Plain Dealing LA
Teaticket MA
Donnybrook ND
Hi Hat KY
Show Low AZ
Hungry Horse MT
Hardscrabble NY
Ant Hills PA
Hell's Half Acre WY
Left Hand WV
Ty Ty GA
Ache PA
Pie Town NM
Zigzag OR
Speculator NY
Dime Box TX
Why AZ
Whynot MS
Calico Rock AR
Gravel Switch KY
Smoky Ordinary VA
Gnaw Bone IN
Weed Patch CA
Wounded Knee SD
Mousie KY
Novelty OH MO
Shivers MS
Bowlegs OK
Bird in Hand PA
Needmore PA
Smackover AR
Vinegar Bend AL
Social Circle GA
Embarrass WI MN
Barefoot KY
Slap Out IL
Zap ND
Ho-Ho-Kus NJ
Only TN
Soft Shell KY
Magazine AR AL
Bug KY
Braggadocio MO
Mouth of Seneca WV
Mexican Hat UT
Mouthcard KY
Shinhopple NY
Modest Town VA
Battiest OK
Horse Thief AZ
Shickshinny PA
Jackass Flats NV
Eek AK
Askew MS TX

I close the list with Java which, appropriately, is in Coffee County, Alabama and Ding Dong which, appropriately, is in Bell County, Texas.