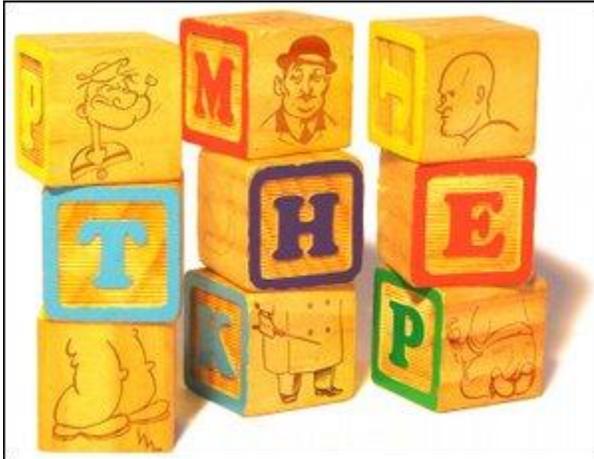


Op-ed column: Memorable monikers - Joe the Plumber just one of nifty names in history

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Mark Wilson/For The Sunday Gazette

My first inclination was to write glowingly about the inspirational and internationally mind-boggling result of Nov. 4, but then I realized that only the moderate conservative columnists such as David Brooks and George Will could do justice to that, and they did so, and very well indeed.

For that matter, so did John McCain in his gracious concession speech. But I, having touted Barack Obama to you in these pages in November 2006 — six months before he declared his candidacy and 14 months before the Iowa caucus — cannot muster comparable credibility. I must take a different tack.

The electorate, to its credit, did not buy into that Joe the Plumber nonsense. By now we know that Joe's real name is Samuel Joseph Wurzelbacher, that he is not a licensed plumber, and that he had no immediate prospects for earning an annual wage anywhere near the level that he would be endangered by a still-hypothetical Obama tax increase. But I think that coinages that link a name with an occupation or imputed characteristic are great fun.

There are many people, real or imagined, whose middle name is “the”: Attila the Hun, Bartleby the Scrivener, Billy the Kid, Bob the Builder, Conan the Barbarian, Harry the Horse, Tillie the Toiler, Popeye the Sailor, Minnie the Moocher, Winnie the Pooh, Robbie the Robot, Jude the Obscure, Mandrake the Magician, Bozo the Clown, and a host of others. Oh, then there's the title character of one of my favorite songs, “Mack the Knife.”

Historical names

Two really good examples are the historic Vlad the Impaler, who inspired the fictional Count Dracula, and Aethelred the Unready. I don't know what he was unready for, but probably only the fact that he is more obscure than Jude kept people from hanging that on one of this year's candidates.

But the post-election commentary did include at least one good suggestion for a new sobriquet. Many are fans of the Web site dailykos.com, conducted since 2002 by a certain Mr. Moulitsas who, it is proposed,

should forever be called by a combination of his first name and avocation, Markos the Blogger. Has a nice ring to it.

Many people whose middle name was “the” had great surnames in lieu of a stated occupation. Among the best known are Alexander the Great, Catherine the Great, Peter the Great, Frederick the Great and Charles the Great, better known as the Charles Magnus who became, for short, Charlemagne. Peter the Great couldn’t be shortened because he was six foot eight, the same height as prospective cabinet member Paul Volcker.

Would you believe that Wikipedia has an article titled “List of people known as The Great”? Well it does, and it lists more than 100 real people called Great and 24 fictional ones. Several of the fictional names have permuted components, that is, “The Great” comes first. My favorites are The Great Gildersleeve, The Great Gatsby, The Great Santini and the Great McGinty. McGinty was missing when I came upon the article, but what is so much fun about Wikipedia is that one may edit any article, so I added him. Of course, someone could “revert” the entry, as the parlance goes, but my addition still stands after three days.

I also like names associated with states, or geography in general: Lawrence of Arabia, Man of La Mancha, Tailor of Panama (“of” can be a middle name too), Indiana Jones, Tennessee Williams, Nathan Detroit, Kenesaw Mountain Landis, the first commissioner of major league baseball, and Minnesota Fats (played by Jackie Gleason, another Great One).

Fast Eddies

I, and all those named Edward, Edwin, Edgar or Edmund, are loath to remind you that Minnesota Fats was a character in the same movie, “The Hustler,” as Fast Eddie Felson, played by the recently late and really great Paul Newman. The original Fast Eddie was Edward Vernon Rickenbacker (1890-1973), a World War I flying ace who earned his nickname by being the first man to drive a race car a mile a minute. Several subsequent people have also been called Fast Eddie; the one in the news lately is Fast Eddie Rendell, Democratic governor of Pennsylvania. John McCain should have known he was wasting time and money in that state.

All of the Fast Eddies, real or fictional, were very accomplished at what they did best. Yet, the term feels pejorative to me. When former county manager Bob McEvoy called me Fast Eddie, I could never be sure it was a compliment. But I have fond memories of our association.

Here are two instances, one from politics, one from science, of softly deprecatory human appellation. So many persons of the surname Bass have served in Congress, one in the 19th century and one as recently as 2006, that even the usually reliable Google failed me. I can’t find the first names of two who served at the same time some decades ago. Not surprisingly, the more loquacious one was called “Largemouth Bass” and the other “Smallmouth Bass.”

Of all scientists, physicists have the greatest sense of humor. A very famous one was as much comedian as Nobel Prize-winning scientist and admitted it through the name of his most popular book, “Surely You’re Joking, Mr. Feynman.” And today, as I write, my November Physical Review came and one of its book reviews reminded me of my all-time favorite physics story.

Once there lived two brothers, Hans A. and Wolfgang Kurt Hermann “PieF” Panofsky, both of whom became distinguished physicists. They were so close in age that they graduated from Princeton in the same year, 1938. Hans finished first in the class with the perfect grade of 100, and Wolfgang second, with only a 99. Thereafter they became known, respectively, as “the smart Panofsky” and “the dumb Panofsky.”

Guys and dolls

Ten days ago, Jean and I attended the Notre Dame-Bishop Gibbons' wonderful production of "Guys and Dolls," in which our granddaughter Laura was a soldier in its Mission Band. One of the dozen sinners that Sky Masterson brought to the mission to fulfill his bet was Big Julie, who rolled blank-faced dice but always won because he "remembered where the spots were." Others were Angie the Ox, Nicely-Nicely Johnson and Harry the Horse, duly listed earlier in this piece. That equine moniker reminded me that last month I received a letter at our Historical Society Museum that I think was intended for the Racing Museum in Saratoga. It began with the salutation "Dear Mr. Ed."

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