

THE NAME-GIVER

January 2, 2006

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Of the nearly thirty million Europeans who emigrated to the United States in the century between 1820 and 1920, ethnic Russians were not the most numerous among them. Their numbers certainly didn't match the approximately five and a half million Germans, the four and a half million Irish or the four and a half million Italians who flocked to these shores in those hundred years. It is true that some two million Jews from the Russian Empire settled in this country during that time, but they were not ethnic Russians. Many of them did not even speak Russian, as was true of my mother and father. A large number of them were speakers of Yiddish, the language with which I grew up at home.

Nevertheless, the fewer ethnic Russians who did migrate to these shores certainly left their mark on the American landscape. All one has to do is look at the cities and towns in the United States bearing Russian names. They range from Moscow in Idaho to St. Petersburg in Florida, from Odessa in Texas to Sebastopol in California. And while in Russia there is only one city bearing each of these names, in the United States there are no fewer than nine Odessas and nine Moscows, one of the Moscows being located on the Ohio just upriver from Cincinnati.

How these towns acquired their names is not always known. In some cases there are no written records, in other cases older residents simply could not remember. Sometimes locals could recall only fanciful stories for which they had no hard evidence. Perhaps the most amusing story relates to the town of Moscow in Michigan, one of the nine Moscows in the United States. It is located in the Kalamazoo River valley on what used to be the stagecoach route between Chicago and Detroit. The story, as related by a local Michigan writer in 1938, has it that the name Moscow is of mixed Indian-Russian origin. According to this account, in the early nineteenth century some Indians in the area were very hungry, having gone without food for many days. In the distance they spied a cow moose and in their broken English excitedly shouted to one another, "Uh! Moose-cow dere." Why these Indians would be using English among themselves, the writer doesn't say. In any case, they brought the moose-cow down with their arrows and ended their long famine. The writer claims that later, during the Napoleonic Wars, the name Moose-cow was changed to Moscow. (Sylvester, p. 28) Is this story true? Probably not but it's fun to tell.

A much more believable and historically verifiable account is the story of how the

city of St. Petersburg in Florida got its name. It revolves around the exploits of a Russian immigrant aristocrat with such driving energy and ambition that one of his biographers has called him a "redoubtable hustler." (Alien, p. 208) His Russian name was Pyotr Alexeyevich Dementyev which he Americanized to Peter Demens shortly after he arrived in Florida. He was born in May 1850 in the province of Tver in the north of Russia between Moscow and St. Petersburg, which was then the capital of the Russian Empire. His father was a prosperous nobleman who owned two estates which together ran to more than 16,000 acres. On one of the estates stood a 26-room stone manor house staffed by thirty servants. Young Peter was orphaned at the age of five and was then raised by a wealthy uncle. The uncle sent him to St. Petersburg for his schooling, first to a traditional gymnasium and later to one that emphasized science and engineering. In 1867, at the age of seventeen, Peter entered the military service of Tsar Alexander II and became a lieutenant in the elite Imperial Guards. By 1870 he attained the rank of captain but he had become so disenchanted with military service that in March of that year he resigned his commission and returned to Tver to manage his rural estates. He also married a young woman named Raisa Borisenko who eventually gave birth in Russia to the first four of their seven children.

All through his twenties Peter Demens devoted himself to managing his estates in what was then post-emancipation Russia, the serfs having been freed in 1861. He also became active in local government as a leader of the local nobility and as a member of the Zemstvo, a board which managed public education, public health and all roads in the province. Despite his hard work, the economic condition of his estates did not improve. At the same time he lost patience in trying to lead a local nobility that was resistant to change. By 1880 he decided he would emigrate to the United States, an unusual decision for an ethnic Russian of his class. His decision was prompted by political considerations. Peter Demens was a liberal for his time. In the early 1870s he began publishing articles in St. Petersburg journals critical of the conditions among Russian peasants. By 1881 he had become uneasy that his writings had attracted the attention of the tsarist police. In fact he actually was under police surveillance, not because of his articles but rather because he had friends in the radical reform movement. One of those revolutionary groups ultimately did succeed in assassinating Tsar Alexander II in March 1881. There is no evidence that Demens himself was linked to that group. Still, fearing retaliation against all reformers by the new Tsar, Alexander III, the son of the slain Alexander II, and given his own disillusionment with life in the countryside, he decided it was best for him to leave Russia as quickly as possible. He hurriedly sold his estates to one of his relatives and booked

passage for himself on a freighter bound for New York. He left his wife and four children behind, intending to send for them in about a month.

