



## GOING TO THE CITY EAST OF THE SIERRA NEVADA: FURTHER INVESTIGATION OF GEOGRAPHIC PAROCHIALISM

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### Introduction

Geographers are beginning to pay more attention to the colloquial descriptions of residents in defining regions.<sup>1, 2</sup> One aspect of colloquial geographic thinking is the parochial usage of generic terms to refer to specific locations, for example, "She lives in The Valley" or "We are going to The Lake." Such expressions assume shared meanings within the taken-for-granted spatial context.<sup>3</sup> Shortridge made parochial usage the basis of boundary maps for the United States.<sup>4</sup> An earlier study by the present author examined parochial place usage among Northern and Southern California students.<sup>5</sup> With San Francisco as the northern hub and Los Angeles as the southern hub, the limit of vernacular usage of "The City" was the east and west diagonal cut of the Coast Range between San Luis Obispo and Bakersfield.

The significance of the Coast Range in defining regional hub cities suggested that other mountain ranges might also affect geographic images of the state. An important omission in the earlier study had been respondents from east of the Sierra Nevada. This region is often

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described in newspaper accounts as isolated from California, and occasionally it attempts to affiliate with Nevada.

This study examines parochial place usage among students in three California communities on the eastern slopes of the Sierra, one in the north (Susanville) and two in the south (Lone Pine and Ridgecrest). The focus was upon the relative strength of identification of these students with California and Nevada. Would these eastern Sierra communities find their hub cities in California (San Francisco in the north and Los Angeles in the south), or in Nevada (Reno in the north and Las Vegas in the south)? Parochial usage of "The Border" might also reveal the geographic significance of Nevada in the students' thinking, since students in other parts of the state identified this as the separation between California and Mexico.<sup>6</sup>

## Method

The respondents were students in social science classes in Susanville and Ridgecrest community colleges, and Lone Pine High School. In each case, the instructor was contacted by letter or telephone and questionnaires were sent. The questionnaire included eleven vernacular place descriptors: lake, river, city, downtown, mountains, beach, island, valley, forest, peninsula, and border. Each student was asked to take out a sheet of paper and write numbers from one to eleven, one beneath the other. Then the teacher read the following instructions:

I am going to read you a list of statements about places. If you have a reasonably good idea of the answer, please guess, but if you have no idea, just write "don't know." If you are already in the place described in a question, please write "already there" as your answer.

This was followed by eleven statements, each involving one of the place descriptors:

1. If I said I was going to The Lake, what would be the name of the lake to which I was going?
2. If I said I was going to The River, what would be the name of the river to which I was going?

3. If I said I was going to Downtown, what would be the name of the city in which downtown was located? . . . and so forth.

The task of the students was in each case to identify the place referred to in the generic description. Responses were collected by the instructors and returned to the author for scoring. A summary of the results was mailed back to the instructors to provide feedback to the students. Most of the responses were scored easily; although in a few cases, replies were combined into a single category. For example, Maui was included with Hawaii; and Mt. Whitney was placed with the Sierra Nevada.

## Results

The degree of consensus is indicated by the percentage of responses in each sample interpreting a generic name in the same manner. If every respondent in a region interpreted The Lake as the same place, this would represent 100 percent consensus. On the other hand, if each person came up with a separate answer, there would be zero consensus. Variation in degree of consensus can result either from different perceptions regarding the importance of a place or from competing pressures among different places that fit the description.

Those locations mentioned by at least 15 percent of any sample are indicated in Table 1. Using this as a minimum criterion, there was at least one consensual location for all terms. If a higher standard of 50 percent is used, there was consensual meaning for Lake, River, City, Downtown, and Mountains, but not overall for Beach, Island, and Valley.

*The Lake.* A lake was named by approximately two-thirds of the respondents in each group. These were not, however, lakes that one would immediately guess to be so prominent from looking at a map. In Ridgecrest "The Lake" was Isabella; in Lone Pine, Diaz; and in Susanville, Eagle.

