

Origins of Some Old Sayings

Early aircraft throttles had a ball on the end of it, in order to go full throttle the pilot had to push the throttle all the way forward into the wall of the instrument panel. Hence, "balls to the wall" for going very fast. And now you know the rest of the story.

During WWII, U.S. Airplanes were armed with belts of ammo, which they would shoot during dogfights and on strafing runs.

These belts were folded into the wing compartments that fed their machine guns, measured 27 feet and contained hundreds of cartridges.

Often times, the pilots would return from their missions having expended all of their bullets on various targets. They would say, "I gave them the whole nine yards," meaning they used up all of their ammunition.

Did you know the saying "God willing and the creek don't rise" was in reference to the Creek Indians and not a body of water? It was written by Benjamin Hawkins in the late 18th century, a politician and Indian diplomat.

While in the South, Hawkins was requested by the President to return to Washington.

In his response, he was said to write, "God willing and the Creek don't rise."

Because he capitalized the word "Creek" he was referring to the Creek Indian tribe and not a body of water.

In George Washington's days, there were no cameras. One's image was either sculpted or painted.

Some paintings of George Washington have him standing behind a desk with one arm behind his back while others showed both legs and both arms.

Prices charged by painters were not based on how many people were to be painted, but by how many limbs were to be painted. Arms and legs are 'limbs,' therefore painting them would cost the buyer more. Hence the expression, 'Okay, but it'll cost you an arm and a leg.'

(Artists know hands and arms are more difficult to paint.)

As incredible as it sounds, long ago men and women took baths only twice a year (May and October).

Women kept their hair covered, while men shaved their heads (because of lice and bugs) and wore wigs.

Wealthy men could afford good wigs made from wool.

They couldn't wash the wigs, so to clean them they would carve out a loaf of bread, put the wig in the shell, and bake it for 30 minutes.

The heat would make the wig big and fluffy, hence the term 'big wig'.

Today we often use the term here comes the 'Big Wig' because someone appears to be or is powerful and wealthy.

In the late 1700's, many houses consisted of a large room with only one chair.

Commonly, a long wide bench folded down from the wall, and was used for dining.

The 'head of the household' always sat in the chair while everyone else ate sitting on the bench.

Occasionally a guest, who was usually a man, would be invited to sit in this chair during a meal.

To sit in the chair meant you were important and in charge.

They called the one sitting in the chair the 'chair man.'

Today in business, we use the expression or title 'Chairman' or 'Chairman of the Board.'

Personal hygiene left much room for improvement. As a result, many women and men had developed acne scars by adulthood.

The women would spread bee's wax over their facial skin to smooth out their complexions.

When they were speaking to each other, if a woman began to stare at another woman's face she was told, 'mind your own bee's wax.'

Should the woman smile, the wax would crack, hence the term 'crack a smile'.

In addition, when they sat too close to the fire, the wax would melt.

Therefore, the expression 'losing face.'

Ladies wore corsets, which would lace up in the front.

A proper and dignified woman, as in 'straight laced' wore a tightly tied corset.

Common entertainment included playing cards.

However, there was a tax levied when purchasing playing cards but only applicable to the 'Ace of Spades.'

To avoid paying the tax, people would purchase 51 cards instead.

Yet, since most games require 52 cards, these people were thought to be stupid or dumb because they weren't 'playing with a full deck.'

Early politicians required feedback from the public to determine what the people considered important.

Since there were no telephones, TV's, radios or internet, the politicians sent their assistants to local taverns, pubs, and bars.

They were told to 'go sip some Ale and listen to people's conversations and political concerns.

Many assistants were dispatched at different times.

'You go sip here' and 'You go sip there.'

The two words 'go sip' were eventually combined when referring to the local opinion and, thus we have the term 'gossip.'

At local taverns, pubs, and bars, people drank from pint and quart-sized containers.

A barmaid's job was to keep an eye on the customers and keep the drinks coming.

She had to pay close attention and remember who was drinking in pints and who was drinking in quarts, hence the phrase 'minding your Ps and Qs.'

One more: Bet you didn't know this!

In the heyday of sailing ships, all warships and many freighters carried iron cannons. Those cannons fired round iron cannon balls and it was necessary to keep a good supply near the cannon. However, how to prevent them from rolling about the deck?

The best storage method devised was a square-based pyramid with one ball on top, resting on four resting on nine, which rested on sixteen.

Thus, a supply of 30 cannon balls could be stacked in a small area right next to the cannon.

There was only one problem; how to prevent the bottom layer from sliding or rolling from under the others.

The solution was a metal plate called a 'Monkey' with 16 round indentations.

However, if this plate were made of iron, the iron balls would quickly rust to it. The solution to the rusting problem was to make 'Brass Monkeys.'

Few landlubbers realize that brass contracts greater, and much faster than iron when it's chilled.

Consequently, when the temperature dropped too far, the brass indentations would shrink so much that the iron cannonballs would roll right off the monkey.

Thus, it was quite literally, 'Cold enough to freeze the balls off a brass monkey.'

If you don't send this fabulous bit of historic knowledge to any and all your unsuspecting friends, your hard drive will kill your mouse.

Submitted by AGCS Lloyd "Punk" Corbett, USN RET