

Rhyme Of Provincetown Nicknames



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RHYME OF PROVINCETOWN NICKNAMES

These Rhymes came to me, springing into instant life, rough and prompt, like something out of sand and the sea; out of the very soil of Provincetown. Unlike the silly, prevalent School of Crossword Puzzle Poetry, which has taken in all the timid critics who say yes to them; being afraid to be left out on a limb if they say no—these rhymes are plain-spoken, and present an open meaning. The nicknames employed were already there, hundreds of them. I have invented none of them. Provincetown is The Town of A Thousand Nicknames.

As for the poem itself: if poets, like lawyers in court, must give precedents, here are mine.

This sort of poetry was plentiful, in Old Greek Times: recited during the grape harvests, when the wine was trod out in vats; and dealing with the foibles and failings of local personalities. From this source, eventually, sprang the glorious Drama of Greece.

Rome, later, followed suit, in the rural Fescinnine verse; rude Bacchic performances from cart-tails, pungent with personalities that soon grew so offensive that the performances were brought under censorship and finally forbidden.

But the inspiration of Fescinnine verse was also not barren; it gave fruition to Roman Satire; from the tough attacks of Juvenal and his lusty crudities, to the smooth flow and suave polish of Horace.

It was not such a far cry, though it came ages after, to the Flytings of early Scotch poetry. Here the rhymes narrowed down to exchanges of personal abuse and vivid vituperation between poets. The Flytings between Dunbar and Kennedy in the Scots dialect, certainly leave little to the plain-spokenness even of a Rabelais. And again like lawyers in court, these wholesome old rough boys were friends afterwards; their rhymed fights being only part of the professional game.

Like the work of these elder rhymsters, my Rhyme of Provincetown Nicknames is tumbling and unpolished. But I have kept them inoffensive. I would not have them be other. The one or two French words I use are to be pronounced with the American accent, like the French of Chaucer's Prioress, in the Prologue of the Canterbury Tales, which was, you remember, the French of "Stratford-at-Bowe".

Since collecting them, fellow Provincetowners have given me many more nicknames I missed.

Our Provincetown, where Greatness Comes True, might add to its other opulent qualities, that of its wealth and variety of nicknames.

There's a Town on the Cape like a fish-head in shape
Whose people don't deck out their feelings with crape;
They laugh, they cavort, they drink beer, they rejoice;
And the day has its sounds, and the night has its voice
Filled with murmur of waves as the sky is with stars;
While New Englanders, Portuguese, Summerers, Tars
Go up and go down, in and out of its bars;
And the winds and the tides and the changes of weather
Bring them all in the meshes-of-living-together;
There's excitement and discord that merges in concord;
The moods of their hearts don't strike always on one chord:
Quite unlike the angels of whom Milton sings,
The Provincetown people don't only have wings!—

Here the Pilgrims first landed and hung out their wash
(Though they went further up, for the winter to hole-in),
And that famed Rock at Plymouth is History's bosh:
And Provincetown's glory by Plymouth was stolen! . . .

Here Art is breathed in with the far-reaching skies;
And here the Contention itself is the Prize,
And Song is its own reward, bright in the heart,
Sitting close to the life, not a-far and apart!—
The richest Reward is his Dream, to the Dreamer;
New continents open to him; but the Schemer
With poor, selfish motives of ill-conceived gain

Inherits a darkness that grows on his brain,—
Over-reaching no one in the world but himself;
Like sand from his hand slips his ill-gotten pelf!

O, the sight, as you come to this notable Town,
Stands forth, of itself, as a thing of renown:
First, the Harbour's fine sweep takes the rapture-filled eye;
There the Monument stands with its height in the sky;
There the fisher-fleet dances, so brave and so gay,
Through the crescent-shaped waters of Provincetown Bay:
There goes KAKKI'S boat plowing, and ZORA THE FOX
OF THE SEA, packs his haddock in box upon box . . .

With the sun shining bright and the birds at their tunes
BUSHY BILL hitched his team and brought home to the dunes
RUBBER LEGS, the lone Poet, who was glad to be back
To this fine Fisher-Town and his oceanside shack,
Where, when failure impends and all things run a-wry,
He still has his ocean, his dunes, and his sky;
Steak, a seldom-filled wish, quite content with a fish
That he gets at the wharves for his sole evening dish . . .

