

THE SYLLABLE WAR GOES ON

More than one heated debate has ignited through these times over the pronunciation of the Arkansas River.

It's generally pronounced "Ar-KAN-sas" in Kansas and "Ar-kan-SAW" in Arkansas. Oklahomans, for reasons probably unimportant and definitely forgotten, tend to side with the pronunciation of their eastern neighbors, the Arkansans.

But it can be a fightin' word, as reported by *The Topeka, Kansas, Daily Capital* on June 12, 1971:

"Last weekend when President Nixon and other notables were speaking at the dedication of the McClellan-Kerr Arkansas River Navigation system, they repeatedly referred to the river as the Ar-kan-SAW. None alluded to the fact that much of the water reaching the gates at Catoosa was actually Ar-KAN-sas River water picked up by the stream as it flowed through Kansas.

"Of course, it's the Ar-KAN-sas River. Ask anyone all the way from Coolidge to Arkansas City and they'll tell you that. Even in Holly, Colo., they call it the Ar-KAN-sas.

"Let's keep the pronunciation correct in all its purity at least from the river's source in the Rockies to where it crosses the Kansas-Oklahoma line.

"The Arkansas River, sometimes referred to as 'the Nile of America,' was first sighted by the Spanish in 1541. They called it 'the River of Quivera.' Marquette, the great French explorer, called it the Akansa. To the Mexicans it was Acansa.

On a map printed in 1750 it was the Rio des Acansas. And on a map in 1757 it was spelled as it is spelled now, Arkansas.

"A Frenchman, Perrin Du Lac, who traveled through the Louisiana country in 1801, spelled it 'Arkansas.' In 1853, two of the large boats which plied the lower reaches of the river were the 'Arkansas' and the 'Arkansaw,' indicating that at that time there were two pronunciations of the name.

"Controversy for years swirled about the pronunciation of Arkansas, the state. Early settlers pronounced it Ar-kan-SAW, after the Indians for whom it was named. Other pronounced it phonetically as it is spelled, Ar-KAN-sas.

"Finally, in 1881, the general assembly of the state adopted a resolution, stating the pronunciation as that received by the French from the Indians, to be officially Ark-kan-SAW. It was to be pronounced in 3 syllables with the final "s" silent and the "a" in the first and last syllables with an Italian sound.

"The sounding of the final 's' was to be discouraged. Today, it would be little less than high treason for an Arkansawyer to pronounced it any other way.

"However, this has nothing to do with the pronunciation of the Arkansas River. It has never been legislated, as far as we know.

"So let them dredge the Arkansas River, widen it, dam it, or pave it, but call it the Ar-kan-SAW — never!"²³