

The Origin of Selected Clichés
Athenaeum Presentation by Jim Selbe
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Mr. President, Mr. Secretary, Athenaeum Society Members and Honored Guests,

The great challenge I discovered in preparing for this evening is not researching a topic, or being fearful of being judged by respected peers, nor is it the uneasy anticipation of having to unveil your virgin effort at the annual open meeting of the Athenaeum Society, the challenge is settling on a topic and actually getting started. I wish I could accurately recall the number of topics that were considered and discarded, I don't have the figure but it is significant. Among those considered and cast aside, the one I most wanted to do, and some day may tackle is based upon the question, "As compared to those of us who are transplants and moved to Hopkinsville by choice, why do **native** Hopkinsvillians hate Hopkinsville so much?"

Over the past five years I have asked more than two dozen individuals who are not originally from here, "What is your perception of the attitude of Hopkinsville natives toward our fair city?" Quite interestingly, to a person, they comment on the extreme amount of negativity voiced about Hoptown.

While a resident of Paducah, we held Hopkinsville in relatively high esteem in part based upon the workforce opportunities that exist here as compared to McCracken County where there are so few. Once I moved to Hopkinsville I soon became dismayed at the pervasive general "we can't stand this place" attitude, complaining, and the habitual whining which appears to be deeply embedded in the local culture. I have found this phenomenon intriguing and would really like to know more about that.

I met with two different researchers and discussed what would be necessary to investigate this perception in a legitimate, research-based manner and decided that right now life is simply too busy to tackle the question. If, however, you have ideas about this I would love to hear them. I am hopeful that in reality it is merely a predisposition that is tied to the adage, “I can talk bad about my Momma all I want, but you do it and we are gonna fight” mentality. My hope is that in reality everyone really loves Hopkinsville but in some sort of morbid and sadistic endearment we express it in the form of displeasure. Admittedly, I am not convinced that to be the case.

As I transitioned from the various topic to topic options, I kept coming back to one in particular, and that revolves around the use of the English language. Having always been a fan of puns, I have always enjoyed learning about our language and colloquialisms. Especially in the discovering of hidden meanings or paradoxes based in the obfuscation presented by American’s who create new words at a pace that requires annual dictionary updates to add in words and phrases.

Also, think about how the meanings of words and phrases have changed over time. For instance, consider the word “nice”. You know what it means when someone is described as nice. But did you know that word nice comes from the Latin and meant ‘not to know’? Originally a ‘nice person’ was someone who was ignorant or unaware. Or consider the word “awful”. Originally, this meant ‘full of awe’ i.e. something wonderful, delightful, or amazing. However, over time it has evolved to mean exactly the opposite.

A more recent example, one that has evolved in our lifetime would be the word “gay”. “Gay” has come to have a very different meaning from its original use. My father-in-law was raised by his grandfather, a man who he held in the highest esteem and from whom he borrowed the family name. You see his grandfather was named Ben Gay. Really that was his name. Out

of deep respect for his grandfather, he named my wife Lisa Gay and her sister is Lora Gay. To this day, my father-in-law is unhappy with the new connotations that are being given to the time-honored family name.

How much do we really know about our language? I love being introduced to words or phrases that either I have not seen and most certainly don't understand their meanings. I have also considered how often we use fairly common clichés but most have no knowledge of their origins. It is the latter that I want to explore this evening, the historical origin of some of our best-known and most common clichés.

So that we fully understand what I mean by cliché we will use the following definition. A cliché is a trite or overused expression or idea which sometimes has been overused to the point of losing its original meaning or effect. My interest was in trying to see if I could determine where the cliché originated and what did it mean at the time.

When you undertake research on the origin of common clichés you immediately come to realize a couple of significant things, first there is a treasure trove of information on the topic and second, conflicting information on the various cliché origins is plentiful. Therefore, the cliché examples I have selected for this evening is absolutely open to discussion, dispute, argument and even second-guessing. I have relied on a number of sources that seem credible but even they contradict one another from time to time. Therefore when in doubt I selected the historical description that I found to be the most interesting or irritating as the case might be. For example, consider the possible explanations for the cliché, **it's my way or the highway**.

By definition "it's my way or the highway" is to say that if people don't do what you say, they will have to leave or quit the project, be fired, etc. According to most sources, the cliché seems to have originated in the United States. Basketball Coach Dean Smith in his book, *The*

Carolina Way referenced use of the phrase by coaches when he was a player in the 1950s. Smith believes that the phrase originated with the legendary coach Vince Lombardi. But there are other possible explanations.

