

# ZZYZX

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In an article in the February 1974 *Word Ways*, Dmitri Borgmann nominated Zzyzx Springs as the alphabetically-last United States place name. This name apparently is in no gazetteer (even the comprehensive Rand McNally Commercial Atlas and Marketing Guide); he cites as his source an undated map published by the Automobile Club of Southern California, covering San Bernardino County. He characterized it as

a hydrologic feature and a privately owned spa catering to the senior citizen, about 8 1/2 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.

These geographic features--at least Soda Dry Lake and the hamlet of Baker--can be found on California maps near the center of San Bernardino County. Baker is located on Interstate Highway 15, and Soda Dry Lake is immediately to the south of this road.

In addition to Zzyzx Springs, there exists a Zzyzx Road, a 4 1/2-mile dirt road leading from Interstate 15 to Zzyzx Springs. Many years ago, Ralph Beaman sent me a newspaper clipping showing the Zzyzx Road turn-off sign, set in a desert landscape of sand, rocks and scrub vegetation.

I have always suspected that there might be an interesting story behind Zzyzx Springs, and my suspicion was confirmed when I received from Murray Pearce a copy of a Los Angeles newspaper article reprinted in the 4 Nov 1990 Bismarck (North Dakota) Tribune.

The story of Zzyzx Springs is the story of Curtis Howe Springer who, in 1944, settled without a by-your-leave on 12,800 acres of Mohave desert land, on a tract about eight miles long and three wide. On it he erected a 60-room hotel, a church, a health spa with mineral baths in the shape of a cross, a castle, a radio station and several other buildings. He even constructed a private airstrip which he called Zyport. The Boulevard of Dreams, a divided parkway, led to an oasis on Lake Tuendae, which was subsequently identified as the habitat of the Mohave chub, a tiny fish on the endangered list.

Springer identified himself as a physician and a Methodist minister, but in fact was neither. For thirty years he broadcast a daily religious and health program from a radio studio at Zzyzx Springs which was carried, at its peak, by 221 stations in the United States and 102 more in other countries. On the air he played religious music and preached folksy religious philosophy. He urged his listeners to send him donations for miraculous cures for minor ailments as well as illnesses as serious as cancer. He claimed he could restore hair and rejuvenate body

cells. His magic potions (concoctions of celery, carrot and parsley juice) were shipped to all fifty states and overseas.

Retirees gave Springer their life savings for the privilege of staying in spartan quarters at the ranch. Vacationers stayed at the hotel for a few days at a time to enjoy the waters. In fact, at least one **Word Ways** author, Harry Partridge, once visited Zzyzx Springs. He wrote in the May 1988 **Word Ways**

Zzyzx Hot Springs turned out to be some sort of retreat run by a fundamentalist preacher who had simply appropriated government land and some buildings, added others, and used the site as a place for his followers from Los Angeles to come and meditate, eat healthful food, and abstain from the fruit of the vine and the distillations of barley, corn, agave, and sundry other raw materials which, when chemically processed, become mind-altering substances. The most interesting artifact that graced this staid caravanserai was a mechanical exercise-horse that had once adorned the Calvin Coolidge White House.

These enterprises thrived from 1944 until 1974, when federal marshals finally arrested him for alleged violations of food and drug laws and unauthorized use of federal land. Zzyzx Springs and all the improvements were confiscated by the Bureau of Land Management, and Springer was found guilty and spent a few months in jail. He died in Las Vegas in 1986 at the age of 90.

Since 1976 Zzyzx Springs--now simply known as Zzyzx--has functioned as the Desert Studies Center, a teaching and research station administered by the California State University system. The university has free use of the land and facilities under a 25-year cooperative management agreement with the Bureau of Land Management.

Scientists from the university's 20 campuses, as well as from other educational institutions, come to the Desert Studies Center to do research. For example, NASA and Jet Propulsion Laboratory scientists are conducting satellite imagery studies. University classes make field trips there, and every weekend from October through May special desert-related extension programs convene. Administered by the San Bernardino branch (the closest of the state campuses), each session is devoted to a specific topic, such as historical campsites along the Old Spanish Trail. In all, upwards of three thousand scientists, researchers, students and others use the Center each year.

And the name Zzyzx? Pronounced "Zeye-zix" with the accent on the first syllable, it was made up by Springer, who claimed that it was the last word in the English language. It (along with Zzyzx Spring, the associated hydrologic feature) was approved as a place name by the United States Board on Geographic Names on 14 Jun 1984:

Zzyzx: locality, between Soda Mountains and Soda Lake 12.1 km (7.5 mi) NE of Crucero; San Bernardino Co., Calif.; sec. 11, T 12 N, R 8 E, San Bernardino Mer.; 35°08'34" N, 116°06'14" W.

Zzyzx Spring: spring, between Soda Mountains and Soda Lake 11.9 km (7.4 mi) NE of Crucero; San Bernardino Co., Calif.; sec. 11, T 12 N, R 8 E, San Bernardino Mer.; 35°08'10" N, 116°06'10" W.

Logologists, stand up and cheer!

### **The Oxford A to Z of Word Games**

Do Brits view recreational linguistics as a parlor game? Tony Augarde's new (1995) paperback with the above title joins earlier books by David Parlett, Peter Newby and Gyles Brandreth on this topic. Augarde takes an extremely liberal view of what constitutes a game, including such essentially-solo amusements as constructing word squares, palindromes, lipograms or univocalics. He introduces various categories into which games may be placed (grid, challenge, alphabetical, cumulative, etc.) and provides many cross-references (ghost, super-ghost, ultra-ghost; jotto, double jeopardy; crash, wild crash, uncrash). The planner of an evening of word games might profitably take into account additional characteristics which relate to the skills and backgrounds of the participants:

- \* games of strategy for cerebral players (jotto, superghost, letter auction, the forehead game, Scrabble)
- \* games of speed (avoid 'em, spelling round, tongue-twisters)
- \* games involving creativity (authors, my word, bouts-rimes, punchlines, just a minute)
- \* games requiring special knowledge (Guggenheim, who am I)
- \* games of memory (grandmother's trunk, my name is Mary)
- \* independent games in which each player creates his own list or word structure (concealments, doublets, isosceles words)

There's such a wealth of material in this book that even the most finicky gamesman will find something he likes. Augarde gives the reader a "feel" for many of the games by including plausible player dialogues. The book is available in England from Oxford University Press for 4.99 pounds sterling.