*The River* The three communities all had rivers mentioned by at least half the respondents; and for the Susan-

**Table 1. PAROCHIAL PLACE NAMES EAST OF THE SIERRA**

Percentage of respondents mentioning place in:

Parochial Term	Ridgecrest N = 34	Lone Pine N = 61	Susanville N = 37
Lake	Isabella (85%) Tahoe (15%)	Diaz (84%)	Eagle (70%)
River	Kern (76%)	Owens (75%)	Susan (51%) Sacramento (16%)
City	Los Angeles (62%)	Los Angeles (92%)	Reno (57%)
Downtown	Ridgecrest (62%) Los Angeles (18%)	Lone Pine (69%) Los Angeles (15%)	Susanville (76%)
Mountains	Sierra (68%)	Sierra (89%)	Sierra (38%)
Beach	Malibu (15%)	Keeler (25%) Huntington (18%) Long (15%)	Gallatin (32%)
Island	Hawaii (32%) Catalina (26%)	Hawaii (61%) Catalina (20%)	Hawaii (46%)
Valley	San Fernando (24%) Death (18%)	Owens (49%) San Fernando (15%)	Central (22%)
Forest	Sequoia (18%)	Yosemite (23%)	Lassen (51%)
Peninsula	Baja (18%)	Florida (29%)	Lake Almanor (49%)
Border	US/Mexico (74%)	US/Mexico (79%) CA/NV (13%)	US/Mexico (51%) CA/NV (22%)

ville respondents there were two consensual rivers, the Susan mentioned by 51 percent and the Sacramento River by 16 percent.

*The City.* For students in Ridgecrest and Lone Pine, The City was Los Angeles. No students cited Las Vegas. The bright neon and glitter fail to qualify Las Vegas as a hub city for these students. (Perhaps this will change when they reach gambling age.) The Sierra Nevada to the west are not a barrier to Los Angeles, which can be reached by traveling southwest on Highway 14. For students in Susanville, The City is Reno. This is the first indication of

non-California identification for eastern Sierra respondents. Only four individuals mentioned San Francisco, which is the dominant response in northern California west of the Sierra. The responses from the three eastern Sierra communities—alongside those collected in the earlier study from Arcata, Davis, San Luis Obispo, Bakersfield, Long Beach, and La Jolla—are shown in Figure 1.

*Downtown.* In each community, Downtown was located in the city where the survey was undertaken. However, in both Ridgecrest and Lone Pine there was a secondary Downtown associated with Los Angeles. This supports the earlier identification of Los Angeles as The City for these respondents. It is noteworthy that Reno was *not* a secondary Downtown for the Susanville respondents. Although Reno is The City, it is too distant over mountainous roads to qualify as a Downtown for Susanville respondents.

*The Mountains.* In all cases this term was identified with the Sierra Nevada, although names of local interest were occasionally used, such as Lassen in Susanville and Mt. Whitney in Lone Pine and Ridgecrest.

*The Beach.* Although there was significant consensus on The Lake, there was no common meaning for beach. In Ridgecrest and Lone Pine, ocean beaches predominated, although a lake beach was mentioned in Susanville and in Lone Pine.

*The Island.* California lacks major islands, but it does have several minor ones. The dominant consensual referent for all three samples was Hawaii, with a secondary response for Catalina in the two southern communities.

*The Valley.* Interpretations of The Valley—alongside those collected in the earlier surveys west of the Sierra Nevada—are shown in Figure 2.

Lone Pine students predominantly interpreted this as the Owens Valley, with a secondary response for the San Fernando Valley. For those in Ridgecrest, there was a slight grouping around the San Fernando Valley, with a smaller number using Death Valley. In Susanville, where only 22 percent of the students mentioned the Sacra-