It is known that the cliché became popular under former Detroit Tigers baseball coach Sparky Anderson. The Tigers had some unique pitchers prior to Anderson's arrival, namely Mark "The Bird" Fidrych and Dave Rozema two guys who were incredibly talented but well known for being flakes. When Anderson took over the Tigers in 1979 he was asked how he would be exerting his authority; "what if the young pitchers rebel? Sparky said, "I told them there's my way and the highway." The reporters asked, what "highway"? Anderson said, "That's the highway to Evansville, and it's a long road." Evansville was Detroit's farm club in the American Association. Does this help to provide a plausible history for the cliché? We could only say maybe. Consider this.

My favorite explanation for the cliché "my way or highway" comes from Dr. Paul Muchinsky, a distinguished professor of business at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Muchinsky offers this origin. He writes, "Every year the ancient town of Lochlassie, Scotland celebrates a high holy day. The day marks the slaying of a dragon that threatened the city with destruction thousands of years ago. The day is celebrated by a formal gathering that features high dances, high tea, and the eating of two special high dishes, curds and whey. Curds and whey are both dairy products and are used in the making of cheese. Over the years the locals came to agree on a single recipe for making curds, but there are two recipes for making whey. Most of the townspeople prefer the more modern recipe for making whey that is lower in cholesterol. The old, high recipe, for making whey has been used since antiquity. The responsibility for preparing the curds and whey fell to Elsie MacTavish and Maggie McGuinness.

Elsie had been preparing the celebratory food for over 50 years. Maggie is learning the craft of food preparation from Elsie, as one day Maggie will assume Elsie's role in this time-honored tradition. Over time, Elsie has developed her own distinctive recipe for whey that is enjoyed by most townspeople. Yet, she is sensitive to the old high recipe for whey that has been used for centuries. Elsie and Maggie debated at great length as to which recipe they would follow. Elsie was indifferent as to which recipe she would follow as she wanted to defer to young Maggie's preference. However, Maggie was very uncertain and couldn't decide between Elsie's recipe and the high recipe. Elsie grew impatient with Maggie's indecision and finally said, "Make up your mind, Maggie. Either it's my whey or the high whey."

I loved the explanation but is it accurate? Unfortunately, I have been unable to find confirmation of Dr. Muchinsky's story, to find a town named Lochlassie in Scotland, and then there is the whole dragon slaying celebration thing. I have discovered that the study of the origin of clichés is replete with potential myths and pitfalls.

Consider the cliché "**It's a gas**", which we know means that something is great fun. I asked my early 20's son if he had heard the phrase "it's a gas" of which he had not. Being a huge fan of the immortal Maynard G. Krebs I recall the cliché very well.

According to the Oxford English Dictionary "a gas" was a joke in Anglo-Irish slang. James Joyce uses it in *Dubliners*, published in 1914. By the 1950s in the US, it had taken on the meaning of anything that is pleasing or exciting.

It is interesting to note however that most believe that the phrase relates to an invention of the great scientist Humphrey Davy. You see in 1799 Davy introduced nitrous oxide to the public (primarily the British upper class) as a recreational drug at "laughing gas parties" and it was some 36 years later before it was actually used medically. Davy noted that some people, in a

state of induced euphoria by the gas, got the giggles, erupted in laughter, felt stuporous, dreamy and sedated. At Davy's parties, the audience was amused by watching the user's "nitrous oxide capers," which included stumbling around, slurred speech and falling down - thus earning its nickname, "laughing gas." So the next time you hear Mick Jagger crooning about Jumpin' Jack Flash remember it's the gas, gas, gas.

Question, have any of you ever been "**In like Flynn**"? One of the more widely understood clichés, "in like Flynn" means to be accepted by the group without question, to have a sure thing. But who was Flynn and where did it originate? As you might guess it relates to the wildly popular Errol Flynn who was a phenomenally successful movie star of the 30's and 40's. His defining role was in "The Adventures of Robin Hood." Other notable roles include: "Captain Blood", "They Died with Their Boots On", and "The Sun Also Rises."

But did you know that the meaning of the cliché "in like Flynn" relates to his acquittal on statutory rape charges. Flynn was involved in a sensational trial, in which he was accused of having sex with two underage girls on a boat. When Flynn was found not guilty, the phrase "in like Flynn" became a part of the popular vocabulary. The phrase suggests that his acquittal was based on his popularity and celebrity. Thus, if you were sure to get some action, you too were going to be "in like Flynn."

