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IN AGRICULTURE AND HOME ECONOMICS
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SUPERSTITIONS AND THEIR ORIGIN

Many of our superstitious beliefs and practices originated long, long ago and it is interesting to trace back through the years to find the origin of some of the common ones. The origin of most of them is no doubt to be found in man's effort to explain the phenomena of nature and in an attempt to appease an angry deity and to invite a better fortune. From these sources come many of the absurd notions still practiced among primitive people and which have been handed down in modified form to us.

Man has ever found it difficult to understand the mysteries surrounding him on all sides and groping in the dark he has tried by prayer, incantation, or peculiar practices to force nature to do his bidding.

Superstition, therefore, arises primarily from ignorance. Early man believed that every phenomenon of nature was the work of a spirit or devil. His intelligence could not suggest any other explanation. To this belief was added fear. The thunder, the lightning, the earth quake and darkness, all filled him with fearful dread. To him they were the workings of spiteful powers to be propitiated. Where ignorance and fear are surrounded by danger they will always grope for a way of escape. Thus superstition is born. A belief in the existence of spirits antagonistic to man gave rise to most of the old superstitions.

In Egypt, Greece and Rome superstition gave birth to mythology with its pagan rites and ceremonies. During the Dark and Middle Ages when people were for the most part illiterate, superstition flourished.

From Eichler's "Customs of Mankind" we have some interesting bits of history about some of our popular superstitions.

"Fear of the unknown and dread of the evil eye led early man to avoid whatever seemed, to his superstitious mind, an omen of bad luck. He saw signs of warning in the simplest of evil and hence something to be shunned.

"Some of the early superstitions, originally concerned with the evil eye and with customs for banishing or destroying its influence, have survived and are still observed. The survivals have taken the form of bad luck omens such as the black cat, the spilling of salt, the number thirteen, and so forth. And, of course, there are methods for overcoming the bad luck promised by these omens, as casting a pinch of the salt over the shoulder, or whispering a benediction after the sneeze.

The Unlucky Number Thirteen

"Precisely how this superstition originated no one knows. In Scandinavian mythology there are twelve Aesir or Demi-gods, and the old legend is that Loki came among them making the thirteenth. This Loki was cruel and evil, according to the story, and among the Demi-gods he became 'The chief author of human misfortunes.' Because he was evil, and because he was the thirteenth, the number thirteen came to be looked upon as an omen of ill luck."

It is also said when men of the stone age began counting and falling under the spell of numbers, they began to use tallies. They wondered at the triangularity of three and the squareness of four, and why some quantities like twelve were easy to divide in all sorts of ways, and others, like thirteen, impossible. Twelve became a noble, generous and familiar number to them, and thirteen rather an outcast and disreputable one.

Outcast it has remained ever since! One of the most widespread of superstitious notions is that thirteen is unlucky, and so general is this notion that many hotels do not have a room number thirteen.

Another explanation as to the origin of this superstition is that the Valkyrs, or virgins, who waited upon the heroes in Valhalla were thirteen in number. Many writers believe that from this source sprang the common superstition concerning the bad luck of the number thirteen, especially in connection with guests at a table.

The most popular explanation, however, is that there were thirteen persons at the Last Supper, Judas being frequently represented as the thirteenth guest. Not a few authorities offer this as the true origin of the superstition, although this writer is inclined to believe that the notion goes back much farther.

The superstition regarding the number thirteen is universal. We find it in France, England, throughout practically the whole of Europe, and in America. It has long been a matter of etiquette in France to avoid having exactly thirteen guests at a dinner party.

The number thirteen is also associated with the fee of thirteen pence which the hangman was paid for each execution. The payment actually made was thirteen and one-half pence, but the half penny was regarded as the price of the rope.

