



## NEBRASKA BY HEART

Folk Arts • Traditional Arts • Folklife  
Curriculum Unit • Grades 6–8  
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## Nicknames

The word “nickname” originally came from the Middle English word “ekename”, which meant “additional name”. According to the dictionary, a nickname is a descriptive name added to or replacing the actual name of a person, place or thing. A nickname can also be a shortened or familiar form of a proper name, such as “Bob” used for “Robert” or “Pat” used for “Patricia”.

Below are nicknames from a few ethnic cultures and occupational groups who are represented in Nebraska. What other groups might frequently use nicknames?

### Ethnic Groups

#### Germans from Russia

Germans from Russia are a major ethnic group in Nebraska. Their ancestors immigrated first from Germany to Russia in the 1700s. In the late 1800s conditions became so bad in Russia that many of the Germans immigrated again to the United States and other countries. They have a strong tradition of nicknaming.

Many of these immigrants say the nicknaming tradition originated in their Russian settlements where there were many large families. Many people were given the same first names as their relatives. Often there were only a few last names represented in each village as well. So, many people ended up with the same, or similar names. To tell one Johannes Schenkel or Katherine Bauer from another, the villagers would give each person a nickname that either described him or her or was related to something he or she had done.

Some of the most common descriptive nicknames were “Lefty” for a person who was left-handed and “Schwarz” (black) for someone with dark hair.

The German Russians also loved to taunt and tease each other. So they used nicknames and jibes to joke about human foibles and frailties. Current political correctness might cast a negative view on the often hard-edged humor. But the German Russians thought giving lots of praise and compliments would tempt fate and lead to the sin of pride. That’s why, depending on the circumstances in which they were used, nicknames like “stink katz” (skunk) could be terms of endearment.

Nicknames were also a way of remembering a person who had some notable characteristic, or who had done something silly. The latter explains why one young man, who had once bragged about how accurately he could back his father’s tractor to a hitch, was known ever after as “Entchi” (tractor.)

## **Latinos**

Nicknames (“apodos “ in Spanish) are used even more frequently in Latino cultures than in Anglo culture (Latinos’ name for the English-speaking American culture.) The following are some common types of apodos.

### **Apodos Referring to Professions**

Maestro – teacher, or any profession where a great deal of skill is needed, such as carpenter, craftsman, bullfighter, musician, bricklayer, or even an experienced laborer.

Carnicero – butcher

Vendedor or Vendedora – sales persons

Profesor or Profesora – professor (This is sometimes shortened to el profe.)

Doctor or Médico – medical doctor (Dentists and veterinarians will usually be called doctor.)

Licenciado – lawyer (The name of the degree, which is equal to a bachelor of arts or science.)

Lechero – milkman

Sastre – tailor

### **Apodos Used to Show Affection**

Latinos use the diminutive (a shortened form of a name) to show friendship or affection, just as Anglos do. But in the Anglo system, “Johnny” usually becomes “John” in later life and “Tommy” becomes “Tom.” “Susie” usually later converts her name to “Sue” or “Susan” and “Patty” to “Pat.” Among Anglos, it’s common that later in life the individual will lose the shortened name form. This is seldom the case with Latinos. Many times the shortened form will stay with the person his or her entire life.

### **Common Spanish diminutives**

Toño – Antonio

Concha – Concepción

Quique – Enrique

Pepe – José

Pili – Pilar

Pancho – Francisco

Teté – Teresa

Chabela – Isabel

Chico – Francisco

Chuy – Jesús

Lola – Dolores

Lupe – Guadalupe

Memo – Guillermo.