Now before you run out and get in trouble like Flynn, you need to learn what happens when you go out raising Cain. You ask, "Before we do what? Go out raising Cain of course. What does it mean to raise Cain and where did the phrase originate? In the US, one raises Cain when he causes a disturbance, or perhaps when one becomes angry and loses his temper. It could be exemplified in something as innocently as inappropriately moralizing or bringing religious beliefs into an Athenaeum presentation leading to chastisement, or conversely making

too many references to a scrotum mascot which sets off an avalanche of degenerate puns. But then I digress, guests consult your Athenaeum host for details on the trip home or simply gaze upon Chris Gilkey for a visual image of Scrotie.

I debated whether I should actually lower myself to reference Gilkey in this presentation and started to “**get cold feet**”. I reconsidered and recalled that I got not one but two shout-outs from him last month and decided to go for it. Shout-outs, go for it, cold feet, clichés abound...I recall another time in my life when I got cold feet. Fortunately it was moments prior to the playing of the wedding march and it was too late to back out.

Cold feet, is the notion of being timid, or to back off from some undertaking. The expression is linked to the early seventeenth century and was an Italian proverb that meant to have no money. The source of its more recent meaning remains obscure. Some believe it comes from the soldiers retreating in battle because their feet are frozen. Another source cites a German novel in 1862 in which a card player withdraws from a game because he claims his feet are cold. Though no one knows for certain, most believe that the original cliché was both literal and descriptive.

While working on this topic I discovered repeatedly that it was difficult to not get “**The cart before the horse**”. As the cliché instructs, don’t reverse the natural order of things. In approximately 75 B.C. Cicero accused Homer of doing just that complaining that the Greek poet stated the moral of a story before the story. A derivative can be found in a French treatise authored in 1279 by Laurentis Gallus. Gallus complained, “Many religious folks set the plow before the oxen.”

From the 1500s on, numerous English writers including Sir Thomas More, William Shakespeare, and Charles Kingsley to name a few used this phrase which appears in Greek, Latin, French, German and Italian. In English it was an established cliché by the 1700s.

For some here in Kentucky “getting the cart before the horse” might take on a special meaning. Some coal mine tunnels were cut so that the tracks for a coal cart allowed the cart to be lowered down into the tunnel by gravity with the horse tied to, and trailing the cart. Literally, they put the cart before the horse. Once the cart was filled the order was then reversed and the horse would pull the cart up out of the tunnel and also would keep the cart from rolling back into the tunnel.

As we progress on a study of clichés it becomes increasingly difficult to “**cut to the chase**”, an imperative that comes from the film industry of the 1920s which meant to edit or cut the film to an exciting sequence, but I must stop “**beating around the bush**”.

As I considered it, I realized that I knew **neither** what it meant to “beat around the bush” **nor** where the phrase originated. Originally, the phrase alluded to the sport of bat-fowling. I am pretty sure that bat-fowling was never practiced as an American sport. Bat-fowling is an archaic method of catching birds at night while they are roosting. It involved lighting straw or torches near their roost. After waking them out of their roost, the birds would fly toward the flames, where, being amazed, they are easily caught in nets, or beaten with bats. The early sixteenth century phrase "beating about the bush" is said to be derived from this practice as the trapper's accomplices would go around the bushes to disturb the birds.

The phrase is old and first appears in the medieval poem titled Generydes (Jen-er-rides) – Generydes is a Romance in Seven-line Stanzas, circa 1440. One stanza reads.

Butt as it hath be sayde full long agoo,
Some bete the bussh and some the byrdes take.

The poem is anonymous and exists only as a single handwritten manuscript in the library of Trinity College, at Cambridge. The early printed versions have all disappeared. Even at that early date the author's implication was clear that 'beting the bussh' was considered a poor substitute for getting on with it and 'taking the byrdes'. If it really was said 'full long agoo' in the fifteenth century then the English 'beat **about** the bush' must be one of the oldest non-biblical phrases in the language. The earliest version that I can find that adds the word '**about**' to 'beat the bush' are included in George Gascoigne's (Gas-coins) Works of 1572: "He bet about the bush, whyles other caught the birds."

I had to wonder though if they beat the birds with a bat would we say that they beat the tar out of them? I don't think so. I know what it means when something, or worse someone, has the tar beat out of them. Like many of you, I was on the wrong end of some of those rebukes. As a parent, I may have even been the initiator of such a colorfully imaged activity and yet I never remember seeing any tar. Researching the notion of beatings in cliché lore I quickly discovered there are numerous thrashing related clichés. We have the option to beat one's brains out, beat one's head against the wall, beat them to the punch, or even beat the living daylights out of them. Let's notice just two of these.

