

THE ATHENAEUM SOCIETY

CHRIS GILKEY

"WHAT IN TARNATION?"

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Good evening Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, fellow presenter, and esteemed "high falutin" Athenaeum members. Tonight's presentation/paper will certainly contain some things/phrases/origins you may or may not have heard before, but nevertheless I am either here to bore you or entertain you with useful knowledge henceforth. Being in the field of education, as a teacher, assistant principal, and principal for 23 years, there are certain phrases, and slang that will always amuse me that students and even parents have used that have stuck to my vocabulary either fortunately or unfortunately. Let me just dabble in a few and educate you beyond measure, shall we? Sushi, Joe, Dog Water, Slaps, I'm about to go 51/50, Slaw, Mean Muggin, Buggin, You a "Opp," and the most recent being GYATT. Sushi, Joe, Dog Water, and Slaw typically mean the same thing and that something is bad or gone wrong. I'm about to go 51/50 means that the student and or parent is about to "go off" or crazy. Mean mugging means someone or you are staring at someone intensely. Buggin - you are doing something that someone else doesn't like or approve of. "You a Opp" would mean that you are my opponent. And GYATT is typically yelled by students when a teacher bends over during class to get laughter

out of the rest of the class. Usually, the teacher has no clue what GYATT means or why someone is entertaining the class. However, I have intentionally learned these words and/or phrases to stay at the top of the lingo especially as a school administrator in terms of discipline and support of teachers.

Sometimes, the words and/or phrases mentioned above can actually be comical to me and I catch myself saying them on a daily basis . I am especially a fan of "dog water." But, that's neither here nor there and I will get to the point of this paper. Do the words and/or phrases have an origin or did someone just use them and it was just say catchy and it stuck? We, in Kentucky and especially the south for that matter, have our own way of speaking as well. "BlessYour Heart," "Gimme Some Sugar," "Y'all," "Fixin' To," "Over Yonder," and "Jerk a Knot in your Tail" are just a few I could mention and I would be willing to bet that 90% or more in this room would know exactly what they meant. Not necessarily where they originated but automatically know the meaning and how to use them in a sentence. Oftentimes I get asked, what is the Atheneum Society? And, I often attempt to explain in the best way possible and as one person said to me after my explanation..."Oh Yall High Falutin." Which, I've already mentioned if you were listening intently in the opening sentence of this

paper. I laughed it off because honestly I believe we are some of the most educated, well put together, funny, and knowledgeable people. With that being said, gentlemen, I present to you tonight a paper/presentation, as I find things that we sometimes say intentionally/unintentionally here in Kentucky and the South, entitled, "What in Tarnation?"

"High Falutin" - aka "uppity" : It's not certain how the phrase "high falutin" came about, but there are two theories that have survived the ages. Wealthy travelers in the 19th century would take steamboats, which often had high-fluted funnels on the vessels. It is believed that common folk would sometimes term these steamboat passengers as "high falutin." Others believe the phrase is derived directly from the musical instrument, the flute itself. Because it's a woodwind, the flute is played with the mouth and therefore held high, near the head, as it's being played. A high falutin person is also sometimes called an "uppity" person.

"Madder than a Wet Hen" : to define this term is to get very angry. "Grandma's gonna be madder than a wet hen when she finds out you tracked mud all over her floor." The phrase originates from when a hen lays its eggs, she usually likes to remain in her nest after her eggs are removed. In order to get the hen to lay more eggs, farmers would typically

pull the hen from its nest, dunk her in water, and then place her back in her nest so she could start laying eggs again.

"Drunker than Cooter Brown" - It's not known if Cooter Brown (or as we called him in Kentucky, "Cootie" Brown) actually existed, but that doesn't stop people from invoking his name to this day as part of this classic phrase. Legend has it that Cooter Brown was a southern man that lived very close to the Mason-Dixon Line during the 1860s, and in order to avoid being drafted by either armies of the North and South, stayed perpetually drunk(which made him ineligible for military service during the Civil War). Go figure. And, some of our young folks and some Kentuckians are still known to use the phrase "gettin cootie" while partaking in libations.

"Good Lord Willing and the Creek Don't Rise" : The origin of this popular phrase is frequently debated. The expression appeared in magazines and newspapers throughout the 1800s, and the general interpretation was that the "creek" (sometimes 'crick) referred to a body of water. As the years passed, another theory about the expression was born. Legend had it that the expression had been coined by Benjamin Hawkins, a political figure from Georgia in the late 18th century and early 19th century. Hawkins worked closely with the Native American tribes, specifically the "Creek," and eventually married a Creek woman. It was

said that in the letter to the president of the United States, Hawkins wrote that he would return to Washington "if God willing and the Creek don't rise," and that by capitalizing "Creek" he was referring to the Indian tribe. To date, no evidence of the letter has been found, likely meaning that it is just an urban legend. In any case, the origin of the phrase is destined to remain a mystery.

"Fair to Middlin" : Middling is a Scottish word that means "medium or moderate size, strength, and quality." And, by the 19th century, the phrase "fair to middlin" was being used by authors such as Mark Twain and Louisa May Alcott in some of their most famous works. It also became a popular phrase in the cotton business, as "fair to middling" was often used to describe grades of cotton available for purchase. Often used in small talk, "How are you doing?" "Fair to middling, I suppose...I can't complain."