But why go to the United States, a country whose language he hardly knew? It seems that three years earlier, in 1878, he visited the Paris Exposition where he chanced to meet a distant relative who lived in Jacksonville, Florida. She told him about her life there, where she and her family owned an orange grove. Peter was intrigued and began corresponding with her when he returned to his estates in Russia. She was the only one he knew in the United States. No surprise then that the day after he disembarked in New York in June 1881, he purchased a train ticket for Jacksonville.

When Peter Demens met with his relative and her family, he had hopes of purchasing an orange grove for himself. But he learned that property prices in the Jacksonville area were high, about \$50-\$200 an acre; all he had brought with him was \$3000. Further south, he was told, where the land was less settled, property was cheaper. So he took a small steamer that sailed south about three hundred miles to the upper reaches of the St. Johns River, a sparsely populated region in Orange County that was growing rapidly. The only other passenger was the boat's captain, an Irishman who spoke no Russian. To communicate with him, Demens used an English grammar he had brought with him and mixed English phrases with his fluent French and German. That seemed to work.

He learned from the Irishman that that part of Florida was not well suited to agriculture and that he could do much better running a sawmill because of all the building and construction going on in the area. Demens had never seen a sawmill but there were many of them along the river. The next day the captain docked near one and took Demens to inspect it. The sawmill was a rickety little affair powered by a squealing steam engine. But Demens quickly calculated that that little sawmill with its squeaky engine produced more lumber in a day, and of better quality, than a whole group of sawyers he had known in Russia could do. He concluded that owning a sawmill in this rapidly expanding part of Florida was a worthwhile investment. Demens spent a month wandering through the county looking for a suitable location. He wound up buying an eighty-acre orange grove with a two-room wooden shack on it near the tiny settlement of Longwood. He also bought a one-third interest in a small sawmill about a mile away. A month later his wife and four children arrived. They all lived in the shack, without servants. This was a major change from the life they had known in Russia. After paying for his land, his sawmill, and his family's travel costs, Demens had about forty dollars left. Demens' two partners in the sawmill were both Americans but hardly sterling characters.

One was a failed farmer from Georgia with no financial sense. The other was a good machinist from Kentucky who was nearly always drunk. To make matters worse, the two quarreled all the time and the business suffered. They finally agreed to let Demens manage the mill. Demens worked fifteen-hour days and did so well that after six months he bought out first the Kentuckian and then a bit later, the Georgian. With his business booming, he was able to borrow money and bought one more mill and a woodworking plant. He now became a contractor and in 1883 won lucrative contracts to build station houses for the rapidly growing South Florida Railroad.

Demens even found time for local politics. He joined the Republican Party and got elected mayor of the small town of Longwood. In 1884 he ran as a candidate for the state senate but lost that election. Still, his plunge into local politics, while not entirely successful, did have beneficial effects. For one thing it quickly improved his fluency in English, not something one usually attributes to election campaigns. Cynics may scoff but it was Demens himself who made the claim. Yet however fluent he became, he still retained his Russian accent. The other benefit of his campaigning was that it widened his connections with prominent people. Remarkably, all this was accomplished within four years of Demens having landed in New York as an immigrant who barely spoke English. Meanwhile Demens continued to prosper. By 1885 his annual turnover was \$2.5 million. He employed 300 craftsmen and 3,000 laborers. That year he acquired the Orange Belt Railway because its owners failed to pay for the railroad crossties that Demens had delivered. What he got was a shaky, narrow-gauged line only thirty-four miles long, but Demens was determined to extend it to the Gulf of Mexico, 150 miles to the west, and transform it into a major railroad that would carry heavy freight and passengers. Within the next twelve months his business burgeoned still more. He gained contracts to build a church and a hotel in Sarasota, seventeen buildings elsewhere in the state, as well as buildings for a new college, Rollins College, in Winter Park. Rollins was Florida's first institution of higher learning and is still flourishing. On a personal note, I first heard of Rollins in 1950 when I was a graduate student at Northwestern University and learned that one of my colleagues was an alumnus of Rollins. After completing his doctorate at Northwestern, he eventually went on to become head of the History Department at the University of Akron. I have no recollection of his ever having mentioned the man who is the subject of this paper.

