

Masthead Logo

The Palimpsest

Volume 5 | Number 10

Article 6

10-1-1924

Pronunciation of Iowa

Frank Luther Mott

Follow this and additional works at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest>

Part of the [United States History Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Mott, Frank L. "Pronunciation of Iowa." *The Palimpsest* 5 (1924), 373-377.

Available at: <https://ir.uiowa.edu/palimpsest/vol5/iss10/6>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the State Historical Society of Iowa at Iowa Research Online. It has been accepted for inclusion in The Palimpsest by an authorized administrator of Iowa Research Online. For more information, please contact lib-ir@uiowa.edu.

Pronunciation of Iowa

Not long ago, on a train speeding from the East toward Chicago, I fell into casual conversation with two gentlemen whom chance had made my fellow travellers for the afternoon. Now, three topics commonly form the subject-matter of discussions in the smoking compartments of Pullman cars: they are methods of shaving, brands of tobacco, and the virtues of home States. Other matters may of course slip in, though rather incidentally, as politics, sports, and the weather; but the first three are the staple Pullman topics. On this occasion we had finished with shaving and tobacco and had settled down to home States, when the Chicagoan — a portly gentleman with a close-cropped black mustache — upon learning I was from Iowa, remarked that he had been born in Ioway himself. Thereupon the baldheaded man from Albany observed that his sister had married a man from I-o-wa, and now lived in Dez Moinz. Being of a nasty disposition in such matters, I at once raised the issue of pronunciation, alleging that out in Iowuh most people pronounce the name of the State as I do. At the end of a more or less heated argument we might have repeated in chorus the same statement: "I have always heard the name pronounced my way, and therefore my way must be correct."

As a matter of fact, there is something to be said for each pronunciation. *Ioway* is still common in the State, especially among older people and in rural districts. When many of the State's respected and cultivated citizens, including its Governor, pronounce its name so, the usage can not be said even to be obsolescent. Moreover, while Iowans continue to raise their right arms high and sing at the top of their voices,

“We're from I-o-way, I-o-way!

That's where the tall corn grows!”

the *Ioway* pronunciation is not likely to perish. Thus the superior timbre of *ay* over *uh* for singing strengthens the older pronunciation.

And the fact is that etymologically *Ioway* is more nearly correct. The Indians whose name was identical with that of the river from which Albert Lea christened the “Iowa District” were called Ioways or Iyooways. Alanson Skinner, the best authority on the Ioway Indians, writes in a private letter, “In my ten years' experience with the tribe I have heard the name repeatedly pronounced by the members of both the Oklahoma and Kansas-Nebraska divisions as follows: *I-yu-way*, the accent being on the first syllable, and the last syllable having the distinct *ay* sound.”

Recollections of pioneers, the early English spelling *Ioway*, and the efforts of French explorers, missionaries, and traders to spell the name support this view. These men were not noted for accurate

orthography, nor were they concerned with philology, but, as was usual in reducing an absolutely new word to written symbols the spelling was inevitably phonetic. F. W. Hodge in his *Handbook of American Indians* lists about seventy versions of the word, of which the following French spellings indicate clearly the prevalence of the final *ay* sound. Aiaouez, Aiauway, Aieways, Aijoues, Aioaez, Aiouez, Aiowais, Ajaouez, Ajouez, Aöais, Avauwais, Ayauais, Ayauvai, Ayauway, Ayawai, Ayeouais, Ayououais, Ayouez, Ayouwais, Ayovai, Ayoway, Iawai, Ihoway, Ioewaig, Ioway, Jowai, Joways, Yoways, Yuahés. The final *-ay* is etymologically correct.

The pronunciation of my friend from Albany has less to commend it. Any reason for the placing of the accent on the second syllable is difficult to find. When one tries to account for it by analogy, remembering *Iona* and *iota*, one is embarrassed by the commoner *iodine*! The fact remains that in the East and South the penultimate accent for *Iowa* is very common. Its users say they were taught that accent at school; yet the books do not have it. Out of ninety-two records of pronunciation I have gathered from dictionaries and geographies only three accent the word on the *o*, and two of them are English and the third published in Boston in 1855.

Though the reason for a shift of accent may be hard to find, the cause of the change of *-ay* to *-uh* is fairly clear: the purists started it, and human na-

ture finished it. The purists, working chiefly through the teachers of the common schools, insisted there was no justification for pronouncing the final *-a* like *-ay*. They argued from analogy, citing Christian names like Ezra, Anna, Elisha, and place names like Minnesota, Africa, America. *Ioway* seemed quite as wrong as *Joshuay*. If analogy is superior to etymology in pronunciation, these purists were right. They insisted, moreover, not upon *-uh*, but upon a sound sometimes called the half-Italian *a*, somewhere between *a* in *fat* and *a* in *father*. They were able to make thousands of children try for that sound in *ask* and *grass*, but in a final unstressed syllable it quickly degenerated into the sound of *a* in *about*, which may be indicated by the spelling *-uh*. This lax *uh* sound is also frequently substituted for the *o* sound of the second syllable. Moreover, some New Englanders will add a final *r*.

Here, then, are six distinct pronunciations: *I'oway*, *Io'wah*, *I'ower*, *I'owah*, *I'owuh*, and *I'uhwuh*. Which is right? There is, after all, but one standard of correctness for pronunciation, and that standard is the consensus of usage. Now if this consensus is not clear, that is, if there appears to be a division in common usage, the conscientious seeker usually does one of two things: he either adopts the usage of some person or group of persons that he respects, or he accepts the "preferred" pronunciation of his favorite dictionary. He may choose the

latter course because he thinks that in the dictionary the god of words speaks, and the three legs of the dictionary-stand are for him the tripod of the sibyl; but a consultation of the preface of the sacred tome will reveal the frank acknowledgment that the lexicographer is trying merely to record usages as he has carefully observed them. Thus the *vox dei* he thought he heard is shown to be only the *vox populi* after all, and whether he follows his preferred group or his dictionary he is yielding finally to "social coercion".

Weight of usage, now, is with the pronunciation *Powuh*, the final vowel as *a* in *about*. Thus the dictionaries record it. The purists, however, plead for a lower, "broader" *a*, a definite *-ah* in place of the lax *-uh*. The advocates of this pronunciation can not claim "correctness", since correctness is based on consensus of usage rather than on aesthetics, but their pronunciation is attractive.

I wish this article might fall into the hands of the portly Chicagoan and the baldheaded man from Albany, for they did not allow me to set forth my arguments at length. After they had read it they would say, I suppose, what they said before with some philological soundness: "I have always heard the word pronounced my way, so my way must be right."

FRANK LUTHER MOTT