

Generations

Customs and beliefs from generation to generation

Happy St. Patrick's Day to everyone today whether you're Irish or not and clad in green to help celebrate. The holiday, named in honor of the patron saint of Ireland, commemorates the arrival of Christianity in Ireland as well as celebrating Irish heritage and culture.

When I think of St. Patrick's Day, four-leaf clovers quickly come to mind. The ancient Egyptians and the Druid priests of Ireland believed that the clovers had healing properties and could ward off evil. I've never had the good fortune to find one, but I'm in a lot of company as it's estimated that the chances of finding a four-leaf clover are 1 in 10,000.

What about other customs that have lasted throughout the ages such as lighting candles on a birthday cake? Lighting candles and making a wish stands back to the ancient Greeks, when they would bake cakes and top them with candles to ask Artemis (the moon goddess) for a favor.

The smoke from the extinguished candles was believed to carry the message up to the gods as it rises.

Is a rabbit's foot really a lucky charm (except for the rabbit)? The idea of rabbits being lucky is part of Celtic lore. The

idea sprang from the fact that they live underground, which made people at the time think they had a direct line of communication with the gods.



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In more recent times, the animal's reputation for being fertile made rabbit-themed charms popular among women hoping to conceive. Thank goodness rabbit's foot charms today are actually just made of fake fur and plastic and not a threat to a bunch of bunnies.

My mother used to always dry out a turkey wishbone and we'd make a wish on it. The wishbone superstition started thousands of years ago with the Etruscan Italian empire.

They predicted the future by observing chickens and viewed the collarbone as a sacred part of the bird. They would let the collarbones dry out and then keep them to make wishes. Romans adopted this tradition and started breaking the bones between two people due to a lack of availability.

What about knocking on wood, something I simply can't break the habit of doing even today? Ancient pagans used to believe that

there were spirits living in the trees, and knocking on the trunks would summon them for protection. The gesture was also used to thank them when something good happened.

Is there really a bad stigma to Friday the 13th? Friday the 13th is widely believed to have biblical roots in that the number 12 was seen in many cultures as a sort of "perfect" number, and adding one more threw perfection off.

According to the Bible, Judas was the 13th guest to arrive at the Last Supper and Friday was widely believed to be the day Jesus was crucified.

Similarly, in Norse mythology, Loki was the 13th guest to arrive at a dinner for the gods in Valhalla, bringing evil to all the guests.

The Friday superstition also has origins in the U.S., where in the 19th century all executions took place on Friday.

I'm extra careful when handling a mirror and didn't exactly know why. It turns out that ancient Romans believed that mir-

rors held pieces of your soul. This, coupled with the myth that our body "renews" itself every seven years, fueled the belief that breaking a mirror means that your soul is in a lot of trouble for seven years minimum.

Today, people wouldn't consider a single cent on the ground to be good fortune, but back in ancient times, it was.

Old civilizations believed that finding any metal on the ground was a gift from the gods. Some people also believed holding on to the penny would bring good luck and others that good luck comes when you give the penny away.

Spilled salt is supposedly bad luck and I, for one, still throw a couple of crystals over my shoulder when I do. Salt was once used as an expensive trading commodity, so spilling it was deemed wasteful. The other theory is that it was considered a magical substance in ancient times, when it was used to perform rituals, and spilling it meant you were

inviting the devil in. That's good enough for me to keep throwing it over my shoulder.

The last is for poker enthusiasts — the "dead man's hand." It's considered bad luck in poker to be dealt a two-pair hand consisting of black eights and black aces. The dead man's hand got its name because, according to legend, they were the cards held by Wild Bill Hickok when he was murdered in a Deadwood saloon in 1876 by Jack McCall, an unsuccessful gambler.

However, when chips are dwindling, I'd hang on to my pair of aces and eights and take my chances.

Enjoy St. Patrick's Day, and I'll end this column with a lovely quote from Denise Morrison, one of the 21st century's most powerful businesswoman and former CEO of Campbell Soup Co.: "I see the world through Irish eyes, and they are smiling."

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