## Apodos Relating to a Physical Characteristic

A third form of placing nicknames in Latino cultures relates to a special physical characteristic, racial group, or in some cases a deformity. To the Anglo, this practice may seem cruel or insulting. However, in Latino cultures it is most often viewed as a sign of affection or cariño than as mocking the physical characteristic. Most Latinos with these designated names wear them proudly and wouldn't think of protesting them, much less changing them. Some examples are below:

Viejo (old) for one's father rather than Papa  
Gordo, Gorda, or Gordita (fat)  
Flaco (skinny)  
Chato (pug-nose)  
Zanahoria (carrott) for a redheaded person

## Nicknames in Occupational Groups

### Musicians

#### Blues

**“Magic Slim”** – Born Morris Holt on August 7, 1937 in Torrence Mississippi. He is one of the best known Chicago bluesmen. With his band, the Teardrops, he has played often in Nebraska, especially at Lincoln's Zoo Bar, which is famous for blues music. Slim likes Nebraska so much that his family has lived in the state.

**“Blind” Lemon Jefferson** (1893-1929) – An early bluesman thought to have been born near Couchman Texas. He was one of the most popular blues singers of the 1920s. He was blind from birth or early childhood. Lemon was his real first name, however. It was a common given name at the time.

**“Muddy Waters”** (1913-1983) – He was born Mckinley Morganfield on April 4, 1913 near Rolling Fork Mississippi. Known almost exclusively by his nickname, he is generally considered one of the greatest bluesmen of all time. He was given his nickname by his grandmother because, as a child, he liked to play in the mud.

**Willie Mae “Big Mama” Thornton** (1926-1984) – “Big Mama” Thornton, a legendary blues singer and songwriter, was born on December 11, 1926, in Montgomery, Alabama. Her nickname was an obvious reference to her height and size.

#### Country

**Johnny Cash, “The Man in Black”** (1932-2003) – Cash was known for his deep, distinctive voice. He was also known for his dark clothing and serious demeanor, which earned him his nickname. He sold over 50 million albums in his nearly 50 year career and is generally recognized as one of the most important musicians in the history of American popular music.

**Loretta Lynn, “The Coal miner’s Daughter”** – Born Loretta Webb on April 14, 1935 in Butcher Hollow, Kentucky, Loretta Lynn is a country singer and songwriter who was the leading country female vocalist during much of the 1960s and 1970s. Over her long career she has released 70 albums 17 of which became number 1 on the country charts. Her father was indeed a coal miner and that is how she received her nickname.

**“Uncle Dave” Macon, “The Dixie Dewdrop”** (1870-1952) – was a banjo player, songwriter, and comedian. Born David Harrison Macon on October 7, 1870, in Smart Station Tennessee, he became one of the first stars of the Grand Ole Opry on WSM radio in Nashville. Grand Ole Opry founder Judge George D. Hay nicknamed Macon “the Dixie Dewdrop” when he began performing on the Opry.

**“Hank” Williams, “The Hillbilly Shakespeare”** (1923-1953) – He was born Hiram King Williams on September 17, 1923 in Mount Olive, Alabama. Despite his short life, he was one of the most influential musicians of the 20 th century. His songs continue to be played by contemporary musicians of all kinds and he is in both the Country Music and the Rock and Roll Halls of Fame.

## **Jazz**

**William “Count” Basie** (1904-1984) – was an American jazz pianist, organist, bandleader and composer. He is considered one of the greatest jazz musicians in musical history. Count Basie was honored at the Kennedy Center in 1981 and with a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award in 2002. His nickname reflects the longtime practice of referring to jazz musicians by royal titles.

**Edward Kennedy “Duke” Ellington** (1899-1974) – One of the most influential figures in jazz history, Ellington was one of America’s most significant twentieth century composers. He led his own orchestra for fifty years and composed more than 2000 songs as well as numerous longer compositions. His nickname too is reflective of his status as “jazz royalty”.

**Ella Fitzgerald, “the First Lady of Song”** ( 1917-1996) – Ella Jane Fitzgerald was born in Newport News, Virginia on April 25, 1917. She was the most popular female jazz singer in the United States for more than half a century. In her lifetime, she won 13 Grammy awards and sold over forty million albums.