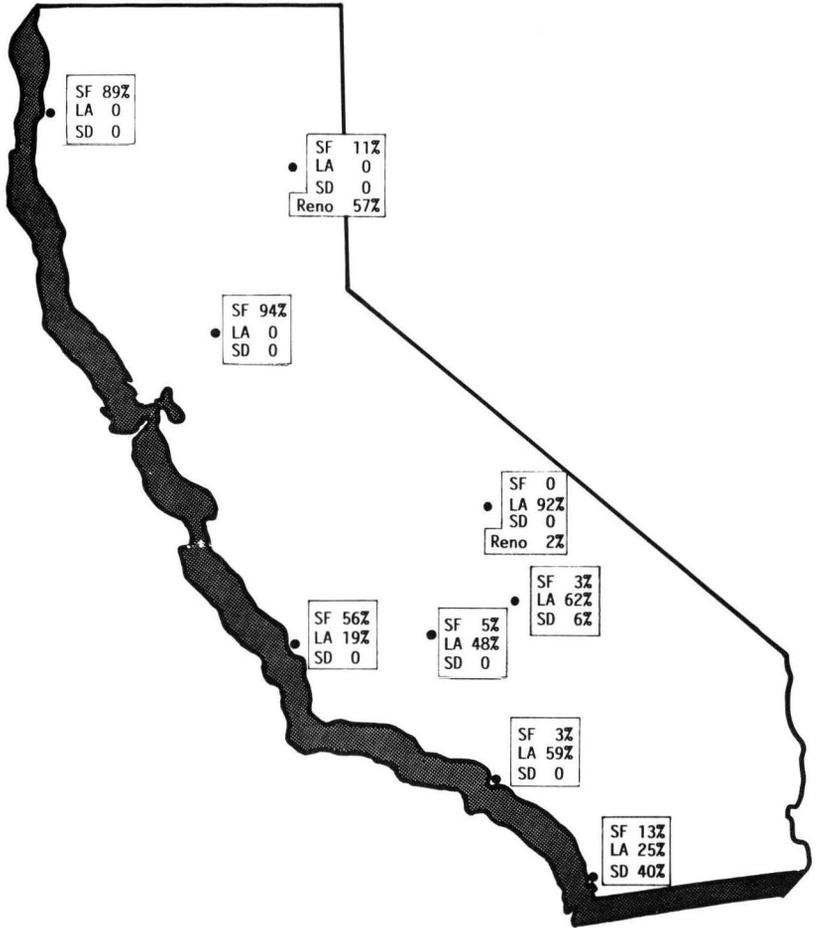


Figure 1. Responses from all samples to The City.

mento/San Joaquin Valley, there was less consensus. This further supports psychological distance between Susanville and the major agricultural region west of the Sierra Nevada.

*The Forest.* In the earlier surveys west of the Sierra Nevada, so many different terms were used to describe forests, including names of specific state parks, groves, and generic terms such as "redwoods" or "national forests," that the responses to this item had not been analyzed. All

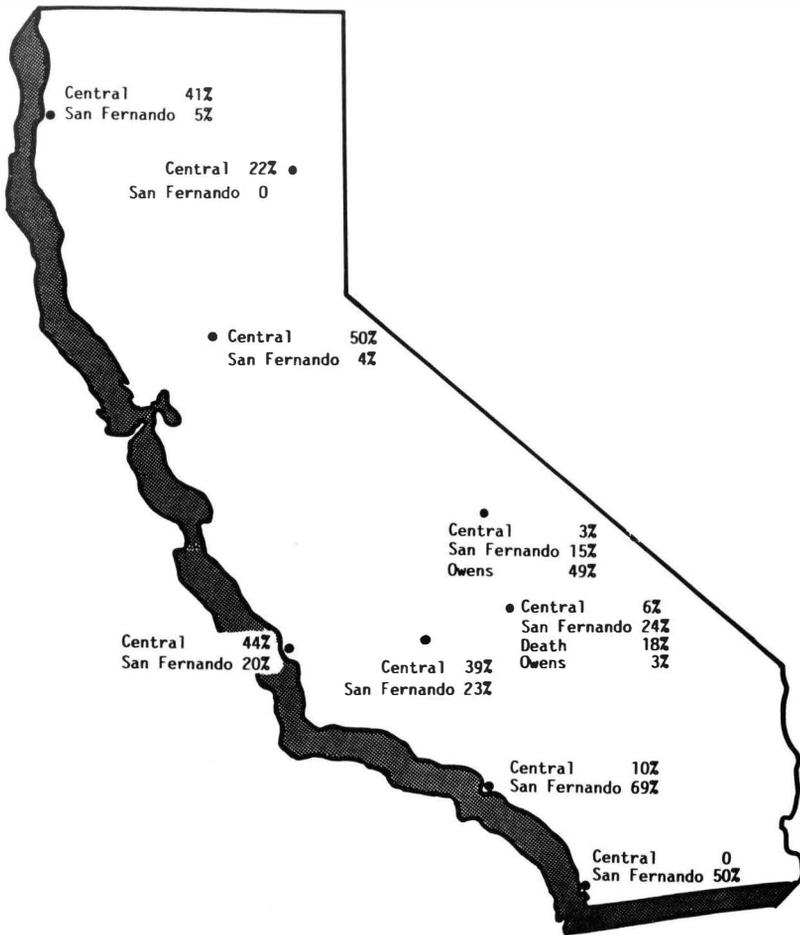


Figure 2. Responses from all samples to The Valley.

