

# WORDS AND THEIR STORIES

by

Herbert Sutcliffe and Harold Berman

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## FOREWORD

A good story can be told about a great many words in every language. This is especially true of those words that become part of day-to-day speech. Above and beyond its formal literature, a people's speech—its idioms, vernacular phrases and special expressions—reflects the whole range of that people's culture and experience.

Out of the American experience, American English has carved a large body of expression that continues to grow. It would be surprising if it did not, considering the vast changes that have taken place in the United States just in the last 50 years. Space exploration alone has given the language a sizable new vocabulary.

Nevertheless, as can be seen in our stories, a great number of the old expressions clings stubbornly to present-day American speech. These expressions have lost little of their health and vitality. Some are hundreds of years old and refuse to disappear, although new phrases keep crowding them, threatening their very existence. Such new ones, as "ripoff," "stone-wall," "scofflaw" and "gobbledegook," among others, may be colorful, exciting and lie close to contemporary life. But will they last, as the older ones have? Will they be able to sustain themselves and hold on as have these phrases—"lame duck," "talk turkey," "logroll," "all thumbs," to name a few? It remains to be seen.

However, our concern here is not with etymology or linguistics in any formal sense. This is simply a series of stories that is being broadcast overseas by the Special English Section of the Voice of America. Its purpose is to help foreign listeners improve their understanding of

American speech and to give them a more sensitive feeling for it. This can open up another channel of communication and a closer rapport between peoples.

Above all, we hope that some of these listeners may perhaps find these stories not only informative, but interesting and entertaining as well.

Our special and sincere thanks to C. B. Groce, VOA Deputy Program Manager, and to V. Hobson Banks, Chief, VOA Worldwide English Division. They have given us unceasing support over many years and we owe them much. We also wish to thank Henrietta Walton, Special English News Chief, for her valuable suggestions.

Several of the stories were contributed by members of the Special English staff. Their names are listed in the table of contents.

|                        |                               |
|------------------------|-------------------------------|
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# HELLO

Hello. This is as good a way as any to welcome you to these pages.

The word "hello" is probably used more often than any other one in the English language. Everybody in the United States—and elsewhere—uses the word, again and again, every day of the week.

The first thing you hear when you pick up the phone is "hello" unless the caller is an Englishman, who might say, "Are you there?"

Where did the word come from? There are all sorts of beliefs. Some say it came from the French, "ho" and "la"—"Ho, there!" This greeting may have arrived in England during the Norman Conquest in the year 1066.

"Ho, there" slowly became something that sounded like "hallow" (accent last syllable), often heard in the 1300's, during the days of the English poet, Geoffrey Chaucer.

Two hundred years later, in Shakespeare's time, "hallow" had become "halloo." And later, sounds like "halloa," "halloo" and "hollo" were often used by sailors and huntsmen. "Halloo," is still used today by fox hunters.

As time passed, "halloo" and "halloa" changed into "hullo." And during the 1800's this was how people greeted each other in America.

The American inventor, Thomas Alva Edison, is believed to be the first person to use "hello" in the late 1800's, soon after the invention of the telephone.

At first, people had greeted each other on the telephone with, "Are you there?" They were not sure the new instrument could really carry voices.

Tom Edison, however, was a man of few words. He wasted no time. The first time he picked up the phone

he did not ask if anyone was there. He was sure someone was, and simply said, "Hello."

From that time on—only about 100 years ago—the "hullo," became "hello," as it is heard today.

Strangely enough, when the first telephone system was put in New Haven, Connecticut, in 1878, people did not say "hello" or "hullo" or even "halloo." They answered the phone the way sailors hail a ship, "Ahoy, ahoy there!" Thank God, that telephone greeting did not last long.

Of course, there are other ways Americans greet one another. Not long ago, people often said, "How are you?" when they first met someone. This later became "hiyah." Then, someone thought that two syllables were too much and "hiyah" became "hi." Laziness is a strong force in changing language.

Answering a telephone call in America still presents problems, however. Telephone companies think that Thomas Edison's short "hello," is too long. Why waste time? the phone companies say. Simply pick up the phone, give your name, and start talking.

## YANKEE

The word "Yankee" is about 300 years old. It was first used as a nickname for the colonists who settled in New England. But where did the word come from? What does it mean? How did it get into the language?

There are 20 stories explaining where "Yankee" came from. But the experts say only two of these stories are believable.

A number of people believe that it came from a Scottish word meaning sharp and clever. Even today, anyone who is a sharp trader is called a "Yankee trader." But most experts agree that "Yankee" came from Holland.

Many years ago, the Hollanders who made cheese were called Jan Kees by the Germans. Some of these Hollanders came to America in the early 1600's. They settled near the New England colonists. The Hollanders were great farmers. They laughed at the colonists in the north who tried to build farms on the mountain rocks. And so, the Hollanders gave their own nickname to the New England colonists. The British quickly picked up the nickname and the New Englanders became Yankees.

During the American Civil War "Yankee" took on a wider meaning. The soldiers in the northern states were called Yankees by the men of the southern army.

During World War One the word was shortened to "Yank." The song, "The Yanks Are Coming," brought tears and joy to the peoples of the hard-pressed Allied nations.

Today, "Yankee" is known throughout the world as another name for an American.

Of course, one cannot talk about "Yankee" and not mention "Doodle" or "Yankee Doodle." This phrase

also has a story.

