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The River Misnomer

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By Richard Garrity

The River

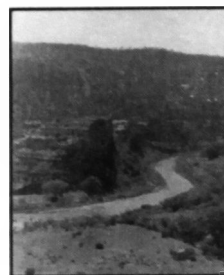
On the eastern slopes of the Sangre de Cristo Mountains of South Central Colorado, a river is spawned. At the end of a nine-hundred-mile flow, it enters the Arkansas River near Tamaha, Oklahoma. It's a river of conflicting names.

When the Spaniards were searching for gold in the area, they called the river the **Canadian** from the Spanish word **Canada**. *LIVING WEBSTER DICTIONARY*, 1972, records: "a deep narrow valley in Western U.S.; a river bed which is dry." George Shirk in his *OKLAHOMA PLACE NAMES* states, "The accepted explanation of the name is that it is a reference to Canada." Which is correct?

South of Taylor Springs, New Mexico, the Canadian River enters the thirty-mile-long Mills Canyon. It's a six-hundred-feet deep rocky gorge. The sides are thickly forested with pinion pine, oak, and cedar. Sheer eroded side canyons slash the red earth. Small waterfalls tumble over the brinks. Undeniably, this is the first part of the definition. It's a "deep narrow valley." At Wagon Mound, New Mexico, the Canadian River is released from Mills Canyon to enter the sandy plains—"a river bed which is dry"—the second part of the definition.

As the Canadian River meanders across New Mexico and Texas, the original name is retained. The town of Canadian, Texas is named after the watercourse. It continues as the Canadian River until it

Canadian River in
Mills Canyon,
New Mexico.
About 600 feet deep.
Photograph by
Richard Garrity



Misnomer

crosses the Texas-Oklahoma state line. At that place, it suddenly becomes the South Canadian River. What's the reason?

When General Edmund L. Gaines was stationed at Fort Smith in 1822, he explored the rivers of the area, which included the Kiamichi, the Poteau, and the South Canadian River. At that time there was a South Canadian River.

In 1830, J. C. Russell published a map of the eastern section of the present state of Oklahoma. The map shows the main river as the Canadian. A lesser stream flowed from the south to enter the Canadian near the present town of Eufala; it was called the South Canadian River. General Gaines renamed it **Gaines Creek**. The change was accepted, and the Canadian River was lost.

Presently, all Oklahoma highway signs refer to the Canadian as the South Canadian River. Most maps, especially those prepared in Oklahoma, identify it as the South Canadian River.

For the few who call it correctly, their protest is lost like the waters "on a riverbed that is dry." ♦

(RICHARD GARRITY of Oklahoma City is a free lance photographer and writer.)



Canadian River from the highway 177 bridge south of Asher, Oklahoma. Photograph by Richard Garrity