Now, with more friendly feeling than any good reason
Townsmen say of their Poet he "brings in the Season,"
As he wanders the streets, greeting friends, right and left,
So pleased to be back half of wits he's bereft:
Each woman seems sister, each man seems a brother
As he roams from one end of the Town to the other,
Up-Along, Down-Along; low of heart or with fun,—
Each girl like a daughter, each lad like a son;
O, whether there's sunshine, or fog, or it rains,
This warm human kinship enkindles his veins;
His welcome from all sides prolonged and profuse is,—
And half of the names are nicknames that he uses,
Strange names that have never been put in a book,
From PEECEE and JIGGSUM to bland FRIDAY COOK.
Here in Provincetown nicknames are frequent and rife:
If you have an odd way or you fight with your wife
You'll be nicked with a name that will dent you for life!—
BOOZY doesn't touch liquor; WINE DROP, once begin it,
Can gulph down a quart on the tick of the minute . . .

I don't think there's anything small-time or mean
In these nicknames, though one or two touch the obscene:
Then, hurray, for each nickname!—not a dead, but a quick
name

That nicks with a character everyone named;
Not mine the invention, nor ill my intention,—
If any blame falls, the whole Town is to blame;
So deep roots each nickname, so wide spreads its fame,
There are many but known to their friends by the same:
When it comes to the point, I would have the world know it,
At hitting off nicknames the Town is the Poet . . .

As I said, there are nicknames I must not retail
For dread of a lawsuit or session in jail
Because they are ribald, though wholesome and hale:
Which when spoken bring grins and no Jot of alarm,
But in plain-witnessed print might breed malice or harm.

Once all names were nicknames: ADAM, formed without birth
From a woman, in Eden,—was really RED EARTH;
And EVE who was given to RED EARTH for wife,—
EVE is CHAVAH, in Hebrew, which means, simply, "LIFE."
So when men, to this day, say "MY LIFE," to their wives,
That will show you how long ancient usage survives.
SMITH once meant THE BLACKSMITH; FLETCHER feathered
the arrow,

And BARROW pushed hard at the loaded wheelbarrow . . .
Nicknames trace a lineage beyond accolades:
Before them the boast of nobility fades . . .

For a lover of names none surpassed the Old Roman;
He had praenomen, nomen, cognomen, agnomen:
The first was his personal name; the second,
The name of his gens or his house; the third reckoned
His immediate family; and sometimes a fourth,
The agnomen, was added, for some deed of worth.
In his family name oft a nickname was hidden
Like a pearl in an oyster, lost gem in a midden:
In Marcus Tullius Cicero we see,
Interpreted rightly, Mark Tully SMALL PEA,
While Ovid THE NOSEY, was Ovidius NASO,—
At least all the Latin Lexicons say so . . .

William Shakespeare once asked what there was in a name:
SHAIKS couldn't say "Shakespeare," whence came his
nickname;

FLINKS couldn't learn "Sphinx" when they had him in
school,—

Yet he learned how to live by good-fellowship's rule . . .
HOWDY, HOT TIME, SWEET KEES! Hello COLONEL KORN!

Now some of these nicknames are family-borne,
Where children inherit each nickname in turn.
The GOD-DAMNS, JAZZ-GARTERS, and TIN-DRAWERS
inherit,
Through the dash of their nicknames, a keen, jolly spirit . . .

Does GLOBE equal FATS with the meat on his slats,
Or HOTEL MAN BOSSY found eating at Pat's?—
Or BARTENDER-PAINTER who comes riding high
With his heavily braceletted arms in the sky? . . .

No, that is not thunder a-bumbling and rumbling:
That is WILD HUNTER Frank whose shots send the ducks
tumbling:
CAPTAIN HARRY and he, if the weather be harsh,
Or sunny, go gunning on dune, over marsh . . .

Brave SAM CENTER-BOARD, when he reached T'other Shore,
Was disgusted to find Charon sculled with an oar.
(In the Greek, by the way, CHARON means "BURNING-EYED",
From the way that he glared at the ones who had died,—
Souls who thronged by the Styx for that grim ferry-ride).

Now, I might as well write here, not keeping till later,
For the using of nicknames the chief raison d'etre:
Given thirty-odd Jameses whose last name is Doane,
How then can one James from the other be shown,
With both names in common?—to the accurate force
And distinction of nicknames our tongues find recourse . . .
We have Manuels here, we have Manuels there,
And Dutras and Silvas as thick as the air
When SNOW wavers down from the sky everywhere:
Hence are nicknames employed to point out Which is WHO . . .