In any case, back to the story. As his business enterprises expanded, Demens' activities revealed him to be a genuine hustler who often resorted to questionable practices. The first president of Rollins College, for example, constantly complained

about the shoddiness of both the material and the labor that Demens supplied. For his growing railroad, the Orange Belt Line, he purchased second-hand narrow-gauge locomotives and rolling stock from the South Florida Railroad which at the time was upgrading its own operations to standard gauge. The first tracks laid for the Orange Belt Line were light 16-pound rails from his log road to the sawmill, instead of heavier 25-pound rails. Demens was trying to stretch as far as he could some \$37,000 accumulated from a partnership he had formed with three other men to construct the railroad. One of the partners was a Canadian named Henry Sweetapple who had moved to Florida for his health and invested \$15,000; the other two were Americans, Josef Henschen, a winter visitor from Buffalo who put in \$20,000 and A. M. Taylor of Staunton, Va. who had become Demens' storekeeper and added \$2,000. Demens managed the finances and business operations. When the Orange Belt Line reached Lake Apopka, a 200-acre tract was set aside to lay out a town. Demens wanted the town to be named St. Petersburg, after the city in Russia that he knew so well, but his partners overruled him. Instead it was named Oakland and became the headquarters for his Orange Belt Company.

Disappointed but still ambitious, Demens now got his partners to agree to extend the railroad all the way to the Gulf of Mexico, another 110 miles to the west. That required more capital than the partnership had on hand. Demens decided to take advantage of the fact that Florida was then in the midst of a land boom. A persuasive wheeler-dealer, he was able to convince a New York broker to take over the sale of \$170,000 in bonds issued by Demens' company and to persuade a financial firm in Philadelphia to advance \$30,000 per month based on expected returns from the bonds. Even with this backing, Demens and his company could barely keep up with construction costs. That was one of the factors that prompted Demens to build the railroad to minimum standards.

Demens had other problems as well. At times the brokers and moneylenders in New York and Philadelphia were slow in sending the money he needed to pay laborers and creditors. Most of his laborers were Italian immigrants and on one occasion when they were not paid on time, they threatened to lynch him. At about the same time the creditors got a writ against the company and attached the rolling stock. As an extra precaution, they chained the locomotives to the track so that they could not be moved. All this was too much for the Canadian, Henry Sweetapple, who had come to Florida for his health. The crisis brought on a stroke and in the midst of the commotion he fell over dead. Eventually the money did arrive and the crisis did pass but too late to benefit Mr. Sweetapple.

Meanwhile Demens resorted to whatever artifice he could to impress his investors. By now they included Hamilton Disston of Pittsburgh, whose firm made saws and milling equipment; H.O. Armour of the Chicago meatpacking firm, and several Philadelphia financiers. These wealthy men regularly visited Oakland, Florida for hunting trips and winter vacations. Since Oakland was also the headquarters of Demens' railroad operations, he made it a point to get to know these men and regularly joined them for poker. Demens saw these occasions as opportunities to create an air of false prosperity. His *modus operandi* has been described by Karl Grismer, an historian of St. Petersburg:

On certain occasions, wrote Grismer, [Demens] would order night train crews to create as much activity around the yards as possible by prolonged shifting and switching of cars, then whistling off and running down the line for a few miles, returning later to repeat the performance. At other times he would have himself paged by a railroad call boy, then excuse himself from the current poker game, saying that his private car was waiting to take him to some urgent business matter... H. O. Armour is reputed to have said on one occasion [when he was roused from his sleep] that he guessed he would have to buy the damned railroad in order to stop the noise and have some peace.

(Grismer, pp71-72)

It was tactics such as these that Demens used to promote his railroad. In June 1888 the first train of the Orange Belt made its way from the eastern end of the line on the St. Johns River to its terminus on the Gulf of Mexico. Once again the question arose as to what to name the new station and the town that would grow up around it. There are different versions of this story. One has it that the land set aside for the town was owned by a John C. Williams of Michigan, the son of Detroit's first mayor and one of the richest landowners in Florida. Williams insisted that he had the right to name the town. Demens claimed that he should have that honor. To settle the dispute the two men agreed to draw straws. Demens won and the site was named St. Petersburg. As compensation, Williams was given the privilege of naming the first hotel. He called it the Detroit, after the city where he was born.

