BUCKEYE LORE – Origins of the Buckeye Name

The use of the term “Buckeyes” to refer to Ohio State University athletic teams derives from the even wider use of the term to refer to all residents of the State of Ohio.

The university’s Athletic Council officially adopted the term in 1950, but it had already been in use for many years before. It was firmly established by 1920, and most records indicate that it had probably been used with some frequency to refer to Ohio State and its athletic teams since before the turn of the century.

The history of “Buckeye” is a bit fuzzy. The Buckeye (aesculus glabra) is a tree native to Ohio and particularly prevalent in the Ohio River Valley, whose shiny dark brown nuts with lighter tan patches resemble the eye of a deer. Settlers who crossed the Allegheny Mountains found it to be the only unfamiliar tree in the forest. Perhaps its uniqueness contributed to its popularity, because it had few other attractions. Pioneers carved the soft Buckeye wood into troughs, platters, and even cradles. Before the days of plastic, Buckeye wood was often used to fashion artificial limbs. The inedible nuts are attractive, and folk wisdom told that carrying one in a pocket brings good luck and wards off rheumatism. However, in general, the trees and nuts are of little practical use: the wood does not burn well; the bark has an unpleasant odor; and the bitter nut meat is mildly toxic. Still, the tree has grit. It grows where others cannot, is difficult to kill, and adapts to its circumstances. Daniel Drake, who once spoke on behalf of the Buckeye in Cincinnati in 1833, said, “In all our woods there is not a tree so hard to kill as the Buckeye. The deepest girdling does not deaden it, and even after it is cut down and worked up into the side of a cabin it will send out young branches, denoting to the entire world that Buckeyes are not easily conquered and could with difficulty be destroyed.”

The first recorded use of the term to refer to a resident of the area is in 1788, fifteen years before Ohio became a state.

Colonel Ebenezer Sproat, a 6’4” man of large girth and swashbuckling mannerisms, led the legal delegation at the first court session of the Northwest Territory, held in Marietta. The Native Americans in attendance greeted him with shouts of “Hetuck, Hetuck” (the Indian word for Buckeye), because they were impressed by his stature and manner. He proudly carried the Buckeye nickname for the rest of his life, and it gradually spread to his companions and to other local white settlers. By the 1830s, writers were commonly referring to locals as “Buckeyes.”

It was the presidential election of 1840, though, that put the term permanently in the vocabulary. William Henry Harrison, who traded his Virginia–born aristocratic background for a more populist image as a war hero and frontiersman living on the banks of the Ohio River just west of Cincinnati, adopted the Buckeye tree and Buckeye nuts as campaign symbols. At the Whig convention, Harrison delegates carried Buckeye canes, decorated with strings of Buckeye beads. The Buckeye nut was a precursor to today’s campaign buttons. The Buckeye became indelibly linked with Ohio.

The Ohio Buckeye is one of 13 recognized members of the genus Aesculus, seven of which are native to North America, one to Europe (the Horse Chestnut) and five to Asia. The Ohio Buckeyes’ five–fingered leaflet, along with the nut, is sometimes used as a symbol for The Ohio State University and is incorporated in its Alumni Association logo. Buckeye leaf decals are awarded to Ohio State football players for outstanding efforts on the field; players with many buckeye leaves on their helmets are indeed honored.

It is rare for an athletic team to be named after a tree, but the Buckeye name is so ingrained in the history and lore of the state and the university that few stop to consider how unusual it is. It is native, tenacious, attractive and unique – traits that Ohioans and Ohio State alumni are proud with which to be associated.