When fishermen, like-named, work on the same crew,
The employment of nicknames is practical, too . . .

Frank DOC BLANEY Flores has a great voice to call
The Selectmen to time, when they meet in Town Hall . . .
ROW-DOWN he scorned walking the new-paven street,
So he voyaged down-town on his row-boat's seat—
ROW-DOWN was the Captain—JOE THE SPANIARD tells me
Who, when out with his fishing crew, bounced on the sea,
Called, gruff, down the forec'stle, "how many men there?"
An echo lagged up, in response,— "Cap'n, THREE!"
"Cap'n" shifted his quid, spitting out through the air,
(Quick at hauling in fish, at arithmetic slow)
"Then let HALF come on deck,—an' the rest stop below!"

Well, who THE BLACK FLASH is who frightens the ladies
Peeking in through windows, when not drawn the shade is,—
If the cops ever catch him, he'll catch more than Hades! . . .
MARY FATS, she who never spills liquor from glasses,
In this respect leads all the Provincetown lasses;
SAM THE GREEK, that vociferous son-of-a-gun,
Flips up fried potatoes and never spills one . . .

I thought DOCTOR SMILES a particular friend
When he took me to ride with him, soon to perpend
It was not for mere friendship's, companionship's sake:
When he has any lengthier visit to make
With some one to talk to, it keeps him awake,
As from patient to patient he speeds, day and night . . .
He rests when he can, but dare not sleep upright . . .
Now to work is THE THREE BULLFROG BROTHERS' delight,
But JIMMY THE WORKER, he works day and night—
And he thinks poets lazy who just sit and write . . .
So opinions are passed from one mouth to another:
Few are critics of self, lamming into each other;
Poets satirize landlords who won't give rent free,
And find fault with tradesmen who show industry;
Are themselves, in return, called "the long-haired breed,"
And considered but fools for their rhymes and their need:
But how dull would life be, with no one to upbraid!
Thus the-give-and-take of existence is made;

We would none of us care for a world without strife,
As a fight often proves a man's love for his wife . . .
If writers had no one to damn and indite
Where would writers find subjects on which for to write?
How else could the poets with rhyming proceed?—
Why, we wouldn't have Bibles that Christians don't read.

As I saunter and visit about Provincetown
Receiving and writing these odd nicknames down
I find matter enough to embarrass the brain
Of an Aesop, or Phaedrus, or sage la Fontaine . . .
As a canvas is painted, stroke for stroke I put down,
Like that picture of Breughel's industrious town,
Grocer, Butcher, and Bayberry-Candle-Maker,
Banker and Fisherman, THREE-FINGERED BAKER,
The men on the wharves and the women in stores,
As thick as the sand-fleas that hop on our shores . . .

The marriage procedures in due order met,
New nicknames as well as new beings beget:
When BIG HE went courting and wedded BIG SHE
The first of their offspring was called LITTLE HE . . .

Now line after line I will rapidly number
Of names most unique, JOE DUCKS, BUCKET, CUCUMBER,
FISH-FOR-FRIDAY, LITTLE JESUS, THE SAVER, BROOM-
HANDLE,
HONKA and KONK, SHORKERS GLORY, and BLUE,
DRY POD, WHITE MOLASSES, JOE CRABBY, CRAPOO,
SPEED, JOCKO, KOBobbles, JOHNNY LIMBS, DR. FOO,
PUMP CART, FANCY GARTERS, LITTLE HOUSE, MADAME
WHALE,
SIDE WHEELER, FOUR MASTER, and FLYING TOPSAILS;
BIG BERTHA with keen-witted eyes on the job;
And that wonderful nickname of UNCLE DOOR KNOB;
HYSTEROCKS, hilarious when sipping his beer;
MICKY MOUSE, DING DONG, SUNNY, that girl of good cheer;
BENNY REGULAR, BELO, CAT, TISS, PIGGIE WEE;
RUBE, JUNE, and WEEJUM; RED, SNONYA, WHOOPPEE;
Next I swing into sight on my astrolabe
BLACK, LIGHT-FINGER, FOUR FINGERS, PEANUTS, BABE;
And, a few more to tie up the tongue of the Tripper,

"What words did they use?" "Well (pause), the first said
'GOD DAMN,'
"And one asked for—JAZZ GARTERS!" he rose in despair—
"You take it up, girls, while I come up for air!"

