



READERS' FORUM

GROUNDWATER IS PROBABLY ONE WORD (OR MAYBE TWO), MORE OR LESS: AN ALLEGORY

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(Note -- This is a sort of reply to Ivan Johnson's article on pages 690-691 of the September-October 1986 issue, "Ground Water Is Definitely Two Separate Words")

Once upon a time in a faraway kingdom, the citizens of the realm were faced with three pressing problems. In the first place, their water resources were being overutilized, and in some parts of the kingdom economic dislocations loomed. In the second place, their water resources were being polluted, and in some parts of the kingdom health hazards loomed. In the third place, there was massive public unrest over how the word used to describe the waters under the ground should be spelled.

The citizens did not really know what to do about the first two problems, but strong feelings were held on the third. Over the years, positions had hardened and the populace had divided itself into two political parties: the Oneworders and the Two Worders.

The king was at a loss as to how to end the polarization, but finally he decreed that there should be a Great Debate to be held in the Rotunda of the Hall of Resolutions. All citizens were required to attend.

The great day arrived. The crowds were massed. The Two Worders were represented by the noted consultant, Prince Ivan The-Not-So-Terrible. The Oneworders were represented by the noted textbook authors, the Counts Frost and Berry. The Grand Vizier, Sir Jay of the Leer, was in the judge's chair. The learned arguments began.

"The American Geofizzikal Union (AGU) spells it as one word!"

The Oneworders cheered.

"The National Water Witchers Association (NWWA) spells it as two words!"

The Two Worders cheered.

"Webster's Ninth New Collegiate Dictionary (1986) spells it as one word!"

"That's only for new collegiates," taunted the Two Worders.

"Webster's New Riverside University Dictionary (1984) spells it as two words!"

"That's only for riverside universities," taunted the Oneworders.

"The Germans spell it 'Grundwasser.' One word!"

"The French spell it 'Les eaux souterraines.' Three words!" (This caused a ripple of nostalgia in the crowd, for there had once been a splinter party of Three Word Ers in the realm).

At length, the two sides rested, and the Grand Vizier retired to his chambers to reflect on his decision.

Oneworders and Two Worders alike repaired to the pubs together (for while there was strong feeling, there was no animosity).

A Oneworder sipped on his Perrierwater. "Perhaps, he will ban both spellings," he mused.

"Too totalitarian," said another.

A Two Worder sipped on his Coca Cola. "Perhaps he will allow both spellings," he mused.

"Too democratic," said another.

The hours went by. Tension mounted. All eyes focused on the door of the Grand Vizier's chambers. At the stroke of midnight he emerged and mounted the podium.

As usual, he announced his decision in rhyme:

One word or two words?

I've communed with my staff.

We are all in agreement.

It shall be one-and-a-half!

The citizens of the realm were awed by the wisdom of the decision. The king ratified it at once. In the weeks following, the two political parties were dissolved and an All-Party Committee was formed to see how to best carry out the King's wishes. The Committee meets regularly on the first Monday of every month. It has done so for many years now. The feasibility studies and remarkable investigations (RI/FS) are complete. An Emergency Response Operable Unit Plan for the new spelling is expected in due course.

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