

5/25/46

ORTHOGRAPHIC G-MEN

Now, folks, that should puzzle you a bit. That's really a \$64 title. But honest! we do have Orthographic G-Men in the Government, What are they, you ask? Well, they're name-sleuths. And what's name-sleuths? Well, they're proper-name detectives. They're experts who sneak up on an unsuspecting place-name that has the apostrophe in the wrong place maybe or two "e's" where only one should be and get it all fixed up. But, maybe, we should start at the beginning.

BACK IN 1890.

Back in 1890, when Benjamin Harrison was in the White House and Executive Orders were as scarce as they are plentiful now, just such an order was issued to create the United States Geographical Board. Evidently, the Board had a purpose, altho that's a bit hazy and nobody knows exactly what it was doing or supposed to do. In any event, it was just another Bureau and since it took little or no money to run it, it was sort of forgotten. Perhaps it could style itself the "forgotten bureau," altho bureaus are not inclined to let themselves be forgotten. In 1934, somebody remembered this lonely little bureau. Maybe it was Secretary Ickes. Anyway, an order - an Executive Order - was issued, transferring the U.S. Geographical Board and it's functions to the Interior Department under the watchful eye of Honorable Ickes. There it carried on under the title of U.S. Board on Geographical Names at a cost of about \$8000 per year.

ESSENTIAL TO NATIONAL DEFENSE.

It was soon evident that the Board was really essential to national defense and to Victory- maybe. Every so often, there came to Congressional desks, a document showing what the Board was doing. It was setting the world right on spelling- exactly - spelling. It was engaged in meeting a world shaking crisis - that of getting proper name spelling correct so that a mistake in a word might not become the moving cause for another war. If something happened at Minsk, Pinsk, Omsk or Tomsk, it was Minsk, Pinsk, Omsk, or Tomsk - and make no mistake about it. If the Soviets changed the name of Perm to Molotov or Chkalov, there were the Orthographic G-Men to record the fact for history. If a bomb fell on Funakawaminato or Kagoshima it was Kagoshima, no matter how hard some Yankee humorist might labor to change the "a" to "e". Once, our name-sleuths announced to a breathless world that Hsuchow was Hsuchow, then all the etymological or orthographic experts in the world would be unable to insist successfully that it was Soochow or Psuchow or Suchow or Moochow. It was indeed word-shaking. If some map-maker with a fine Irish sense of humor, felt that Okeene, Oklahoma would match up better with O'Toole or O'Grady or O'Callahan, if it was recorded as O'Keene, there were the orthographic sleuths to hunt down that innocent apostrophe and restore Okeene. Let Arkansas have her Okean and Ohio her Okeana, but to the 1079 souls who live at Okeene Oklahoma, it must be Okeene and no other.

THE BOARD GROWS.

Remember now what they say about tall oaks and little acorns. So did the Board. In the fiscal year 1946, it received by transfer about \$219,000 from the War Department to chase names and arbitrate name-disputes, in addition to the \$25,000 it received from Congress. Our little bureau was becoming a big bureau. Instead of 2 persons - it now employed 69. It saw visions of work for the Post Office Department, the Army, the Geological Survey, the Soil Conservation Service and other mapping agencies of government. It was dreaming dreams and getting ambitious.

O CRUEL CIRCUMSTANCE.

When our little bureau came before Congress for funds for the fiscal year 1947, it asked (with the approval of the Budget Bureau) for a regular appropriation of \$82,000. That's ten times as much as it normally had. And maybe in the following year, if it worked diligently at the business chasing apostrophes and misspellings, it might ask for \$182,000. Who knows. It would show the world that Przemysl was Przemysl and not Peremyshi. It would prove that Pskov was Pskov and not Pskow. Lwow might be a radio station to some scoffers and it might be Lvov to others but to the world it would be Lwow. It might actually prove, as it stated to a sub-committee of the Appropriations Committee that "defense of this country, should it become necessary, would call for far better name information on domestic names." But somehow, those cruel members of the Appropriations Committee were not convinced and finally cut the appropriation from \$82,000 to \$12,000. And then to top it all, a Congressman discovered, when this item was up for consideration on the floor of the House, that there was no legal authority for the U.S. Board of Geographical Names, made a point of order against the whole item and thus wiped it out. O Cruel Circumstance. P.S. The one who found no legal authority for the continuance of the Board was the author of the

CONGRESSIONAL FRONT.