three eastern Sierra communities had a consensual referent and several secondary ones. In Susanville, Lassen National Forest was mentioned by more than half the respondents; in Lone Pine, Yosemite was mentioned by 23 percent; and in Ridgecrest, Sequoia Forest was mentioned by 25 percent.

*The Peninsula.* In Lone Pine, The Peninsula was Florida, with a secondary meaning for Baja, California. It is possible that Florida has been used as an example of a

peninsula in the primary school geography classes of this region. For Ridgecrest, there was a grouping around Baja; and at Susanville, a majority mentioned the Lake Almanor peninsula. While I have driven through the area on several occasions, I had never identified the land strip in the lake specifically as a peninsula, though a view of the map reveals that this is an accurate characterization.

*The Border.* For these respondents, as with other Californians, The Border separates the United States from Mexico. However, in Lone Pine and Susanville, there was a secondary response for the California/Nevada border.

### Discussion

The major points of similarity between these responses and those collected west of the sierra are the United States/Mexican border, Los Angeles as the southern hub of the state, the Sierra Nevada as The Mountains, and Hawaii as The Island. Responses from the southeastern part of the state seem anchored to the Los Angeles basin which contains The City, The Beaches, and a secondary Downtown. Of the three communities, Susanville appears to be most psychologically distant from the rest of California, since The City and a strong secondary border lie in Nevada; and there is little connection with either the Sacramento Valley or the City of Sacramento.

These results show the value of parochial usage as a guide to regional imagery. For students in Lone Pine, The Lake is overwhelmingly Diaz, with no one mentioning the large but mostly dry Owens Lake featured prominently on maps, or several of the nearby reservoirs. Maps also show three large lakes near Susanville—Almanor, Eagle, and Honey. Almanor is probably the best known statewide because of its proximity to Lassen Park. Honey is the largest of the three, but it is Eagle that is The Lake and provides The Beach for Susanville residents.

These results reflect the large size and geographic diversity of California, in that there is no city, lake, river, or peninsula that has parochial usage throughout the entire state. Other than the California/Mexico border, the only

geographic feature meeting the 15 percent consensus index at all locations is Hawaii as The Island; but this is not in California. Catalina has a parochial usage in the southern part of the state but not elsewhere. The various bay and delta islands—including those with considerable cultural significance, such as Alcatraz, Treasure, and Angel in San Francisco Bay—do not have significant parochial usage. This raises the question of the factors responsible for a place acquiring parochial usage. Based on data collected thus far, these factors include a combination of economic and cultural hegemony, proximity, and distinctiveness. Los Angeles is by far the largest city in the state, but it is The City only to residents south of Bakersfield and above the orbit of San Diego. In northern California west of the Sierra, The City is San Francisco. The dominance of San Francisco in regional imagery is undoubtedly due to its cultural attractions, since San Jose is technically a larger city; and Sacramento is closer and more accessible to many Californians.

As a resident of Davis, I was personally interested in how The Valley would be interpreted. In Northern and Central California west of the Sierra Nevada, The Valley is the Sacramento/San Joaquin agricultural basin. In the south, the term is associated with the San Fernando Valley, featured in the popular song "Valley Girl," and surfer graffiti such "Vals Go Home." In Susanville, the Sacramento/San Joaquin does not seem culturally or economically significant, perhaps reflecting a division between hill people and flatlanders.

In closing, I remain impressed with the use of this technique for defining regions, hubs, and areas of influence. As part of a multi-method approach, such as that employed by Miller,<sup>6</sup> analysis of parochial usage can add to our understanding of geographic imagery. Among its advantages are economy and standardized administration and scoring. The technique is suitable for groups or individuals with either oral or written instructions. Often the most interesting findings are those geographic terms that lack consensual referents.



## NOTES

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