Another version of how the town got its name was told by Josef Henschen, one of Demens' partners in the railroad. According to Henschen, a postmistress was appointed even before the railroad reached its terminus. She had no idea of what to call the post office so she went to the Oakland headquarters of the railroad and spoke to Henschen, who happened to be the only one in the office at the time. As Henschen recalled the

meeting, "I didn't know what to call it [either].... However, I knew that Demens wanted a town named St. Petersburg. So I thought to myself why not call this town down there on the gulf St. Petersburg—it will never amount to anything anyway, so its name won't make any difference." (Grismer, p. 72) Were Henschen still alive, he would be surprised to learn that the town he so blithely dismissed has a population today of a quarter-million people and is the fourth-largest city in Florida. In any case he and several others signed the necessary petition which they sent to Washington where the name St. Petersburg was officially approved by the Post Office Department.

There is yet a third variation of how St. Petersburg got its name, which is part of the Demens' family tradition. According to this account, Peter Demens and John Williams agreed to settle their dispute by flipping a silver half-dollar. Demens won the toss. Professor Albert Parry, the most recent biographer of Demens, says there is no evidence in all of Demens' voluminous writings to substantiate this account. That has had no effect on Demens' descendants. They cling to their family folklore. (Parry, p. 15) However the really important point to keep in mind, as Parry reminds us, is that "If not for [Demens'] astonishing vision and stamina in building the Orange Belt Line there would not have been Florida's St. Petersburg as we know it now." (Parry, p. 49)

Meanwhile Peter Demens found that even after his railroad reached the Gulf, he was beset with problems. In the Florida of 1888 his Orange Belt Line was a 150-mile railroad to nowhere. To compound the problem, as president and general manager of the Orange Belt Railway, Demens presided over a line with a bad roadbed and unreliable equipment. By July 1889 he was unable to raise the \$55,000 he needed to meet interest charges on the railroad's bonds. In desperate straits, he agreed to accept a settlement offered by his creditors: \$25,500 in exchange for his rights. He kept only \$14,400 for himself and paid the rest to his partners. Ironically, while this was a poor return for all the effort Demens and his partners had put into creating the Orange Belt Railway, the line, with all its flaws, did contribute to the growth of St. Petersburg and its section of Florida. (Allen, p. 219)

To add to his distress, Demens came down with yellow fever in 1888 when an epidemic struck Florida. With its warm, humid climate, Florida was an excellent breeding ground for the mosquito that carried the disease. Epidemics of yellow fever were common in the southeast at that time. There were as yet no known cures. It wasn't until 1898 that General William Gorgas of the U.S. Army Medical Corps began his successful efforts to eradicate the disease, first in Cuba and then in Panama. Demens struggled with the fever for as long as he could and became so worn out that he decided to leave Florida

altogether. In 1889 he sold everything and moved with his family to Asheville in the mountains of North Carolina. But he didn't like Asheville either and after three years he and his family moved once again, this time to southern California. They settled in Los Angeles where Demens went into the steam laundry business. After two years he made enough money to buy a 300-acre ranch near San Bernardino where he grew citrus. Within a short time he expanded his California enterprises to include a citrus-packing plant and a lumber business. These activities were all successful and Demens became a millionaire.

Demens' financial position now gave him the independence to return to his real love, journalism. In the twenty years between 1893 and 1913 he wrote more than fifty lengthy articles in Russian which were published in influential journals in St. Petersburg, his homeland capital. Most of the articles were about life and politics in America; some were autobiographical. He also translated recent American fiction into Russian. Essentially his goal was to explain to his Russian readers American political processes as well as economic and social realities here. His biographers claim that among his readers were people as diverse as Leo Tolstoy, Vladimir Lenin and Tsar Nicholas II.