The notion of **beating the tar** out of something or someone has its origin in the US with no earlier record than the twentieth century. It is believed that the phrase may have been carried to this country by some Scottish or north of England sheepherder who may have used the phrase in a literal sense. Centuries ago it was learned that a sore on a sheep, from say an accidental cut in shearing, could be protected from the biting of flies if it was smeared with tar. In fact, in

1670, a proverb is recorded by John Ray when he wrote, “Ne’re lose a hog (later a sheep) for a half penny worth of tarre.” But when the tar becomes embedded into a sheep’s wool, its removal is very difficult. To remove the tar it became necessary to beat the sheep’s side. Hence they beat the tar out of it.

Maybe you have never had the tar beaten out of you, but have you ever had **the living daylights beat out of you**? This American locution dates to about 1900. The word “daylights” was a nineteenth century American colloquialism for one’s vital organs. One American author referred to pulling out a mule’s daylights by beating it. The expression “I’ll make daylight shine through you” is recorded in America as early as 1774 and may be an earlier form of the cliché. While we are on this genre, Shakespeare described beating something or someone black and blue. What is it with so many clichés on this topic? Beats me! Speaking of Shakespeare, one high school student was quoted as having said that he didn’t understand how Shakespeare got famous because “all he did was string clichés together.”

The use of clichés in formal papers has been frequently criticized by most experts and often serves to **get the goat** of English teachers.

Okay, the cliché to get one’s goat, meaning to annoy someone or to make a person lose his or her temper. The background for the cliché has to do with horse racing. It was at this meeting last year that Dr. Dougherty gave an excellent presentation on horse racing, but Doc I was unaware of the important role that goats have played in the horse racing world.

High-strung racehorses often have goats as stable mates, on the theory that the goats have a calming effect on the thoroughbreds. But the horses tend to grow attached to their companions and become quite upset when they are removed, throwing off their performance on the track. It is said that nineteenth century gamblers capitalized on the fact by stealing the goat on the day

preceding the race from a horse they wanted to lose. This practice gave us the phrase, “to get one’s goat”. While the explanation seems as good as any, quite frankly there is not much supporting evidence to the claim.

Jack London was the first to record the expression “get one’s goat” in his novel *Smoke Bellew* in 1912 though it had nothing to do with horse racing. Attempts have been made to connect the goat in the phrase with the scapegoat of Hebrew traditions; to tie it to the word “goad” meaning to anger or irritate, and to a very old sixteenth century French phrase that when literally translated it meant “to take the goat.” If that is the case, it surely took a long time for the phrase to make it to the United States.

The study of clichés could go on endlessly which in doing so instead of having the desired outcome, might make you crazy like fox, so let me make a long story short. This topic may simply not be your cup of tea, so I want to leave well enough alone, because we all know you can lead a horse to water but you cannot make him drink. If, however, you are chomping at the bit to know more, this is just the tip of the iceberg. If you are a glutton for punishment I can help you jump on the bandwagon. In order to research clichés, well you would need to put your shoulder to the wheel, and keep your nose to the grindstone, knowing that at times we don’t know where the road leads. Just when you think you see the light at the end of the tunnel, be aware, and know that some explanations defy all odds, because you see they seem to cut both ways.

So let’s get down to brass tacks, when questioned about the origin of clichés you may need to be as sly as fox, and cut to the chase by admitting **what you simply don’t know**, which by the way can cover a multitude of sins. It always easier to get out while the goings good. Don’t let **not** having an answer force to get up on the wrong side of the bed. Not knowing is not

all bad and there is no reason to cry over spilled milk, because the answers are not always cut and dried. Don't go off all half-cocked, instead keep your nose clean, cross your fingers, keep your ear to the ground, your mouth shut, keep it under your hat, and mums the word. Remember to keep your head above water and it will all work itself out. There is a point at which you must keep a stiff upper lip, and leave well enough alone because some circumstances are out of your control. Instead of trying to pull the wool over someone's eyes, just clear the air, put your best foot forward, pull yourself up by your boot straps, and pull yourself together Man! The bottom line is that we should just nip this in the bud. Often, even the truth just doesn't matter, it's neither here nor there. It goes without saying that most folks need this information like they need a hole in the head. **And** last but not least, listen I want to make you an offer you cannot refuse, you can hold your head high, and take it to the cleaners or to the bank if you prefer. If you don't understand much about clichés it is absolutely okay. Just remember that Will Rogers once said, "Everybody is ignorant just on different subjects." So don't go against the grain, and give up the ghost, but instead take it to heart and recognize this promise. If the good Lord is willing, and the creek don't rise, the sun will come out tomorrow, we will rise and shine and realize that any day above ground is a good day. Thank you and **may God bless**.