



AT THE LIBRARY

By Julie Winkelstein
January 7, 2005

“Language can be a fascinating study, instead of the dull, technical things it used to be in old-fashioned schools. English has been filled and enriched over its centuries of gradual development, with the most colorful words, word-elements, and word combinations of a score of older tongues.”

-From the Introduction to
Why We Say..., by Robert
L. Morgan

With a few days off and my children home from various places, I found myself participating in a group attempt at the Sunday Times crossword puzzle. This is usually something I work on sporadically during the following week, and occasionally actually finish before the next one arrives.

But with so many of us working on it, we had it finished by Sunday night and that, combined with the reading aloud from a book called *Why We Say...* by Robert Morgan, made me think again about what a word-oriented family we are.

Of course, there is also the fact that when I opened the huge red dictionary we keep in the kitchen *Webster's Encyclopedic Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language*, I found the list we compiled last year around this time. For some reason, we decided to come up with as many English words or phrases as possible that included the word “dog.” I

think this started with the expression “sick as a dog,” and by the time we had finished, we had 45 more. These included “doggerel,” “my dogs are barking,” “dog’s age” and “dog-tired.” This year I noticed the dictionary lists at least two dozen more that we didn’t think of – it is amazing how that word has crept into our language. The word cat, on the other hand, has few expressions associated with it. I wonder why?

There are other books like *Why We Say...* – a book about the derivation of various expressions used in everyday English speech. And our 1953 edition doesn’t include the many additions to our language in the last 50 years. In fact, there are expressions in it that are probably not familiar to many people, because they have basically passed out of our daily language. But it is fascinating to try to guess how some of these sayings originated.

I thought I'd share a few of my favorites – none of which I guessed, by the way. First, "stool pigeon." This great expression means, in case you don't know, to act as a spy. The story of its derivation is: "At a time when there used to be wild pigeons at large, hunters would catch one and tie it by the foot to a stool near a wire net. The other pigeons would see the fluttering and be lured into the net. This gave rise to the name 'stool pigeon' for one who unofficially acts as a spy for the police."

Or how about the word "garbled"? This word actually means, "to sift and sort out something that is all mixed up. It began in London over 150 years ago when the city appointed inspectors, called 'garblers,' to see that spices and drugs were not mixed up."

And then there is "the real McCoy": "This expression alludes to a boxer in the 1890's

known as Kid McCoy. So many people imitated McCoy's style that boxing enthusiasts became angry and raised the cry that they wanted 'The Real McCoy' and not just some imitator."

And, finally, the wonderful "getting into a scrape." This expression actually means, "falling into a pit." It originated in England, "where holes that deer dig at certain seasons of the year are called 'scrapes.' Pedestrians who frequently fall into these pits were referred to as 'getting into a scrape.'"