

I like nicknames. The word is derived from the Middle English “ekename” that meant “also-name.” Some say that the Middle English term came from Teutonic “Nicht Nahm.” So, I guess the shortened or altered forms of names we are familiar with have a legitimate past.

Some people never acquire nicknames. One would think that short names—like Tom, Bill, Bob, Jane, Ann, and Pat—would stay just as they are with no need to change them. Yet, we all know a Tommy, a Billy, an Annie, or a Patty. Although those are all monikers we think of as traditional. Babies’ names these days are much different, and it will be interesting to see what kinds of nicknames arise from them.

With a dominant Swedish immigrant or first generation population, it is no wonder that years ago in this community, nicknames took on added importance. Ole Anderson could have been any one of a number of men with the same first and last names. And last names, often used especially by the male population in referring to others among their acquaintances, sometimes needed an addition—not a shortening—to make it clear which person was being referenced. This was the case in this area with the surname Anderson. Although all of these people lived before my time, I heard their names through local stories. There was Art Louie, Flatiron Anderson, and Ox-Ole, just for a sampling.

One family we know includes two sons’ wives with the same name. So, it is easy to keep them straight in third person conversation by “Annie-John” and “Annie-Keith.”

Nicknames are also common in Scandinavia. Lars is often Lasse; Nils becomes Nisse; Karl very often is known as Kalle. That last name is also the moniker given to our Donald Duck. In Swedish he is Kalle Anka.

I had no nickname for the first sixteen years of my life. Except for the oddity of being called by my middle name instead of my first name—and the middle name is a much better fit for me—I had no shortening, changing, or lengthening of Betsy. But, when my oldest niece began to talk, I acquired a nickname. I guess she could not say “Betsy,” though her speech was early and clear. But, I became Bobbie, later shortened to Bob. When siblings were born in her family, they knew what to call me—Julie had established a firm tradition, and they all called me “Bob.” I was “Bob” pretty much all of the time even as they grew up until the year I was in Sweden and came back with a husband named Runo. Then, all of a sudden, it seemed to me, “Bob” disappeared, and “Betsy” arrived again. At the age of twenty-nine, I lost my nickname.

But, in the meantime, I had acquired a nickname in Sweden. Since Betsy is often a shortening of the name Elizabeth, though not in my case, I was often called Bettan, the Swedish nickname for Elizabeth. I still have that nickname here at home, and I don’t mind at all being a Bettan. But, I still fondly remember being Bob.