"Keep Your Britches On" : Simply put, settle down and compose yourself. In a sentence, " There's no need to rush. Just keep your britches on and we will be there soon enough. I actually heard this one from my parents many times on trips when my sister and I would ask the common phrase, "Are we there yet?" This phrase is derived from "keep your shirt on," which was a popular expression in the 19th century. Because clothing was somewhat tight and restrictive during this time, brawls would often

begin with angry men taking their shirts off to improve arms' mobility during a fight.

"Aint Seen Hide nor Hair" - by definition, unable to find someone or something. This dates back to the 18th century when hunting and tracking skills were often needed to feed yourself and your family. After shooting your prey, it would sometimes escape into the woods or underbrush to elude capture. In many instances, injured prey would soon die but not be found until many days later when their hides or hair were discovered by other hunters.

"Pig in a Poke" : by definition it is a surprise at the end of a trick or a scam. Often used in political lingo, "I can't believe I voted for that guy. All of his promises turned out to be pigs in a poke." This originated many years ago in the farmer's markets, and merchants selling pigs would often carry them in "pokes", which are sacks or bags. Devious merchants were known to replace the pig with an animal of lesser value, such as cat, and keep it hidden in the poke until the transaction was complete. The merchant would then abscond with the money and the buyer would have been duped into purchasing an item that they didn't want to buy. This scenario is also where we get the phrase "letting the cat out of the bag."

"They Got More _____ than Carter's Got Liver Pills" : having an abundance of, or having much more than one needs. In the first half of the 20th century, Carter Little Liver Pills could be found in many family's medicine cabinets throughout the United States. Advertisements for these pills claimed that they would cure a variety of ailments and increase bile flow in the liver. They were so plentiful in fact that the phrase "he/she's got more _____ than Carter's Liver Pills" became commonplace. Ironically, the Federal Trade Commission required the medicine to remove "Liver" from its name in 1951 after it was proven that the pills had no effect - good or otherwise - on a person's liver. Hence, is why you might now say "More than Carter has pills."

"He Don't Know Shit from Shinola" : A way to describe someone that is lacking in a brain/knowledge. Founded in Rochester, New York in 1907, Shinola was a brand of shoe polish that peaked in popularity during the 1940s. Legend has it that an officer in the U.S. military ordered a disgruntled soldier to shine his shoes, the soldier used feces rather than the shoe polish and proclaimed that the officer "wouldn't know shit from shinola." Sadly, the Shinola shoe polish company went bankrupt in 1960.

"Happy as a Dead Pig in the Sunshine" - meaning blissfully ignorant. When a pig dies outdoors , its skin usually shrivels up fairly quickly in the

warm sun. This is especially true with skin around its jaw line, as the shriveling around its mouth can give the impression that the dead pig is smiling.

"Rode Hard and Put Up Wet" : to appear unkempt or look exhausted. While a horse is being ridden or exercised, it can sweat quite a bit. It's generally best to walk it around before being put back in the stable, so the horse can dry off and not appear so rough.

"Old Codge" : describing an elderly man, often eccentric or curmudgeonly. "He's still alive? I thought that old codge died years ago." Codge is derived from the English word "cadge," which was commonly used in the sport of falconry. The "cadge" or (cage) that housed the falcons would typically be carried by elderly men, who served as assistants (much like caddies in golf) to the younger falconers. Over the years, beggars and tramps would often be referred to as "cades" or "cadgers"

"Spittin Image" : A 19th century English phrase that is short for "the spit and image of," of course. This expression is actually used when comparing two people or things that look exactly alike. It's formed from the notion that a person could so closely resemble another that they might be formed by the spit of another. Hmmm...

And, one last one before I close, "Barking up the Wrong Tree" or making a wrong assumption. This expression comes from the early 19th century, when a pack of dogs were used in hunting. Often the animals being hunted would surrey noisily into a group of trees in order to confuse the pursuing dogs, which would sometimes confuse the canines into mistakenly believing the prey were trapped atop a tree when in fact they had escaped. And, now you know the rest of the story.

There were several other phrases and words that I also found amusing that we sometimes use a lot while confusing our friends and people around us without us missing a beat. "Fiddlesticks," "Well Butter My Butt & Call Me a Biscuit," "Hold Your Horses," "Naked as a Jaybird," "Piddlin," or "He Could Eat Corn through a Picket fence." This list could go on all evening but I don't want to be one of those presenters where you are looking at your watch saying to yourself, "He's Slow as Molasses."

In conclusion, whether it's a saying or a phrase that originated back in the 18th and 19th century, we as a human race are no different than the current students that I have or have had over the last 23 years. Either way, if you don't know what the word means or where it came from it's hard to get your point across to people that aren't as educated on slang and historic phrases and words used over time. With that being said, it's been

an honor to present this paper to you tonight as I really did have a good time researching and laughing at most of the things that I found. In the comment portion tonight of this meeting, I would appreciate you sharing some you may have heard over the years and even the origin if possible. Kind words are welcomed as well. Don't be an Opp because that's slaw. Negative comments are sushi and even dog water. I would rather say your comment "slaps" during the rebuttal portion of the evening. It's been an honor, you "high falutin" gentlemen. Thank you!