

Can you say *Champoeg*?

How do you pronounce it? What does it mean? These are simple questions, but the passing of time has made the answers more difficult than you might expect.

OK, let's get you started. You may say “sham-POO-ee.” That's how most people say it today (although you might hear a ranger say “sham-POO-ig”). And briefly, the name is based on a Kalapuya Indian word for a place to find a certain edible root—a kind of wild carrot. But Champoeg was not always pronounced this way, and its origin has been controversial.

A wandering pronunciation

As you can probably tell, “Champoeg” is not an English-language name, and Americans have been struggling to spell and pronounce it for nearly 200 years. Today the pronunciation has settled down to “sham-POO-ee.” This is easy for English-speakers to say, but is certainly not the original pronunciation. Even a generation or two ago, locals were more inclined to say “sham-POH-eg.” And during the time of the town of Champoeg—the 1840s to 1861—the pronunciation was probably close to the way it is spelled: “cham-POH-eg,” with a “ch” sound.

The spelling, however, has not always been consistent either. Early 19th-century travelers wrote the name as Sampou yea, Sampouyia, Champoicho, Champooing, Chumpoeg, and Champoic, as well as Cham-poeg. They were trying to write out the name phonetically, the way they heard it pronounced. But each traveler heard it differently, and at that time, spelling rules were not standardized. The question is: what was the word they were listening to, and who was saying it?

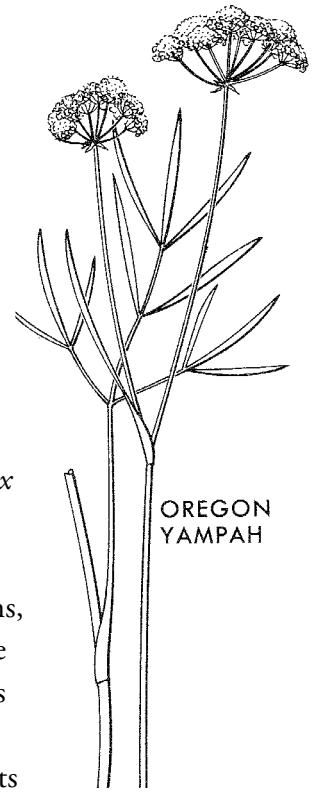
Was it French?

Since the first non-Indians to live in the area were French Canadians—and the word does look somewhat French—arguments have been made that Champoeg is a corruption of the French *Campment*

du Sable (“Sandy Camp”), a name they used for the area that later became the town. Or perhaps it came from *champeaux* (“plains”). The overwhelming evidence, however, points to a name from the Kalapuya Indians, the people who lived here in the Willamette Valley for thousands of years.

Today, Kalapuya descendants are members of the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, based roughly 40 miles to the west of the park. The Tribes have preserved their way of pronouncing this important place: “chuhm-POIeek” (two syllables)—or using the official linguists’ spelling, *Chumpúyk*.¹ Even today it is difficult for an outsider to accurately hear and pronounce the way tribal members say *Chumpúyk*, so it's easy to imagine a 19th-century American changing it to “cham-POH-eg.”

However, *Chumpúyk* is not a true Kalapuya word either. So where did it come from? Here's the theory: the



¹ Many languages, including the Kalapuya dialects, use sounds that are not found in English. Linguists use a complex spelling system that precisely captures the pronunciation of any word in any language.

Key Concepts

- The pronunciation of Champoeg has changed greatly over the years.
- The origin was once controversial, with some claiming it was French, and others, Kalapuya Indian.
- We now know that Champoeg is based on the Kalapuyan word for yampah, a food root.

Kalapuya language uses sounds that do not exist in any European language, and vice versa. The early trappers, either French- or English-speaking, misheard and mispronounced the original Kalapuya name, whatever it was. *Chumpúyk*, in turn, was the Kalapuya's attempt to pronounce what the trappers were saying.

This still leaves us wondering about the original Kalapuya name. It is possible to make some guesses because of two facts. First, even though Kalapuya is no longer spoken by anyone, linguists preserved two of the Kalapuya dialects—Santiam and Tualatin. And second, the Tribes have preserved the *meaning* of Champoeg, if not the actual, original word.

Yampah yes, camas no!

Park officials long believed that Champoeg might mean “place of camas.”² Indeed, the park's exhibits and other interpretive material have mentioned camas for years. However, the Tribes tell us with certainty that Champoeg is a place to find, not camas, which grows almost anywhere, but a more unusual plant—a wild carrot called “yampah” (*perideridea*). Yampah is *aBuiCuk* in Tualatin Kalapuya, or *ant-BuiCuk* in Santiam Kalapuya. (Roughly, “ah-BUee-chook” and “ahnt-BUee-chook,” with the “B” being pronounced between English “b” and “p”.)

Perhaps, then, the original was *CamBuiCuk* (“chahm-BUee-chuck”), which means “place of yampah.” Or one source in Tualatin Kalapuya mentions *CaCimaBuiCuk* (“chah-CHEE-mah-

2 Camas is a member of the lily family. Its bulb was an important food for all the tribes in the area. (“Camas” is the Nez Perce word.) Its lovely blue blossoms fill the park's low-lying areas in April and early May.

BUee-chook”), probably meaning “place in front of yampah.”³ Unfortunately, we will probably never know if either of these is correct.

Where is Champoeg?

One last note of confusion: “Champoeg” hasn't always referred to the same place. While it may have been “the place of yampah” to the Kalapuya, to the early settlers it was several miles of riverbank and floodplain. Etienne Lucier's farm—possibly the first in Oregon—was two miles west of the park, but in the 1830s it was considered to be “at Champoeg.” Later, Champoeg meant the town and its immediate area. Today, Champoeg refers to the park.

Many thanks to Tony Johnson of the Confederated Tribes of the Grand Ronde, and Henry Zenk of Portland State University.

3 While camas prefers low areas found throughout the Willamette Valley, yampah grows in high, dry places that are less common. Yampah would probably not have grown in the park itself, but across the river from the park in the rocky meadows of Parrett Mountain.

Further Reading

- **Champoeg: Place of Transition** by John A. Hussey, printed by the Oregon Historical Society in Portland, 1967. This book is our primary source of historical information about Champoeg. Although out of print, it can be found in libraries and in used book stores such as Powell's Books.
- For more on Kalapuya names, see http://www.orww.org/Kalapuya-Amin_2006/Program/ZenkH/Kalapuyan_Names_20060908.pdf. This is “Handout: The Kalapuyan Presence in Oregon's Geographic Names”, a six-page paper by Henry Zenk, September 8, 2006.

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