**John Birks “Dizzy” Gillespie** (1917-1993) – Also known as “the Diz”, Gillespie was an American jazz trumpeter, bandleader, singer and composer. He was a major figure in the development of both the bebop and Afro-Cuban styles of jazz. His lighthearted, quirky personality was the reason he was called “Dizzy”. He was known for using a trumpet that had been damaged and had its bell bent at 45 degree angle. Gillespie left the instrument that way because the bending altered the tone and he liked the effect. He was honored by the Kennedy Center and received a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award during his career.

## **Rap**

**“Snoop Dogg”, or “Snoop Doggy Dogg”** – Born Calvin Cordozar Broadus Jr. on October 20, 1971 in Long Beach California, he was nicknamed Snoopy by his mother because he liked to watch Charlie Brown cartoons. He is a rapper, record producer and actor.

**“Diddy”, “P. Diddy”, or “Puff Daddy”** – Born Sean John Combs on November 9, 1969 in Harlem New York, Diddy is a successful record producer and actor as well as a rapper. It seems that Diddy got his original nickname because, when he was an adolescent, he often puffed out his chest in an effort to disguise his scrawniness.

**“Lil’ Kim”** – Born Kimberly Denise Jones on July 11, 1974 in Brooklyn, New York, Grammy Award winner Lil’ Kim is one of the most, if not the most successful female rapper of all-time. She got her nickname because she is less than five feet tall.

## Rock

**Antoine Dominique “Fats” Domino** – Born on February 26, 1928 in New Orleans, Louisiana, Fats Domino is a classic rhythm and blues and rock and roll singer, pianist and songwriter. He was the best selling African American singer of the 1950s and early 1960s. He has been inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame and has received a Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. His nickname refers to his stature.

**Jerry Lee Lewis “The Killer”** – Born on September 29, 1935 in Ferriday, Louisiana, Jerry Lee Lewis is a rock and country singer, songwriter, and pianist. He was part of the first group of musicians inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame in 1986. Nicknamed “The Killer” for his forceful voice and piano production on stage, Lewis is best known for his early hits, “Whole Lotta Shakin’ Goin’ On” and “Great Balls of Fire”.

**Elvis Presley (1935-1977)** – Known as “The King of Rock ‘n’ Roll” or simply “The King”, Elvis Aaron Presley was an American singer, musician and actor. He remains a pop icon to this day and is regarded by some to be the most important, original entertainer of the last fifty years. He is one of the most talked about and written about performers of the 20th Century. He began as a rockabilly performer, singing rhythm and blues, gospel and country songs. He quickly became a rock and roll star and world-wide phenomenon. Legends about Elvis abound, especially one indicating that he didn’t really die in 1977 and is still living in secret somewhere.

**“Ringo Starr”** – Born Richard Starkey on July 7, 1940 in Liverpool England, Ringo Starr is an English musician, singer and actor. He is best known as the drummer for the legendary English group, The Beatles, although he has continued to play and produce music on his own since The Beatles broke up in 1970. He was the oldest and shortest member of the band and the last to join the “Fab Four’s” famous lineup. Ringo got his nickname in 1959 when he was playing with an English band called “The Raving Texans”. The name referred to the many rings he wore and was also supposed to sound “cowboyish”. At that same time he shortened his last name to Starr.

## Sports Figures

### Baseball

**“Yogi” Berra** – Born Lawrence Peter Berra on May 12, 1925 in St. Louis, Mo. Yogi got his “nickname” from Bobby Hofman, a childhood friend. While watching a movie about an Indian snake charmer, Bobby noted that Yogi had a striking resemblance to the Hindu man, saying “That yogi walks like Lawdie ( Larry) Berra,” The nickname stuck.

**“Shoeless Joe” Jackson** (1888-1951) – Born Joseph Jefferson Jackson on July 16, 1888 in Pickens County, South Carolina, Jackson was a left fielder who played for the Philadelphia Athletics, the Cleveland Indians, and the Chicago White Sox. One of the greatest hitters of his era, he was one of eight players made permanently ineligible for Major League Baseball for his alleged participation in the “Black Sox” scandal in which some of the White Sox players were paid to lose the 1919 World Series. He received his nickname earlier, when he played a game in his socks because his shoes were too tight. He was a featured character in the 1989 film Field of Dreams.

