

# AT THE OUTER LIMITS

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Those of us who spend our time skulking along the periphery of language have been indescribably saddened by the recent quasi demise of one of the most interesting words in the outer reaches of the alphabet: ZZXJOANW, a purportedly Maori name for a drum or fife, as well as for a musical conclusion. The word is now believed to be fictitious, as explained in an article in the November 1976 Word Ways.

As a result of this untoward event, increased interest has focused on another term, one that is even further out toward the absolute limits of language: ZZYZX SPRINGS.

ZZYZX SPRINGS made its logological debut in 1967, in my book Beyond Language. It was defined there as the name of a hydrologic feature and privately owned spa in San Bernardino County, California, about 8.5 miles south of Baker, on the western edge of Soda Dry Lake, off the abandoned right-of-way of the old Tonopah and Tidewater Railroad. I had found the name on an old, undated map of San Bernardino County published by the Automobile Club of Southern California.

Ordinarily, so unique a name would remain in a static condition, immutable unto eternity. Not so in the case of ZZYZX SPRINGS: a series of evolutionary (if not exactly revolutionary) developments has recently taken place in connection with this name. This is a report on those developments.

In 1973, a new edition was published of the Hammond Ambassador World Atlas, a standard reference work. Bedeviled by the desire to surpass ZYYI, the name of two different communities on the island of Cyprus listed in The Times Index-Gazetteer of the World (1965), the editors at Hammond seized on the community in California, indexing and mapping it. For unknown reasons, they refrained from going all the way, and reduced the name to ZZYZX.

According to the 1976 Rand-McNally Commercial Atlas and Marketing Guide, ZZYZX has a population of 100. This opens the door to the creation of a new dictionary word to describe a resident of ZZYZX. That word could be either ZZYZXER, or ZZYZXITE, or ZZYZXAN -- or even all three of them.

In July 1976, the annual revision of the Chicago telephone directory white pages came out. For the first time, there is a new last entry in Chicago: ZZYZX, Isidore R., General Merchandise, 1706

South Halsted Street, Chicago, Illinois 60608. A Californian, perhaps?

On page 22 of the August 17, 1976 issue of the National Enquirer there is a photograph of a road sign spotted by a reader who happened to be driving along Interstate Highway 15, some 100 miles south of Las Vegas, Nevada. Printed on the sign is the name ZZYX RD., with an arrow pointing to that name. Since a distance of 100 miles from Las Vegas along Interstate Highway 15, in a southwesterly direction, would have put the reader within a few miles of ZZYX SPRINGS, it is reasonable to infer a connection.

What next?

It is not inappropriate to mention a collateral development here. For many years -- since 1934, to be exact -- the editors of the G. & C. Merriam Company had prided themselves on including the literally last word in English in their unabridged dictionaries: ZYZOGETON, the name of a genus of large South American leafhoppers (insects). Whatever biological interest these creatures may possess, it was always overshadowed not only by the "lastness" of their genus name, but also by the fact that they were members of the family CICADELIDAE, a long word consisting entirely of letters in the first half of the alphabet, with each letter appearing exactly twice in the word.

Times change. In the 1950s and early 1960s, The American Peoples Encyclopedia published by Grolier Incorporated, New York, decided to upstage Merriam-Webster by delving further into the sometimes esoteric realm of entomology. What it came up with was ZYZYVA, the name of a genus of tropical American weevils, often destructive to plants. Without fanfare, it included that word as its last entry.

The inclusion did not go unnoticed. In 1969, The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language appeared on the scene. Sure enough, the last entry in the new dictionary was ZYZYVA!

Left behind in the scramble to be last is the other major dictionary of our language, Funk & Wagnalls New Standard Dictionary of the English Language. Somnolent almost since its original publication in 1913, the F. & W. is content to drift with ZYZLE ("to make a sputtering or hissing sound, as meat being grilled or fried") as its last word.

Have we reached the end with ZYZYVA? Not exactly. The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, The Unabridged Edition (1966 and subsequently) decided to attempt the ultimate with its last entry: ZZZ, used to represent the sound of a person snoring. Whether or not this entry qualifies as a "word" is open to debate because all three letters are upper-case, the definition is in parentheses, and the term is not identified as belonging to any part of speech. However, it was outstripped many years before the RHD was published by ZZZZ, with the same definition, included in The American Thesaurus of Slang, Second Edition, by Lester V. Berrey and Melvin van den Bark (New York: Thomas Y. Crowell Company, 1953).