

## What's in a Name? I'll Tell You.

*By Robert D. Smith, 1982*

Not long ago in a very interesting seminar, I was asked to write down, as quickly as they came to mind, "Things I Would Like to Change." The first thing to pop into my head was "MY NAME!" I've always hated my name. Haven't you? It is plain, common, dull, and colorless—not at all like the man who wears it.

The worst of these attributes, of course, is "common." There are so many of us that identification (the purpose of a name) is often not accomplished. There are confusions with reservations, mail telephone directories...I'll spare you the awful detail.

Second worst is the perceived or mythical commonness of my name. I have met only two others in my life, and I'll wager you don't know more than three. (OK, I only know one Zuckerman. But three people aren't exactly the sands of the sea.) Still-confess it—when you first met me or heard of me, wasn't your first thought "What a common name." Or "how common," or "I wish his name were something else."

The psychological effects are not well understood, but some studies indicate people with common names are thought to be common or lower class in some way. No one really wants to say, "Let me introduce your new manager, Bob Smith." He will say instead, "Let me introduce your new manager. His name is Bob Smith." As if to say, "But there's more."

I won't even discuss that eternal monument to witlessness, the motel joke.

It has oft been suggested—and considered—that I change the spelling. But none of the options seems really satisfying: Bobb, Baub, Bahb, Bawb, Bhab, Bbob. You'd have to be a Boob to use one of these. And in conversation, only the deaf would notice the unique spelling anyway.

The only real solution is to change the name. And once you decide you can handle one more round of witless gags, it's a terrific prospect. What a chance! To choose your own name. Now if you're Stan Hathaway or Darren MacGregor or something like that, the chance to choose your name may not mean much. Unless you're Bob Smith, you can't believe the exhilaration in that decision!

But you come down with a minor thud when you face up to the enormous difficulty of changing your last name—all those legal documents you've signed, all those data bases that won't get changed right, those kids of yours who won't like the new name, Mon and Dad. Forget it. Anyway, it's not Smith I dislike. There aren't half as many Smiths as there are Bobs, not a tenth, not a thirty-seventh! Smith is OK if it has something good with it (which, of course, my parents thought they were giving me with Robert—little knowing that handsome Robert Young was creating that feeling in maternity wards across the land. Whoever heard of Bob Young?).

The optimum number of syllables is two, and it cannot end in *ins*, *sh*, *ch*, or *z*—unless you want children to think your surname is *Myth*. (This rules out all plural names, such as *Charles*. *Francis* is particularly interesting, since it creates a euphemism for the philosophy of "*LeGrand Charles*.")

Now there is a great tendency to shorten all names to one syllable—*Vic*, *Sam*, *Burt*, *Sol*. And the tendency cannot be ignored. If there's a common "short" for your name, and you don't use it, people think you're weird. Any *Harold* can tell you that. So you need a good two-syllable name with no accepted short. Such names are rare—for men at least.

It also has to have a good reputation. Even though "*Mill*" hasn't caught on, nobody really likes *Millard*, however appealing it may have sounded to *Mrs. Filmore*. *Ethan* is similarly out of fashion, and so on. I don't know why some names are good and others aren't: why *Kevin* and not *Caleb*, *Edward* but not *Edgar*. The problem is to find one whose good press has not also made it popular. With *Kevin*, for example, millions of kiddies born in the 60's will grow up to haunt you.

Your name also ought to fit your background somehow. I can't call myself *Carlos* or *Jean-Paul* or *Omar*; it would sound pretentious. No, the exotic names are all out.

The suspense is killing you, right? OK, I've picked *Colin* (pronounced *Collin*, of course). I hope you like it. It sounds good; it's masculine; it's an old Gaelic name my Scotch-Irish ancestors might have given me, and I don't think "*Col*" will ever get off the ground. The only negative is the spurious pronunciation that sounds like a part of the body. None of my friends could be so gauche as to say that!

*Colin Smith*. Sounds good, doesn't it? ... It'll grow on you.

I'm told it's difficult to get through life with no middle initial (NMI), so I'm keeping the name my mother gave me. I'll be *Colin Robert Smith*. I think it's distinguished. People who haven't met me may even think I'm English.

Wait a minute. I don't want to be English. What if people really do say "*colon*"? If I didn't like it, would I have the guts to change it back—or to something else? I don't want to start what might become an endless search for the perfect name—the laughing stock of the Bureau of Vital Statistics.

Maybe *Bob Smith* isn't so bad. It does help me greatly with my tendency to the sin of pride. This way I'm protected. If I ever do anything great, nobody will know which *Bob Smith* it is anyway.

I guess I'll keep it—at least for now. It seems right somehow. What's in a name? Me!