

Generations

Fascinating origins of common slang terms

As the recipient of red-lined manuscript notes from a series of editors who took the time to point me in the right direction, many dos and don'ts have stuck with me from pen to paper and way before the computer and its auto correct feature found their way into mainstream. The No. 1 grievance that all



Peg DeMarco

editors quickly pointed out was my use of slang, which surprised me at first because I didn't know I had the skill to use it.

Actually, what's a girl from Long Island to do when she's attempting to write like a polished aristocrat and phrases like "dead as a doornail" creep into her heroine's narrative verse?

It took years and plenty of practice, but I managed to avoid slang in all its obvious and hidden forms, so when I spotted an article on www.bestlifeonline.com by Emerald Catron about the origins of common slang terms, I couldn't resist picking out a few.

So, to me, the best place to start was probably "dead as a doornail." As Catron points out, one could certainly argue that a doornail has never been alive and in some way when it has

been hammered through a door so that it can never come loose, one could consider that the nail was finally dead. The slang has actually been around since the 14th century, about as long as the word doornail has officially been in the English language. However, apparently I have always been in good company because the fabulous Charles Dickens used it in his famous "A Christmas Carol" when he described old Marley as "dead as a door-nail."

When someone says, "He's a smart Alec," according to Professor Gerald Cohen, who wrote the book "*Studies in Slang*," the original smart Alec was Alexander Hoag, a professional thief who lived and robbed in New York City in the 1840s. Hoag was a very clever criminal who worked with his wife and two other policemen to pickpocket and rob people. He was eventually caught when he decided to stop paying the cops (which may or may not account for the smart part).

Both Gladys Knight and the Pips and Marvin Gaye had a hit with "I Heard It Through the Grapevine," but the phrase actually was most commonly used during the Civil War. The grapevine people hear things through was the telegraph and "grapevine telegraph" was the nickname given to the means

of spreading information during the war. The grapevine telegraph is just a person-to-person exchange of information.

Today, when somebody "bites the bullet," he or she is usually doing something extremely unpleasant or, even worse, lying on his or her deathbed. When the phrase first came into being, though, people would literally bite down on bullets. Before anesthetics were invented, soldiers would chomp down on a bullet to make it through the pain. Ouch!

The phrase "takes the cake" comes from the cake walks that were popular in the late 19th century. Couples would strut around gracefully and well-attired, and the couple with the best walk would win a cake as a prize. Interestingly, cake walk was soon used to describe something that could be done very easily, i.e., "easy as a piece of cake."

There are many theories about what "down to brass tacks" means, including that brass tacks rhymes with hard facts. However, more than likely, brass tacks used in this slang was truly brass tacks or thumbtacks. Merchants used to keep tacks nailed into their counters to use as guides for measuring things, so to get down to brass tacks would mean that one was finally done deciding what he or she

wanted and were ready to cut some fabric and do some actual business.

When I don't understand something, I still always say, "It's Greek to me," and it's a habit hard to break. Often attributed to Shakespeare, it's actually been around since well before his time. An earlier version of the phrase can be found written in Medieval Latin that translates to "It's Greek; cannot be read."

To "put the kibosh" on something is to shut it down, but the word kibosh possibly comes from the Gaelic word "cie bais," which is the black hat a judge would put on before sentencing someone to be executed (the final putdown).

I'm guilty of using "between a rock and a hard place" often since I seem to be in that see-saw predicament no matter what age I am. In 1921, the phrase became a popular means of describing when miners had to choose between dangerous work for little or no money or definite poverty during the Great Bankers' Panic of 1907.

Thankfully, my rock and a hard place is nowhere dire a choice those miners had to make or I'd be as dead as a doornail.

Peg DeMarco is a Morganton resident who writes a weekly features column for The News Herald. Contact her at pegdemarco@earthlink.net.