According to one recent scholar who has studied not only Demens' published articles but also his extensive personal correspondence with important individuals in Russia, Demens believed that Russia needed significant changes and that much could be learned from his American experience. (Parsons, p. 3) When Tsar Alexander III died of nephritis in 1894 at age 49, his critics hoped that the policy of harsh repression he had instituted had died with him. With great expectations they looked to his son, Nicholas II, who at age 26 was now to ascend the throne. Peter Demens shared those expectations. Shortly after the coronation of Tsar Nicholas II in 1896, Demens returned to St. Petersburg in Russia. One of his goals was to arrange an interview with the new Tsar. But he had completely misread the nature of the new regime and misjudged the new Tsar. He assumed, as did others in Russia, that because Nicholas was young he would be receptive to proposals for reform. They were wrong. Nicholas' attitudes had been shaped from an early age by his tutor, Konstantin Pobedonostsev, the Procurator General of the Holy Synod. An ardent defender of the tsarist regime, Pobedonostsev inculcated in the young heir-apparent his own firm belief that autocracy was the best form of government for Russia and that representative democracy was the worst. Demens didn't know this about Nicholas but even if he had, his own behavior nullified any realistic possibility of an audience with the Tsar. No sooner had Demens arrived in the capital than he sought out and met with liberals he knew. That immediately aroused the suspicions of the regime and Demens found himself under police surveillance. Disappointed and disillusioned about the

prospect of reform in Russia, Demens returned to California.

Demens made two more trips to Russia: one in 1906, shortly after the 1905 revolution which gave Russia a Duma for the first time; the other after March 1917 when Nicholas II finally abdicated. Now, at long last, thought Demens, Russia would have a constitutional government. Those hopes were shattered when Lenin and the Bolsheviks seized power in November 1917 and proceeded to set up a communist dictatorship. In great despair, Demens returned home and two years later died on his ranch in California. He was sixty-nine. He left behind his wife and seven children, the last three of whom had been born in the United States.

Throughout the Soviet period, Peter Demens was a non-person in the land of his birth. Very few people knew that he even existed. There was no mention of him in any Soviet-era encyclopedia or general history. To be sure, he had been a constant critic of the tsarist regime and its policies. But that was overshadowed by his criticism of the Bolsheviks and his praise of American politics and society. The Soviet practice of ignoring writers outside the country, even scholarly ones who were only suggestively negative, continued throughout the regime. My own book of 1979 dealing with a Russian visitor to the United States in the 1850's was never reviewed in a Soviet-era journal because the Soviet historian selected to do the review thought my allusions to the Soviet regime in the Introduction were too negative. I'll never know what royalties I might have earned from potential sales.

Meanwhile, in the decades after Demens' death, St. Petersburg in Florida developed into a flourishing tourist and health resort. It also became home to many Russian-Americans who settled in the area. In 1977 they persuaded city officials to dedicate a small park in honor of Demens and to name it Demens Landing. The park is located in downtown St. Petersburg on filled land that once was the location for the 3,000-foot Orange Belt Railway pier that extended into Tampa Bay. Two years later an historical marker was unveiled at the entrance of the park which pays tribute to Demens as one of the city's founders. In May of 2000 an international Symposium was held at Eckerd College in the city to mark the 150th anniversary of the birth of Peter Demens. Three years later, in March 2003, a special anniversary celebration was held to observe the centennial of the official incorporation of the city by the Florida State Legislature in June 1903. Peter Demens would have been pleased, for the year-long celebration was held in conjunction with the tricentennial celebrations for the founding of St. Petersburg in Russia. Indeed, the two cities have developed a number of thriving exchange programs. Eckerd College even offers a history course entitled "The Two St. Petersburgs." One of the symposia organized

for the centennial celebration featured a talk by Peter Demens Tolstoy, a grandson of Peter Demens, who reminisced about his grandfather. He spoke in English; he did not know Russian.

Through the course of his life Peter Demens had been an Imperial Russian Guards officer, an aristocratic landowner, a local official and an aspiring Russian writer. In the United States he became an owner of sawmills, orange groves and a railroad, as well as a building contractor, and an owner/operator of steam laundries. He also became a fairly prolific journalist who interpreted American life for readers in Russia. Of his thirty-eight years in the United States, he lived only eight of them in St. Petersburg. Once having left the city, he never returned. That helps explain why until very recent years, so few people in the city knew about this remarkable Russian or how St. Petersburg got its name. But that has begun to change. An organization called Russian Heritage, founded to promote Russian culture in Florida, took advantage of the 150th anniversary of Demens' birth to popularize his story. It placed a new historical marker in Demens' Landing Park to honor Demens as the city's founder. It has also sponsored museum exhibits and organized international symposia. There is now a group of scholars both in Russia and the United States actively carrying on research on Demens.

Today there are fewer people in St. Petersburg, Florida who do not know who Peter Demens was. He is being remembered for his lasting legacy to the city: he was, after all, the name-giver.

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