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For the logologist, the study of American surnames is both fascinating and frustrating: fascinating because there are 1.3 million different names now in existence, frustrating because there is no single reference work listing them. The nearest approximation to a reference work is the telephone directory, but the search for a rare name there can be a tedious one: there are thousands of different directories, and most of the smaller ones contain separate alphabetical listings for each town or telephone exchange. And, alas, most names are rare -- Social Security records in 1974 indicate that about 450,000 surnames were held by only one individual each, and 370,000 more appeared from two to nine times. The search for a name shared by only nine people can be very lengthy, and is likely to be successful only if some of them are in the larger monoalphabetic directories associated with metropolitan areas.

This article reports on the results of a telephone-directory search for twenty-six undeniably rare U.S. surnames -- those consisting of a single letter of the alphabet. Without identifying individual bearers of these surnames, or even the cities or towns where they can be found, Social Security in 1974 noted that there were a total of 221 such people in their files, ranging from a high of 24 (A) to a low of 2 (Q, N, and X).

The search for these surnames in telephone directories is made more difficult by the fact that the beginning of each letter is ordinarily cluttered up with a vast assortment of commercial names, from giants such as IBM or ITT to the local PDQ Delivery Service. Another pitfall is that at least some individuals desire the listing J Q PUBLIC as well as the more conventional PUBLIC J Q, necessitating a check elsewhere in the directory when the former entry is noted.

Recently, the Bell System took pity on the logologist, splitting up their directories into separate residence and business listings in at least the larger cities. At present, this innovation appears in only four operating companies of the Bell System: Ohio, Mountain States (Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Colorado, Wyoming, Montana, Idaho), Southwestern (Kansas, Texas, Oklahoma, Nebraska, Arkansas, Missouri) and South Central (Kentucky, Tennessee, Mississippi, Alabama, Louisiana). Although cities such as Los Angeles, New York, Chicago and Philadelphia are still nightmarish to search, one can survey the single-letter surnames in relatively comfortable such medium-to-large cities as Denver, Phoenix, Houston, Dallas, Oklahoma City, St. Louis, New Orleans, Birmingham, Kansas City, Columbus and Cleveland.
There seems little doubt that O is the most prevalent single-letter surname in this country. Its relative popularity is apparently due to emigration from Korea, where the name is quite common; an article in the Washington (D.C.) Star-News in October 1974, featuring new Falls Church (Va.) resident Pok In O and family, guessed that there might be as many as a quarter-million. Even in a country as small as Belgium, 28 surnames of O are found in telephone directories, according to the 1979 edition of the Guinness Book of World Records. Here is a list of 52 O surnames found in the U.S. between 1973 and 1981:

Atlanta GA Do Young O, Thornas O sr. (80)
Baltimore MD Song Tok O, Yong Hun O (80)
Bronx NY Young Kap O (81)
Chicago IL Taekun O, Young Kun O (73,80); Sung Heyung O (80)
Denver CO Chae Sok O, Kumsok O (81)
Elizabeth NJ Kyung D O (81)
Fort Worth TX Sae Mun O (80); Sean O (80,81)
Houston TX Chan Son O, Jil Yong O, Sae Un O, Se Yon O, Yong H O (81)

Two other surnames -- U and I -- have also been identified with a high degree of certainty. These are also of foreign origin: Eladon C. Smith's The History of Our Names (Harper, 1950) cites a Chinese student who was graduated from medical school in 1925 with the surname I, and Guinness states that U is a Burmese surname pronounced /oo/ meaning 'egg'. One representative of each surname appears in the 1976 American Men of Science: Ting-Po I of Groton, Connecticut, a physical chemist born in Yunnan, China on February 20, 1941, and Raymond U of Durham, North Carolina, a researcher in genetics and radiobiology born in Pyoung-Yang, Korea on December 27, 1936. Mitchell Porter of Toowoomba, Queensland, Australia found Hock S U in the 1979 Sydney Australia telephone directory. There are 11 examples of I and U surnames in U.S. telephone directories.
What about the other 23 letters of the alphabet? The only letter verified by a non-telephonic source is E, which is a Burmese surname pronounced /a ye/ and meaning 'calm', according to Guinness. Elsdon C. Smith corroborates the ethnic origin, mentioning a woman from Burma with this surname.

By diligent searching, examples for all letters but Q can be found in telephone directories. However, it is likely that the overwhelming majority of the examples listed below are reversed names (discussed above) or outright typographical errors.

A Geraldo (Brooklyn NY 73); Tony Kobe, Harris Ella (Chicago IL 73); Del Castillo Alfred (Dallas TX 80, 81); E Miller (St. Louis MO 81); L Williams (El Paso TX 81)
B L Rogers (Houston TX 81); Lorenzo (Denver CO 81); Irene (Wantage NY 73)
C Randolph Blythe (Little Rock AR 81); Culloch Marilyn (Chicago IL 73)
D A Wester (St. Louis MO 81); Hosey (Teaneck NJ 73); Ary Kay (Evanston IL 73)
E R Kendrick (Kansas City MO 81); Coure John (Chicago IL 73)
F Arrow Paul (Philadelphia PA 73)
G Kristine Bennett (Dallas TX 80)
H C Knipfer (Houston TX 81); Esther (Chicago IL 73)
J B Reiley-Resnik (St. Louis MO 80, 81); G Anderson (St. Louis MO 80); Tanatip (Austin TX 80); J Reine Harris (Houston TX 81)
K Chesko (St. Louis MO 80, 81); De Torony Nicholas (Atlanta GA 71)
L Forrest (Kansas City MO 80); Bau (Houston TX 81)
M C Wagner jr. (Dallas TX 80, 81); Funke (St. Louis MO 80); Thos (Washington DC 73, 80); J Kamaruddin (Houston TX 81)
N Verna (Chicago IL 73)
P Procaska Richard, Anneman Kent (Chicago IL 73); Dodd (St. Louis MO 74)
R Shahpa (Chicag CA 73)
S J Whitso (Los AN 73)
T Erron (CA 73)
V Humbe (CA 79)
W Sadie (CO 81)
X Morris, Cecil (Seattle WA 73); Melva (CaliCA 73)
Y Jessie (Boston MA 81)
Z Zkiero (CA 79)

Of these, I've seen W, Y, B, H,
Of these, I’d bet most heavily on the reality of the surname X; however, W, Y, B, H, N, R, A and S have possibilities as well.

RATS LIVE ON NO EVIL STAR

This is the palindromic title of a paperback by Joaquin and Maura Kuhn (Everest House, 1981; $7.95) containing 101 crossword puzzles entirely constructed out of palindromic words and phrases. A sample of clues and answers:

Russian river boatman’s prayer as he nears St. Petersburg: DRAW, NEVA, HAVENWARD
Rotten gossip magazine: GARBAGE GAB RAG
If Jupiter liked horses, he might have referred to this one: GANYMEDE, MY NAG
Before poems, I venerate small hills: ERE VERSES, I RISES REVERE