Explanations were made. The man's face was a sight;
For now it went red; and again it went white;
Then he left, to report that "those girls are all right!"
Had it been a trick rigged such as jokesters arrange?
Anyhow, the Main Office O.K.'d our Exchange,
Vowed our girls were right smart, handling such a melange! . . .

Here are beaches surpassing Dieppe and the Lido,
Strands excelling the Midi since France has gone seedy;
Here you don't have to go in full dress or tuxedo;
Mohammedan, Bahaist, Christian, or Buddhist,
Go in slacks if you will, on "the Backside" go nudist;
(Once some Summerers asked where the nudists resorted
To take their sun-baths,—their landlady retorted
With an innocent mind, "On 'The Backside,' of course!"
When the dubious meaning gave laughter full force!—
The dolts didn't know "Backside" meant where the sea,
Far over the dunes, washes in, full and free,
And has nothing to do with ANATOMY!)
Wear your panties and scanties, your brief brazziere:
If you mind your own business nobody will care.
So enjoy both these nicknames and each day's sunny use—
Which we set forth in rhyme to amuse not abuse;
Till Labour Day comes, don't sit twiddling your thumbs;
Pluck the fruit of each day as to ripeness it comes;
Go out with our fishermen, swim in the Bay;
See the dunes, sail the sea, drink your cocktails, be gay;
But abjure that aloof and superior mood,—
You will have to keep jumping to be half as good
As the "natives" who serve you and rent you their houses
For your holiday pastimes, flirtations, carouses;
For our folks, they will silently measure your size—
Who, just like their nicknames, are racy and wise! . . .
To the Portuguese most of these nicknames are given . . .
Though the Sons of New England have manfully striven,
They sometimes forget God has music in Heaven.
From Portugal there has come Song and Romance
Teaching Puritan rigour and primness to dance,

And "The Islands" have added a glow to the day
Which else might appear too forbidding and grey:
Here the Portuguese mingle their good, bouncing blood
With the English Descent that forgets Robin Hood . . .

SQUASH, JUPITER, SASHWEIGHT, still the rife nicknames
come:
HARMONAKA, THE GUINEA, BUBS, BEAVER, and BUM,
WILLY ALLEY, MAX, BOOBA, BUNNY,—nothing can stop;
HALLELUIA from hastening each day to his shop;
KALLIFORNA, TRAM, BLOCKIE, and HAIR DRESSER
FREDDIE;
OUT-RIDER, JIMMY SHIPWRECK, and JOHNNY READY;
VARDI, DORY PLUG, BRONK, help to swell the roll-call;
SAND PAPER, NORTH HARWICH, DRAW BUCKET, SNOW
BALL.
Next I weave on my versicles' difficult loom
SWEDE, SWIFTY, ROCKY, and TITTI-BOOM
BALLERINA, whose books dance with genius replete;
Lithe PSIWI who passes on bare, lovely feet . . .

As bicycles sometimes are built double-seated,
As my rhythms grow heated, I've sometimes repeated,
With a rush and a surge like to waves coming in;
Repetition sticks close, like Original Sin;
Yet adding up joys takes the sting out of sorrow;
Flies biting today will be dead by tomorrow;
But Time makes us pay when the future we borrow —
These are catch-as-can rhymes like jiu-jitsu or judo:
If I can't catch their meaning at times, I hope you do:
Here's a fresh scatteration of nicknames for you:
SCAREY JACK, ROLL-DOWN-CHALKLINE, TIMBER-LEGS,
COCKALOO,
JACKET, FOUL-BALL, CHINK, PSIGA: and, a-float on the Blue
Of our sky-brimming waters, of boats not a few
Bearing monikers,—such as TIN FLAG, RUBBER BOAT,
That lapse through the fog to the buoys' eerie note . . .
But to go on with Humans,—we have WBZ,
SHERLOCK, BABY SNOOKS, BUNGO, then HARMONY,
FROSTY, BLINIE, CHAMAKA, JOE BOBBY, BALONEY,
HALF-A-DOLLAR, MACAQUE, CACA: there goes SMALL
TONY;
TOUGH, SPINACH: some nicknames I never may give

Since I'm friends to their owners,— and still want to live! . . .
While my heart still jiggs to this rocketing tune
Let me add LUCKY, KNOCKS, and CUDDY-MOON.

The theme not exhausted, I lay down my pen
Having done with the nicknames of the women and men
Who work on the wharves, in the shop and the store,
And, living and striving, add up their lives' score,
Till, one day or other, they sleep 'neath the sod,
Resigning their souls to the Mercy of God! . . .