**“Babe” Ruth (1895-1948)** – Born George Herman Ruth, Jr. on February 6, 1895 in Baltimore MD. He was one of the first five players elected to the Baseball Hall of Fame and the first to hit over 50 home runs in one season. He began to be called “the Babe” when he was 19, after his recruitment by Jack Dunn, owner and manager of the Baltimore Orioles. The other players referred to him as “Jack’s newest babe” and the nickname stayed with him for life. He became most famous while playing with the New York Yankees.

## **Basketball**

**“Wilt the Stilt” Chamberlain** (1936-1999) – Born Wilton Norman Chamberlain in Philadelphia PA on August 21, 1936, Wilt Chamberlain (Los Angeles Lakers) is still recognized as one of the greatest basketball players of all time. He was nicknamed “Wilt the Stilt” because his 7’ 1” frame was considered exceptionally tall for his time. Another of his many nicknames was “the Big Dipper” reputedly because he was so often seen dipping his head to go through doorways

**“Meadowlark” Lemon** – Born Meadow George Lemon III in Lexington SC on April 25, 1935, he is best known for his 22 years as the “Clown Prince of Basketball” with the Harlem Globetrotters. His nickname was created from his first name.

**Karl “The Mailman” Malone** – Born July 24, 1963 in Bernice Louisiana, he was nicknamed in college as “the Mailman” for his scoring consistency (“The mailman always delivers.”) Playing power forward, he was the star player for the Utah Jazz from 1985-2003. He played one season for the Los Angeles Lakers before his retirement.

## **Football**

**Bob “The Boomer” Brown** – Born Robert Stanford Brown December 8, 1941 in Cleveland Ohio. Bob Brown was an All-America selection at guard when he played football for Nebraska. His number 64 jersey is one of only two that has been permanently retired. He is listed in both the college and pro football halls of fame. He earned his nickname because of his aggressive blocking style.

**“Touchdown” Tommy Frazier** – Tommie Frazier was born July 16, 1974 in Bradenton, Florida. He was the quarterback for Nebraska’s two back-to-back national football championships in 1994 and 1995.

**“Red” Grange, “The Galloping Ghost”** (1903-1991) – Born Harold Edward Grange on June 13, 1903 in Forksville, Pennsylvania he was a star college football player in the 1920s for the University of Illinois. His nickname was bestowed because he was too elusive to be caught by opposing players.

**“Broadway Joe” Namath** – Born Joseph William Namath on May 31, 1943 in Beaver Falls, Pennsylvania, he was known for his flashy style (which included wearing full-length fur coats on the sidelines) that would have put him right at home in downtown New York. Namath was one of the most famous of pro-football’s quarterbacks during the 1960s and 1970s. He played with the New York Jets and the Los Angeles Rams.

**Tom “Trainwreck” Novak** (1926 - 1998) – Nebraska Center and linebacker Tom Novak was from Omaha. He was the first of only two Nebraska football players to have his jersey number (60) permanently retired. His nickname was a reference to his hard-hitting style.

**Johnny “The Jet” Rogers** – Nebraska star halfback Johnny Rogers was born in Omaha on July 5, 1951. He won the Heisman Trophy in 1972. His nickname refers to his rapid acceleration and speed on the field.

### **Other Sports**

**“Babe” Didrikson Zaharias** (1911-1956) – Born Mildred Didrikson on June 26, 1911, in Port Arthur, Texas. She was a famous golfer, basketball player and Olympic track star. She acquired her nickname during sandlot baseball games with the neighborhood boys, who thought she batted like Babe Ruth.

**Bernie “Boom Boom” Geoffrion** (1931-2006) – Born Bernard Joseph André Geoffrion on February 14, 1931 in Montreal, Canada, he was a professional hockey player and coach. His nickname was “Boom Boom” because of his hard and fast slapshot that would make one “boom” sound when it left his stick, and then a second when it hit the boards. He had a 16-year career with the Montreal Canadiens and the New York Rangers.