

PRONUNCIATION OF THE MANY VARIANTS OF THE SCUDMORE / SKIDMORE SURNAME

by Warren Skidmore

Today the two most common spellings of the same surname are pronounced differently. The first syllable of the ancient *Scudemere* probably rhymed with “mud.” This was retained even when the name was later “Frenchified” in the time of the Tudors. However recently most families I met in England preferred to rhyme the first syllable of their surname with “few.” This somewhat softer pronunciation has now been sanctioned, at least for television, by the BBC.¹

Dr. Harold Hunter Scudamore (1915-1994) was descended from the family who came to Gallatin County, Illinois in 1819 from Abenhall in Gloucestershire. He was on the staff of the Mayo Clinic, Rochester, Minnesota and his wife Virginia was very interested in the highly collectable Heisey art glass once made at Newark, Ohio. They drove down to Ohio looking for choice pieces for her, and stopped in Akron overnight to see me. We had a lovely visit and a nice restaurant meal. I was really surprised to find that Doctor Scudamore called himself *Skudamore*, undoubtedly what his ancestors anciently had been known as over 200 years back in England. He did not fancy the BBC pronunciation I used of his name, and was known by his colleagues and patients with the old articulation (with the hard consonant) of the name until his death some 15 years ago.

The American group who traveled to England in 2008 met David Skidmore, who teaches at a university at Flintshire in northern Wales, at a family gathering at Matlock Bath in Derbyshire. He told the group his explanation, doubtless correct, of how the name evolved in Herefordshire from Scudamore to Skidmore:

I have wondered about the various spellings of the Skidmore/Scudamore name. I know that pronunciation changes over time, and you may already be aware of this but I thought you may be interested that Welsh is still very much spoken as a first language where I work. It probably was along the Herefordshire borders and other areas where the names were originated. In Welsh the letter “u” is pronounced as an “i” or an “e” depending on location. Thus, if the name was spelt *Scudamore* it would have been pronounced *Scidmore*. So anyone who did not see it written down but used English spelling may well have used *Skidmore*. So, in language it may have been that

¹*BBC Pronouncing Dictionary of British Names*, edited by G. E. Pointon (Oxford University Press, 1990).

the names were not necessarily interchanged in spoken language, but actually did sound the same.

It is interesting to note that *Scidmore* was a very common variation of the surname which still survives in upstate New York where is it both pronounced and frequently is spelled as *Sidmore*. *Scidmore*, on the other hand, seems to be presently a most uncommon variant in England.

The name Scudamore survived occasionally in the family who had come by 1636 to Boston, Massachusetts from Westerleigh, Gloucestershire. It did not die out until the American Revolution. An absolutely unique variation of the name in a descendant of the same family (but from Long Island) is found for a certain John Scidmore (ca. 1700-1761?) who went from Huntington to Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. His second wife Maria Margaretha was of German descent and they had, as **Johan** and **Margaretha Scudamory**, two children christened in 1755 and 1756 at St. Michael's and Zion Lutheran Church in Philadelphia.²

In England the choice between Skidmore and Scudamore seems to have once been just as personal and erratic. There are a great many examples in older wills, for example, when a testator signed his will as *Scudamore*, but then named a *Skidmore* brother (or kinsman) as a witness, executor, or even as an heir to his estate. In England, again, we find that children were sometimes christened with two (or more) variant spellings of their father's surname in a parish register. This was perhaps a peccadillo due as much to the officiating clergy as it was to a vacillating parent. This kind of fluidity seems to have disappeared near the end of the Victorian period, when probably a corporation or local government insisted that a man pick and stick with one version of his surname, particularly if it seemed that he might get some future entitlement from an employer, an insurer, or his government.

Finally it does appear that which side of the Atlantic one is on is a factor. There are a number of other less common variations of the name found in England. *Skitmore*, for example, is common in Oxfordshire, but is unknown in America and also elsewhere in England. What must be kept in mind is that no matter however or wherever the name has been pronounced, that inevitably the trail leads back (with frequent interludes of a "non parental event") to the Scudemers in that castle built in the 11th century at Ewyas Harold in Herefordshire.

²If I am ever saddled with two exceedingly clever kittens (who indeed do show a promise of greatness) I would be tempted to name them *Tobemory* (after my very favorite short story by H. H. Munro) and *Scudemory*.