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Mitten envy: Examining Wisconsin's argument that it is the Mitten State

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By [Troy Reimink](#) | [The Grand Rapids Press](#)

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Not cool, Wisconsin.

Mitten State, and we're it.

The appearance of a Wisconsin-shaped mitten on [TravelWisconsin.com](#), part of a tourism promotion, has raised some eyebrows on this side of our shared lake.




It's not that Wisconsin is entirely un-Mitten-shaped. If you squint your eyes in just such a way, perhaps after a few too many cans of Milwaukee's Best, you can sort of see where they're coming from. But come on: Michigan is so obviously the Mitten State, it's barely worth arguing. And Wisconsin already is conceding defeat.

"The mitten was used as a single creative element; you guys still own the mitten," Wisconsin Department of Tourism spokeswoman Lisa Marshall [told the Kalamazoo Gazette](#), adding that Wisconsin residents also consider their state Mitten-shaped.

Pure Michigan spokesman Dave Lorenz weighed in by chiding Wisconsin for suffering "mitten envy."

Needless to say, the mitten is pretty well covered here. Michiganders illustrate their places of residence by pulling out the trusty Michigan hand map — a concept illustrated in the 1980s in a Vernors commercial starring former Red Wings player Petr Klima.



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Entrepreneurs across the state have been capitalizing on the connection for years. [YesMichigan](#) sells a line of shirts bearing a "Don't Mess With the Mitten" slogan. Local music label Friction Records produces shirts declaring [Michigan "America's High Five."](#) Michigan Awesome creates shirts with slogans such as "Land Shaped Like a Hand," "Smitten With the Mitten" and "Home is Where the Hand Is."

"That's not a battle I would want to fight if I were on the Wisconsin side," said Will Bransdorfer, co-founder of the locally based Mitten State T-shirt company ([themittenstate.com](#)), some of

He added: "Any time you're branding yourself, you don't want to come across as a knock-off, and I think that's exactly how they're coming across. On a national scale, I'd have to think 95 percent of the country would think Michigan is definitely the mitten state."

When Connie Hahne of Clarkston started selling mittens with a Michigan map on them, she was surprised somebody didn't already have that idea. Through her site [michigannittens.com](#), she has been selling Lower and Upper Peninsula mittens for about three years.

"God bless them for trying," Hahne said of Wisconsin. "If they're ever in the market for some real mittens, they should give us a call."

But does Wisconsin have a legitimate claim to the title of Mitten State?

The Huffington Post unearthed a [1969 Chicago Tribune article](#) that refers to Wisconsin, not Michigan, as "the mitten-shaped state."

Larry Wagenaar of the Historical Society of Michigan said he didn't know offhand the history of mitten iconography in Michigan, but its use is intuitive and widespread. He also said he doesn't mention the mitten when referring to the whole state, because that excludes the Upper Peninsula.

Fair enough. But that doesn't let Wisconsin off the hook.

That'd be like Florida claiming it's the Italy boot," Dianna Stampfer of Promote Michigan said Wednesday on the Going Gonzo radio show on WJRW-AM (1340). "If you were asked on Jeopardy to name the Mitten State, the only answer Alex Trebek would accept is Michigan."

Talking about Wisconsin's Mitten Envy
 John Gonzalez and guests talk about Wisconsin's claim to be the Mitten state.

Alex Beaton or [Awesome Mitten](#), a website that promotes Michigan attractions, spread the story across the state and said she was "flabbergasted" Wisconsin would try to adopt the mitten.

Pure Michigan's website has [put Mittengate to a vote](#), and Michigan has about 80 percent of the votes as of this writing.

The Milwaukee A.V. Club [points out](#) this isn't Travel Wisconsin's first time disproving the notion that any publicity is good publicity. In 2009, the organization, then called the Wisconsin Department of Tourism, was widely ridiculed for adopting a slogan, "Live Like You Mean It," that had already been used to sell Bacardi Rum.

It didn't take long for parodies of Wisconsin's campaign to pop up online. One suggests Wisconsin more closely resembles a teapot. Yet another superimposes X-rayed hands inside the states to see which fits better. Guess who wins. Yet another shows a hand mangled into the shape of Wisconsin and jokes that it's sponsored by the Arthritis Foundation.

Is that too mean-spirited? Perhaps. But you picked this fight, Wisconsin. Don't make us come after your cheese.

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[twkmkrew](#) [kwsqht](#) [wdcgth](#) December 07, 2011 at 6:26PM

With what? Broken or disfigured fingers? Yeah, ok, whatever dream they want to dream...

[Johnnywestni](#) December 07, 2011 at 6:49PM

Such a trivial story... so what. Don't you have better stories to cover. Maybe the GRP is figuring their future lays as a tabloid.

[FormerNewsType](#) December 07, 2011 at 7:23PM

The Wisconsin mitten is perfect for a hand that is smashed or otherwise horribly disfigured. It makes me cringe.

[LuluSusanna](#) December 07, 2011 at 7:41PM

Only a cheesehead would think Wisconsin is shaped like a mitten.

[NamidaNamida](#) December 07, 2011 at 8:04PM

I'm not sure how Larry Wagenaar can say that calling Michigan "the Mitten State" means you have to exclude the UP. Just take your other hand and put it sideways with the thumb facing up.* Sure, you don't get Menominee, but you get a much better approximation of the state than that Wisconsin... thing.

*I guess that makes it the MittenS State, but oh well.

[nate08rcrcity](#) December 07, 2011 at 10:54PM

I think its a little ironic listening to the John Gonzalez link posted above, that WI stole MI's "mitten" icon, yet John stole "going gonzo" from Hunter S. Thompson.

[dwartarquart](#) December 07, 2011 at 10:55PM

Man! what a waste of column inches and mental energy. I am embarrassed for myself and my fellow Michiganders (I forgot how that worthless debate was settled, also) for wanting time on this nonsense. Even my friends from overseas know Lower Michigan is on the globe due to our near perfect mitten shape. There is no possible way any state is going to steal our warm handed identity.

I want to go on record for stating this: It is no skin off my nose if the cheeseheads curl the fingers down on their right hand and point to a spot thereon and say "this is where I live". I like most of the people I have met while traveling in Wisconsin and am not interested in creating bad blood with my neighbors over this trivial BS.

[tranesong2](#) December 07, 2011 at 11:50PM

So important. The simple shape of the peninsula. Yes, please continue to argue over such simple crap. It really makes a difference. Thanks for your simplicity.

[dwartarquart](#) December 08, 2011 at 12:10AM

Whose?

[krdunnabren](#) [Dunnam](#) December 08, 2011 at 12:20AM

Body part geography! Was sitting around a campfire in Louisiana, "where ya from?" I brought up

Can't wait for Iowa and New Hampshire to duke it out over who has/had the better profile.

[LadySaturn](#) December 08, 2011 at 1:27AM

I've heard that Wisconsin has a good number of jobs. So if they want to be us that bad then they can have our unemployment mess and our lovely governor and they can give us their jobs in return. Seems like a fair trade to me. By the way you can't blame the people of Wisconsin for this but you can blame their state government. Apparently their government is as smart as ours. Lol...

[rosie_mom](#) December 08, 2011 at 4:38AM

We don't have anything more important to write and talk about. Who cares??!

[wptg](#) December 08, 2011 at 6:53AM

If Michigan and Wisconsin are mittens, then what's Florida?

[gman](#) December 08, 2011 at 8:52AM

circumcised

[CvilleLady1](#) December 08, 2011 at 8:57AM

Ummm, the lower half of the U S sticking it's tongue out???? lol

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