Writing rhymes turns to nothing all other delight:
I started with daylight: I've written all night:
The stars stand all pale in the change-waiting sky;
The world's still asleep; one bird wakes with a cry—
Another bird answers in drowsy reply;
The power of the Muse for a while has foregone me.
Like laughter in Heaven the dawn breaks upon me!

CUSTA - NALA, CUSTA - RICA, GAR - RUPA, JACK-THE-
RIPPER;

And Tut, for his silence so dubbed by the boys
(King Tut lay two thousand years making no noise);
CUP-CAKE, and FLITTERS, JOE CRAB, and BUBOY;
SQUEAKY, CAT-THIEF, and GOAT-CHIN, the debonaire
VIOLENT; and THE-MAN-WHO-WASN'T-THERE;
"MR. BROWN" whenever in town he is seen;
FLASH, SQUAKEY, andd QUALEY, and KID NICOTINE;
With a reek of tobacco comes Tony CHEROOT.
And Among the quaint names I cannot overlook
Are BUGGY and CABBAGE, THE COW, and MAROOK;
HERRING BONES is good English for melodious CANESA;
Andn then there is SHAG, BISKRA, CHICK, and PER GIESA;
There is CLOUD-BUILDER PAUL, whose rich pen like a brush
Paints our days from bright dawn to the evening's last flush,—
Notes the roar of Cape storms, and the nights' starry hush . . .
Our BUCKY, each year he goes battering forth
With his valorous shipmates, to tame the wild North;
CAPTAIN STIFF—which means DIGNIFIED—walks the proud
deck

Of his ship, the Queen Mary, snatched from being a wreck;
SPANKER, THE SPANIARD, GREENIE, TARTS, and THE
FLYER.
BARSH, BACKHOUSE, TOOTSIE, CODFISH, BEANPOT, and
THE LIAR

(The latter so named for his brave verbal fire);
EEL POT, GO-TO-HELL, WEATHER BREEDER, BROWN
BREAD,

ALAGOA, and HAPPY; MASTER FROG shows his head;
Next the gentle GORILLA who adds up the score
Where Tillie and he run their grocery store.
We have SWEET BERRY, BURGUNDY, JUMPING JACK,
BUCKALOO;

We have JOHN THE PHILOSOPHER CLAM DIGGER who
Can make dogs so human the beasts all but speak;
MIKE, SAM, and THE TWO NICKS, all nicknamed THE
GREEK

From that Country which gave Freedom's sky a new star
That will never cease shining,— in The Second World War!

Hear the children all running and shouting at play;
See the joy on the street and the life on the bay,
While here comes PIE-ALLEY, the bringer of mail,

Whose steady good-humor and feet never fail . . .

There once was a chap who was brought into Court
Whose belief in Democracy cut his case short:
Are you guilty or not?—the Judge he demands:
When the Prisoner asked for a showing of hands
From the loungers there: having them vote on his case!—
The Judge let him go, with a smile on his face,
While from floor up to rafter exploded the laughter,
And the man was dubbed HANDS-UP on leaving the place;
A name which his fam'ly went by ever after,
This fell in the days when Si Young drove his jigger:
Despite planes and bombers I think those days bigger;
There must have been something in that bootleg likker,
Though the pace went far slower, it moved the wits quicker!

As full as the harbour, when storm threats, of ships,
With nickname on nickname my Muse comes to grips:
SOUTH WEST HARBOUR, SOUTH EAST HARBOUR, RAT,
SHEENY and SCHANZ;
PETEY, CHICO OF THE CASTANETS, ORPHAN, BRAG, and
HOT PANTS;
BERSH, JACKET, LADACOMA, ONE KNIFE, STINKY,
ZIEKIE,
POOPA, CHRISTMAS, DR. DALEY, PAJAMAS, and SHIEKIE.

The telephone girls, our fair Town's oral Fates,
Will connect you by nicknames, at just the same rates:
Ask for someone by nickname, the voice will come through
As quick as a burst of the sun from the Blue . . .
Now, anent the Above, I have heard a rare story
That covers our telephone lasses with glory:
Some one had complained their attention was lax;
An Inspector came down to check up on the facts;
He took over a stool; with a voice trained and low
Like an expert who meant to efficiency show
How to make deft connections—snatched those ear-clasps off
soon—

Leaned back as if struck by a fist from the moon—
"Someone on the wire just ripped out—a bad word!—
"Some one else used a name which was really absurd!
"It could hardly be so,—and yet certain I am!"