

# Justice To The Mountain: The City's Crusade For Mount Tacoma

By  
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*I was asking for something specific and perfect for my city,  
Whereupon lo! upsprang the aboriginal name*

*Now I see what there is in a name, a word, liquid, sane, unruly,  
musical, self-sufficient,*

*I see that the word of my city is that word from old,  
Because I see that word nested in nests of water-bays, superb.*

Walt Whitman, "Mannahatta"<sup>1</sup>

Place names have power. An aboriginal place name—charged with history, pre-history, and the potency of natural forces—evokes mystery and fuels emotion. The native people of the south Puget Sound, along with early non-Indian settlers, were awestruck by the great mountain. They revered her, feared her summit, yet they aligned themselves with her.

John H. Williams noted: "In granting the name Takhoma the Indians implied that this was The Mountain of their universe, having no equal."<sup>2</sup>

In the mid-1860s, Theodore Winthrop's romantic travelogue *The Canoe and the Saddle* was all the rage in the South Sound. Winthrop glorified the aboriginal name of the mountain: "Mount Regnier Christians have dubbed it, in stupid nomenclature perpetuating the name of somebody or nobody. More melodiously the siwashes call it Tacoma."<sup>3</sup>

Evidently, the early settlers at Chebaulip, or Commencement City, were quite enchanted by the Mountain and her name. In November 1868 the upstart town adopted a new name.<sup>4</sup> Today, our city is named Tacoma. The mountain that inspired the name is popularly and officially known as Mount Rainier. This was not always the case.

Great controversy- emotional controversy-underscores the naming of the mountain. From 1885 to 1925, successive waves of determined Tacomans waged a battle over the Mountain's nomenclature. This paper will briefly explore Tacoma's crusade and Seattle's victorious counter-crusade.

The naming of the city after the mountain is generally attributed to Philip Ritz, a visitor to the area, who was impressed with *The Canoe and the Saddle*. However, a multitude of Tacoma's founding fathers, including such notables as Anthony Carr, General McCarver, John W. Ackerson and C.P. Ferry, also claimed the suggestion of the name.<sup>5</sup>

Regardless of which settler actually named the town, one fact is nearly universally accepted: Tacoma was named after the mountain. C.P. Ferry wrote: "Where do you think we got the name Tacoma for the city? We didn't invent it. Why it was the name of the mountain. I named the city, and I named it after the mountain. Where did the mountain get the name? Why the Indians called it by that name."<sup>6</sup>

Strangely, there are a few theories suggesting that Tacoma is not of Native origins. Henry J. Bohn states that the mountain was named after the Japanese word Takoma meaning highest

light, topmost light, light of the world.<sup>7</sup> The historian Francis E. Smith claims that the name is an abridgement of the Aztec word Tecomaxochital, a “beautiful vine bearing a scarlet flower.” Smith states:

The Mexican mariners attached to the Juan de Fuca expedition, 1592, saw the beautiful glow on the mountain and named the majestic peak TACOMA. We have sufficient authentic historical data to establish the credibility of the de Fuca record. Educated Indians, who speak the English language fluently, say that the Indians learned the word from navigators who visited the inland waters of the State of Washington a long time ago.<sup>8</sup>

Other novel theories, interesting yet highly improbable, include the idea that Tacoma was named after Siebe Jans Tacoma, a 19th-century Dutch sailor. Another quirky theory suggests that three pioneers—Thomas Alison, Charles Onslow, and Martin Alden—carved their initials on one of Job Carr’s trees spelling out the word T.A.C.O.M.A.<sup>9</sup> While there is some level of controversy surrounding the origin, it is nearly indisputable that Tacoma was named after the mountain.