It is said that in 1775 a British army doctor, Richard Shucksberg, wrote the song, "Yankee Doodle," to poke fun at the colonial troops. The British army, always neat in its bright red uniforms, looked down on the rough colonial soldiers, who really were not soldiers at all, but farmers with clubs and old guns—angry farmers who rebelled against the high British taxes.

One day, British army colonel, Hugh Percy, set out to collect the arms the colonists had hidden in Concord. Percy marched his men out of Boston to the tune of "Yankee Doodle." At Concord, however, the rough colonial farmers defeated the British. The farmers, now marched with pride to Boston to the tune of "Yankee Doodle." Ever since that day in 1775, "Yankee Doodle" has become an American marching song.

## OKAY

The word "okay" is known and used by millions of people all over the world. Still, language experts do not agree on where it came from.

Some say it came from the Indian peoples. When Europeans first came to the Americas they heard hundreds of different Indian languages. Many were well developed.

One tribe especially had a well developed language. This was the Choctaw tribe. They were farmers and fishermen who lived in the rich Mississippi valley in what is now the state of Alabama. When problems arose, Choctaw leaders discussed them with the tribal chief. They sat in a circle and listened to the wisdom of the chief.

He heard the different proposals, often raising and lowering his head in agreement, and saying, "Okeh," meaning "It is so."

The Indian languages have given many words to English. Twenty four of the American states—almost half—have Indian names—Oklahoma, the Dakotas, Idaho, Wisconsin, Ohio and Tennessee, to name a few. And the names of many rivers, streams, mountains, cities and towns are Indian.

Nevertheless, there are many who dispute the idea that "okay" came from the Indians. Some say that President Andrew Jackson first used the word "okay." Others claim the word was invented by John Jacob Astor, a fur trader of the late 1700's who became one of the world's richest men. Still others say a poor railroad clerk made up this word. His name was Obadiah Kelly and he put his initials, O.K., on each package people gave him to ship by train.

So it goes; each story sounds reasonable and official.

But perhaps the most believable explanation is that the word "okay" was invented by a political organization in the 1800's.

Martin Van Buren was running for President. A group of people organized a club to support him. They called their political organization the "Okay Club." The letters "o" and "k" were taken from the name of Van Buren's home town, the place where he was born, Old Kinderhook, New York.

There is one thing about "okay" that the experts do agree on: that the word is pure American and that it has spread to almost every country on earth.

There is something about the word that appeals to peoples of every language. Yet, here in America it is used mostly in speech, not in serious writing. Serious writers would rather use "agree," "assent," "approve," "confirm" and so on.

In recent times, "okay" has been given an official place in the English language.

But it will be a long time before Americans will officially accept two expressions that come from "okay." These are "oke" and "okeydoke."

## INDIAN

About 485 years ago, a man stood alone on the coast of Spain. He looked toward the west and said to himself, "The earth cannot be flat. If I sail westward, sooner or later, I shall hit land, India perhaps, and the queen will have a new and shorter route to the riches of that country."

Christopher Columbus sold his idea to Queen Isabella of Spain. She gave him men and three ships. And Columbus sailed westward for many weeks, through rough seas.

At last, he saw land: a group of islands now called the West Indies. Columbus was sure it was India, and he called the natives "Indos."

Stories of what Columbus found quickly spread across Europe. His word "Indos," became "Indians" to the English. And all the natives of the West Indies and Central America became known as "Indians."

Christopher Columbus made four trips to the New World. Yet, he died in Spain without knowing where he had been. He died believing he had sailed to India.

It was soon learned that Columbus had made a mistake. But the word "Indian" was well established in Europe.

The first settlers who arrived in North Carolina and Virginia in the early 1600's called the natives Indians. This name spread north as the colonies of Maryland, New York, Pennsylvania and New England were settled.

Today the word is used to describe the descendants of the first peoples of North and South America. In the far north they are called Eskimos. And in the far south there are the Patagonians and the Fuegians.

Students and scholars have long known that the

American Indians were not really Indians at all. And one scholar proposed a name that he believed would be better—Amerinds. He made up this name by joining American and Indian. This word is often used today by other scholars, but the general public has heard little of it.

Word experts say the name Indian may be wrong but we are stuck with it. It is too late to change it to Amerind. Most people would not accept the change. Besides, how could a movie of the old west be exciting if it concerned cowboys and Amerinds, instead of cowboys and Indians?



## INDIAN SUMMER

No one knows where the phrase "Indian summer" came from, or how it got started. We are sure that the phrase was well-known by the year 1778, because Crèvecoeur, the French writer, wrote about it. Crèvecoeur, who became an American citizen, said this: "A severe frost follows the autumn rains. This prepares the ground to receive the snows of winter. But before the snows come, the earth turns warm once again and there are a few days of smoke and mildness called Indian summer."

There is a story about Indian summer that goes back to the very first settlers of the New World. The first frost meant winter was coming. Snow would soon follow.

The Indians, seeing the settlers preparing for winter, told them not to hurry. The weather would turn warm again, mild breezes would blow and the sky turn soft and smoky. And so it did. The sun became hot, and a bright warm haze flowed over the fields and woods. The settlers, remembering the words of the Indians, called this wonderful period Indian summer.

But the Indians have their own stories about this late period of warm weather. One of their stories is about a great god called Nanahbozhoo.

Nanahbozhoo lived at the North Pole. There he sat upon his white throne and looked down upon the world and the deeds of his people. Nanahbozhoo always fell asleep when winter set in. But before doing so, he lit his great pipe and smoked tobacco for many days.

The smoke rising from his pipe flowed down over the earth and produced the beautiful Indian summer. It was the smoke that made the land look hazy, warm and enjoyable.