"Name, please."

"Harold Walter Ichthyologist."

"I beg your pardon - what was that again?"

Who wouldn't beg your pardon after hearing a name like that? And imagine having it and spelling it to every bank teller, school admissions clerk, secretary, credit manager and prospective employer. There are enough difficult names as it is without adding ones like Ichthyologist, Epidemiologist and Taxonomist to them. Yet some families might very well have been given these names if we were still assigning surnames, because a man's occupation was frequently used as the basis for his family's name. Thanks to the simplicity of earlier times, however, Mr. Ichthyologist has probably come down to us as Mr. Fisher.

After I started thinking about occupation names, I started setting down a few. The list soon grew quite long and also led to an insight: monolingual as I am, I could only record occupation names in English or what bits and tags of French and German that were obvious. I concluded that there must be a great many interesting occupational words hidden beneath Russian, Chinese, Japanese, Vietnamese, Armenian and other ethnic names.

There are probably a number of names which originally referred to an occupation but which have been so distorted by anglicizing that they now mean nothing. I also reflected that some of these occupation names may have been given in jest as nicknames because someone acted like a pope or a king. Or, perhaps, he was related to a priest or abbot. Although sometimes the spelling has changed, there are many occupations we can recognize in their old clothes such as Gardner, Saylor, Taylor and Chandler.

The names I like best are those based on archaic or old-fashioned occupations that have all but disappeared from present-day experience. Some of these are Fletcher (arrow maker), Cooper (barrel maker), Palfreyman (groom for ladies' horses), Scribner (writer or scribe), Wainwright (a maker of wagons), Chapman (a peddler or merchant), Sutter (a sutler, or army provisioner), Faulkner (a keeper or trainer of falcons), Shriver (one who listens to confessions) and Farrier (a horseshoer). His daughter is celebrated in the old jingle:

The daughter of the farrier
Could find no one to marry her
Because, 'tis said, she grew so fat
There was no man could carry her.

I'm sure there are a lot of fascinating occupation names that I have not ferreted out. I wanted to include a number of famous people's names which sound as if they are based on occupations, but couldn't find the substantiating evidence to justify it. Maybe you can trace their etymology and thereby add Cheever, Mather, Thurber and Tuchman to the list.

As difficult as some of our names are to pronounce and spell and transport from generation to generation, let's be grateful that we aren't still handing out last names. By and large, I think that the old names are usually simpler and more graceful. Imagine some poor little girl starting school this fall and giving her name to the teacher as Susan Elizabeth Systems-Analyst.

A LIST OF OCCUPATIONAL SURNAMES

Abbott    Cooper    Hosterman    Shepard
Arrowsmith    Dancer    Hostler    Shepherd
Baker    Doctor    Hunter    Schumacher
Beeman    Draper    Kaiser    Schumann
Boatwright    Driver    King    Shoemaker
Booker    Earl    Knight    Schreiber
Bowman    Farmer    Koenig    Shriver
Brenner    Farrier    Lancer    Singer
Brewer    Falconer    Loper    Skinner
Buchman    Faulkner    Mailer    Smith
Butler    Finster    Mason    Spinner
Canter    Fisher    Masters    Steward
Carpenter    Fleischmann    Miner    Stover
Carter    Fletcher    Painter    Streeter
Cartwright    Forester    Palfreyman    Sutter
Carver    Fraser    Palmer    Taylor
Chamberlain    Gardener    Parker    Teacher
Chandler    Garner    Planter    Thatcher
Chaplain    Glasser    Plummer    Tinker
Chapman    Glasser    Rector    Trader
Clark    Glosser    Reever    Trapper
Coachbuilder    Glover    Roper    Wainwright
Coker    Grover    Ryder    Wagner
Coleman    Harper    Sadler    Warner
Collier    Herder    Salinger    Weaver
Cook    Hooker    Saylor    Wheelwright