

The word “Yooper” was added to the Merriam-Webster Dictionary. The event was lauded by the Governor, and warmly received by all residents of the U.P. This action is interesting not only for the dictionary value – I.E., the grammatical pragmatics of identifying a new noun -- but more importantly, reflects the power of that label in how we think about ourselves and our community.

I frequently meet people from other parts of Michigan, the Nation, and the World. For first-time visitors to the U.P., the conversations are remarkably similar. Compliments on the beautiful area; amazement at how friendly people are; how much fun events are – and a few comments that even with travel challenges, the experience makes the trip worthwhile. Great conversations - lot’s of welcome adjectives describing positive visitor views. Inevitably the conversations close with the question “What is a Yooper?”

The word holds far deeper meaning than any Dictionary can possibly describe. We all carry words within us - they tell a story which defines us - and informs the world of who we hope to be.

The differences between visitors are interesting. Foreign visitors use terms which highlight cultural differences, and diminish the geographic connotation of “Yooper”. Their views impart a qualitative sense of common adjectives; I.E. “upper” and “lower”, as with “upper class” or “lower class”.

Out-of-State visitors respond to the term “Yooper” with a sense of exotic novelty. For many the label reminds them of the distinctions other groups have chosen for themselves, such as the Cajuns of Louisiana, or Florida’s self-proclaimed Conch Republic. “Upper” and “lower” reflect a sincere joy in discovering something new, and sharing an experience that is out of the ordinary - after all, they aren’t called “Upper Dakota” and “Lower Dakota”, or “Left Virginia” and “Right Virginia”!

Michigan visitors, remarkably, use the fewest words. Discussions always involve holding out both hands, and pointing to a place on either the left or right. Views always reflect geographic separation - and are focused on subjective comparisons, and the distinctive differences created by the unique geography of the State. Michigan visitors tend to focus on division.

So, how do Yoopers describe themselves? I leave that up to each reader. For Government, words carry profound power, and reflect more than just how we choose to describe ourselves, or the labels others choose for us.

Occasionally, visitors ask me what the acronym “U.P.M.” means, to which I reply “The Upper Peninsula of Michigan”. Sometimes the question comes while I’m focused on other things – I.E., chatting with neighboring jurisdictions about inter-local agreements; coordinating legislative interests with representatives in Lansing; seeking the support of the Governor’s team in regards to program issues and opportunities, etc.

I frequently find myself thinking about other meanings for this acronym – I.E., “The UNITED PENINSULA of Michigan” or even “The UNITED PENINSULAS of Michigan”, and my idle logology transforms a few simple letters into a profoundly different idea. Yoopers are connected with the World as never before, and it’s my personal hope we choose our aspirations to define us, our love for this region to unite us, and collectively empower “Yooper” to be more than just a word.