Other Superstitions About Numbers

The familiar saying "There's luck in odd numbers", lingers in song and story. Odd numbers or combinations of odd numbers are almost invariably chosen in buying lottery tickets. Moreover, they have received a high official sanction for a long time. In the "Art of Navigation", printed in the year 1705, the following rule is laid down for firing salutes by ships of the royal navy: "To salute with an odd number of guns, the which are to be answered with fit correspondence. The number of odd guns is so punctually observed that whenever they are given even 'tis received for an infallible sign that either the captain or some noted officer is dead in the voyage."

The above rule or custom has held good to this day. In the United States the prescribed salute to the President is twenty-one guns, seventeen to the Vice President and so on in descending scale, according to rank, in the several branches of the civil, military, and naval service. Medicines are often taken an odd number of times, though not invariably as they once were. A hen is always set on an odd number of eggs and it seems to be custom rather than any particular reason for it.

In the course of the ages many numerals have come to have supernatural significance ascribed to them. But, there can be no question about the fact, that of them all, three, seven and nine stand pre-eminent.

Every nation had its lucky and unlucky numbers that occur in their mythology and history. The Greeks believed in the sacredness of the number nine. They had nine muses, nine principal deities, nine oracles, and so forth. The Romans believed in the mystic three, the Egyptians in twelve and the Jews revered the number seven.

The number nine was used by primitive people both to cause and to cure illness. For example, during the middle ages Englishmen used to cure a sty by taking the hair from the tail of a black tom cat and applying it nine times to the eye of the patient. It is important to remember that this ceremony was effective only in the event that it was performed on the first night of the new moon.

There may have been several reasons why nine commended itself to human beings in prehistoric days as a mystic numeral. In the first place it is the product of threes. The sanctity of three has been recognized in all ages and among practically all people. Many Gods hold in their hands small objects in three parts, or else they extend three fingers aloft while folding two into the palm of the divine hand. The mystic hand of Buddha, which is used as an amulet in the Far East, is quite unlike the ordinary human hand. The thumb and little finger are exactly alike and curve outwards. The whole hand is symmetrical, showing the three middle fingers flanked on each side by a smaller one.

The number seven appears also to have been regarded with superstitious awe by early peoples, although it was considered lucky by as many as considered it unlucky.

One writer says: "It is hard to escape the conclusion that magic has something to do with the constant recurrence of the number seven in antiquity. We have the seven caves of the Aztecs, the seven ecstasies of Zoroaster, the seventh-day Sabbath, the seven days of the week, the seven golden candlesticks of Solomon's temple.

"Seven was a sacred number among the Acadians, Assyrians and Babylonians. The 'unlucky days' of the 'Farmers' Almanac' are based upon this ancient cult.

"Among various early peoples, the seventh son of a seventh son was believed gifted with supernatural powers. When such an infant was born, the nurse placed a worm in each of its hands, enclosed in a bit of muslin. The hands were tied up until the worms died, and then the tiny fists were allowed to open. The dead worms were thrown away, but it was believed that locked up in the child's hands were miraculous powers of healing and protecting. When the boy grew to manhood he was regarded as a wizard.

"There are still many people who believe that the number seven portends good luck, just as the number thirteen portends ill luck."

Unlucky Days and Seasons

"The belief in lucky and unlucky days is very ancient. This belief appears to have been taught first by the magicians of ancient Chaldea, and history tells us that similar beliefs affected almost every detail of primitive life in Babylonia. The natives of Madagascar have since the earliest times believed in lucky and unlucky days of birth, and if a child is born on what they consider an unlucky day, it is killed.

"The poet Hesiod who, it is believed, lived about 1000 B.C., distinguished lucky days from others in his poem called 'Works and Days'. He declared that the thirteenth day was unlucky for sowing, but favorable for planting.

"Among many early peoples we find the superstitious belief that it is best to sow one's seed at the full of the moon. Among others we find the belief that it is best to gather in the harvest when the moon is full mellow. Still others regard the crescent moon as a fortunate omen. In South Africa it is to this day considered unlucky to begin a journey or undertake a work of importance during the last quarter of the moon.