The next round of the Tacoma name-game centered mainly over the “sensible and suitable” name for the mountain itself. Apparently, there was no outward dispute over the mountain’s place-name during the period before the 1890s. Arthur David Martinson states that local inhabitants—Tacomans and Seattlites alike—accepted “Tacoma” as the Indian name for the mountain without questioning its validity.<sup>10</sup>

By the 1880s there was fierce competition brewing between Seattle and Tacoma over business, bodies, and publicity. According to *Tacoma News Tribune* columnist Denny MacGougan: “Whatever Tacoma was for, Seattle was against-and vice-versa.”<sup>11</sup> By 1883 the controversy over the name was in full swing. The Northern Pacific issued a public statement announcing that the Indian name Mount Tacoma, not Mount Rainier, will be used in all guidebooks and other publications of the railroad.<sup>12</sup> Seattle, still jealous that Tacoma was chosen as the N.P. terminus, reacted by initiating a crusade for the name *Mount Rainier*.

By 1892, the controversy was hot. The U.S. Board on Geographical Names issued a report ruling that made official the name *Mount Rainier*.<sup>13</sup> Tacomans reacted with a huge campaign, fueled by local business promoters and the city’s press. They championed that the name was improper, degrading, and even immoral. They were prepared to accept variant spellings of the aboriginal name such as *Tahoma*, *Tahomah*, or *Tuhoma*-but definitely not Rainier, a “Seattle name.” Judge Wickersham stated that “Tahoma is the name required by honesty, euphony, simplicity, poetry, tradition, history, and patriotism.”<sup>14</sup> Tacoma even suspected a Seattle conspiracy. Bruce Barcott notes:

An apocryphal story circulated about the Seattle Brewery and Malting Company delivering free kegs of Rainier Beer to a late-night geographic board meeting. The story gained credence only in Tacoma, where fathers gathered for a fight.<sup>15</sup>

Tacoma’s furious reaction included a campaign defaming the character of British Admiral Peter Rainier, after which Captain George Vancouver named the mountain. He was described as a murderous villain, a “pirate with a price on his head,” a slaveholder, and a man who fought against the independence of this country during the Revolutionary war. Not only was the name considered unpatriotic but also “it is both disparaging and depreciating to have the mountain named after such an individual.”<sup>16</sup>

Seattlites countered with an attack on the spelling of the name *Tacoma*. They argued that there are multiple variations of the name, including *Tacobet*, *Tacobid*, *Tacobut*, and *Takoman*.

Seattle claimed that Tacoma was incorrect and improper, a "white man's" rendering of the name. The battle of "Mount Rainier versus Mount Tacoma" had become a civic battle of "Seattle versus Tacoma."

The controversy continued through the 1890s and into the 1910s, causing much tension and resentment between the two cities. By 1916 a "Justice to the Mountain" Committee was formed by Sam Wall, a legendary Tacoma journalist. The committee proceeded to solicit endorsements from prominent persons and organizations. Supporting the aboriginal name for the mountain were Will Rogers, the Smithsonian Institution, and even Teddy Roosevelt who called the mountain *Tacoma* and "never pussyfooted about it."<sup>17</sup>

As the Tacoma campaign continued to gain momentum, many Seattleites were tiring of what they considered an irritating, drawn-out, and hurtful campaign. In 1917, the editor of the *Seattle Argus* stated:

I would be willing to call it Mount Tacoma, or Mount Honerificentisimus, or any old thing if it would tend to make the people of Tacoma feel any different toward Seattle. Why blood has even been spilled over it (the name controversy).

I once saw two little boys, not over 10 years of age, fighting over the name of the mountain and one of them got a bloody bugle."<sup>18</sup>

Despite the strained civic relations between the two cities, Tacomans persisted. The near fanatical Minnie Mitchell spearheaded the Mount Tacoma Club, an organization that supplanted the "Justice to the Mountain" Committee as the prime mover in the crusade. They suffered a few setbacks in 1917 and 1921 when the Board on Geographic Names twice rebuffed the Mount Tacoma Club's appeal and reaffirmed "Rainier."<sup>19</sup>

Tacoma's last big push ended in a 1924 Congressional hearing over the name change. Many members of Congress criticized Tacoma as self-promoting, whiny, and stubborn. Although the Mount Tacoma name change was not enacted, some Congressmen seemed to support the resolution out of indignant pity. Mr. Vaile stated: "Tacoma would get rid of her mental misfortune, get over her grouch and start on a process of normal development."<sup>20</sup> Tacoma was portrayed as an adolescent stuck in a self-promoting yet self-defeating rut. William E. Humphrey scolded Tacoma:

There is a feeling of irritation, off resentment, and of hate toward the lone community that would prostitute nature's most sublime creation for the purpose of a billboard... The people of Tacoma themselves know, that this obsession of theirs has been a constant handicap to their growth... it will intensify against Tacoma that feeling of resentment of the people in the rest of the State."<sup>21</sup>

It is on this note that the "Crusade for Mount Tacoma" came to an abrupt halt. Minnie Mitchell persisted until her death in 1941 but the controversy, for the most part, was put to rest. However, many Tacomans continued to regard the name Mount Rainier as "an opprobrious slander."<sup>22</sup>

Periodically, the celebrated cause resurfaces. In 1978 the name change was back in the limelight. Roger Pitsinger claimed that Bing Crosby, who was born in Tacoma, was "upset by the name Mount Rainier and said in the future he hoped to come back and lead a campaign to restore the original name."<sup>23</sup> Bing never did return but he proved that "the Mount Tacoma train continues to be derailed but has yet to be permanently derouted."<sup>24</sup>

Human beings will fight for a place-name with nearly the same determination that they will fight over the place itself. The enduring Mount Tacoma crusade proves this. There are powerful places and there are powerful names. Like Walt Whitman's Mannahatta, Tacoma is one of them. Lyrical and poetic. Ralph Chaplin evokes the name in his hymn to Mount Tacoma:

*High in the heavens where all clean things are  
Still stands that Mountain underneath a Star,  
Timeless and patient, waiting to reclaim  
Its ancient title to the Indian name  
It bore before the white man came.*<sup>25</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Walt Whitman, *Leaves of Grass* (New York: Heritage Press, 1897), 419.

<sup>2</sup> John H. Williams, *The Mountain That Was God*, revised by F.H. Loutzenhiser (Seattle: Lowman and Hanford, 1932), 14.

<sup>3</sup> Genevieve McCoy, *Mount Tacoma vs. Mount Rainier*, Pacific Northwest Quarterly vol. 77 no. 4 (October 1986): 13

<sup>4</sup> Gary Fuller Reese, *The Origin of the Name Tacoma* (Tacoma: Tacoma Public Library, 8 January 1976), 7.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, 3.

<sup>6</sup> Paul W. Harvey, *Tacoma Headlines: An Account of Tacoma News and Newspapers from 1873 to 1962* (Tacoma: Tribune Publishing Company, 1962), 65.

<sup>7</sup> Reese, 20.

<sup>8</sup> *Ibid.*, 22.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 24.

<sup>10</sup> Arthur David Martinson, *Mountain in the Sky: A History of Mount Rainier National Park*. Ph.D. diss. (Washington State University, 1966), 121.

<sup>11</sup> Denny MacGougan, *Tahoma: The Name May Have Peaked Too Soon* (Tacoma: MacGougan, 29 August 1888), 3.

<sup>12</sup> Martinson, 123.

<sup>13</sup> Bruce Barcott, *Measure of a Mountain: Beauty and Terror on Mount Rainier* (Seattle: Sasquatch Books, 1997), 37.

<sup>14</sup> MacGougan, 6.

<sup>15</sup> Barcott, 37.

<sup>16</sup> John Bailey, *Rainier Name Change a Mountainous Undertaking*, Tacoma News Tribune, 9 December 1978, 7(A).

<sup>17</sup> Harvey, 65.

<sup>18</sup> MacGougan, 4.

<sup>19</sup> McCoy, 142-43.

<sup>20</sup> U.S. House of Representatives. *Changing Name of Mount Rainier: Hearings Before the Committee on the Public Lands*. (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office, 1925), 45.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Harvey, 66.

<sup>23</sup> Bailey, 7(A).

<sup>24</sup> McCoy, 149.

<sup>25</sup> Ralph Chaplin, *Only the Drums Remembered: A Memento for Leschi* (Tacoma: Dammier Printing, 1960), 18.

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