



Face of Fillmore

By Sherry Shepard
February 12, 2020

On a daytrip to Cove Fort a few years back to show the Fort to our grandchildren, we were given the usual guided tour which we all enjoyed. (Highly recommended.)

In one of the rooms was an old-fashioned bed. It did not have box springs like we see these days, but underneath the mattress was a crisscross pattern of ropes. The guide explained that these were used to tighten the surface to lay the mattress on and make sleeping more comfortable. This, she told us, was where the old saying came from – “Sleep tight!” We have also heard, “And don’t let the bed bugs bite.” That part of the old saying goes without any explanation necessary.



Cove Fort in its dilapidated days.

Since that trip, I have had my eye out for the origins of other old sayings and have gathered a few that my readers may enjoy.

I will not vouch for their authenticity, but they are fun reading.

It became a custom many years ago to get married in the month of June. This seemed to stem from the fact that in some early cultures their once a year bath was taken in May and they still smelled pretty good by the month of June. However, since the odors were beginning to return, brides carried a bouquet of flowers to hide body odor. This is supposedly the beginning of the custom of carrying a bouquet when getting married.

Baths were a family thing in early days. The man of the house was privileged to take the first one in a big tub of nice, clean, warm water. Then the sons and other men in the household took theirs. These were followed by the women and finally the children. Last of all were the babies. By then the water was murky and some said so dirty you could actually loose someone in it. From there came the saying, “Don’t throw the baby out with the bath water!”

Houses in early days had thatched roofs with straw piled high on top. This was the only place for some animals to find shelter and warmth, so cats and other small animals lived in the roof. When it rained, the roof's surface became slippery and sometimes the animals would fall off. This began the saying, "It's raining cats and dogs." Unfortunately, there was little in the construction to prevent smaller animals and insects from falling into the house and landing on the bed. Big posts were built on the four corners of the bed with a sheet hung in between. This began the canopy bed.

The floors were usually made of dirt, especially if the family didn't have much money. This began the term "dirt poor". The richer families had slate floors, but these would get slippery when wet. They would spread straw (thresh) on the floor to help them from slipping. More thresh was added as needed. When the doors were opened, the thresh would slip outside so a board was placed across the doorway to hold it in. A "thresh hold".

People cooked in the kitchen with a big kettle that always hung over the fire. Each morning they warmed up what was leftover and added to it. At times, this process would go on with the same pot for days. This began the rhyme, "Peas porridge hot, peas porridge cold, peas porridge in the pot nine days old."

On rare occasions they were able to get pork, which made them feel quite special. They would hang up their bacon to show it off when someone came to visit. It was a sign of wealth if a man could "bring home the bacon". They would cut off a little to share with guests and would all sit around and "chew the fat."

Bread was divided according to social status. Workers got the burnt bottom of the loaf, the family got the middle, and guests got the top, or the "upper crust".

People in the high-income bracket had plates made of pewter. There was a problem using these as food with high acid content caused some of the lead in the plates to enter the food, causing lead poisoning. For this reason, it was thought for centuries that tomatoes were poisonous.

Lead cups were also a problem when drinking alcoholic beverages. The combination of the lead and alcohol would sometimes cause the drinkers to pass out for a couple of days. Sometimes they were taken as dead and prepared for burial. It became the custom to lay the deceased out on the kitchen table for a few days while the family gathered there and ate and drank and waited to see if they would wake up. This began the custom of "holding a wake".

The strangest one I read had to do with the fact that in some small villages the folks ran out of gravesites so they would dig up coffins and reuse the grave. When opening the coffins, they found some to have scratch marks on the inside and realized some people had been buried alive. So, they would tie a string on the wrist of the corpse, lead it through the coffin and up through the ground and tie it to a bell. Someone would have the assignment of sitting in the graveyard all night (the "graveyard shift") to listen for the bell. In this manner someone could be "saved by the bell".