"The Romans marked their lucky days with a piece of chalk, their unlucky days with charcoal. From this custom of marking unlucky days with charcoal arose the phrase 'Black-letter day'. We still refer to 'black-letter days', but with us, instead of portending evil, the 'black-letter day' is a day remembered with regret because of some unfortunate occurrence connected with it.

"'Blue Monday' is a very old phrase still in general usage. In early days those whose affairs of business occupied them on Sunday were considered entitled to a holiday on Monday. On Monday, therefore, while others were busy at their tasks, these people who worked on Sunday had a day of rest, during which they usually lazed rather than indulged in any pleasures. Because the churches throughout Europe were decorated with blue on the first Monday before Lent -- which was a holiday or 'lazy day' for everyone -- this day of rest for the Sunday workers came to be known as 'Blue Monday'."

"We still use the phrase, but its meaning has become somewhat modified. We now speak of a 'Blue Monday' when we wish to convey the thought that we are lazy, tired, melancholy -- in need of, rather than enjoying, a holiday.

"The fear of Friday is quite as old as the fear of the number thirteen. An ancient proverb says:

Friday's moon
Come when it will, it comes too soon.

"The origin of the superstition concerning Friday is traced by most authorities to the crucifixion of Christ on that day. But there are some writers who advance the theory that Friday is regarded as an unlucky day because it was on Friday that Adam and Eve partook of the forbidden fruit. It is probably that this popular old legend gave rise to the superstitious notions concerning Friday."

Friday was the festival day of the goddess Freya. The ill luck, which by popular superstition is still ascribed to projects or journeys undertaken on Friday, is traceable to the fact that it was originally regarded as sacred to the goddess whose honor was held to be disregarded by all who followed their own pursuits instead of worshipping her. On such people she was supposed to bring ill fortune. The superstition has remained after the explanation was forgotten.

There is a widely prevalent story told in different ways and in different places, about the ship that was built on Friday to put an end to the superstition and which foundered on its first voyage.

"Although we are still accustomed to refer to Friday as an unlucky day, it would seem that we, in the United States should regard it as a particularly lucky

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day. It was on a Friday, August 3, 1492 that Columbus set sail from the Port of Palos, Spain, on his great voyage of discovery. It was on a Friday, October 12th that land was sighted. On Friday, November 10, 1620 the Mayflower reached the harbour of Provincetown, and on Friday, December 22, 1620, the Plymouth fathers landed upon the famous Plymouth Rock. A century later on a Friday, February 22, 1732, George Washington was born. It would seem that all good things happened to young America on the traditional bad-luck day!

"One of the most common of modern superstitions is that to break a mirror invites death, or seven years of bad luck.

"Since very early times the mirror has been used in attempts to read the future or the past. In ancient Greece divination performed by means of water and a mirror was so popular and so widely practiced that it was given a definite name -- 'catoptomancy'. There are still seers and fortune tellers who 'see' the past and the future in crystals and mirrors.

"An early belief was that one saw the will of the gods in the mirror. To break a mirror accidentally, therefore, was interpreted as an effort on the part of the gods to prevent the person from seeing into the future. This was construed as a warning that the future held unpleasant things. Among highly superstitious people the breaking of a mirror came to be looked upon as a death omen. Somehow this superstitious belief has prevailed and still exists even among educated people.

"It is related of Napoleon that on one occasion when he was campaigning in Italy he broke accidentally a mirror which hung over Josephine's portrait. Instantly he conceived the superstitious notion that she had died, and he couldn't rest until he returned home and saw for himself that she was well and alive. Superstition sometimes clouds even a brilliant mind.

"The curious notion that to break a mirror brings seven years of bad luck originated with the Romans about the first century of the Christian Era. They believed that the health of a person changed every seven years, and as the mirror reflected the health, or appearance, of the person, to break it meant to break the health for a period of seven years. Hence the belief in seven years of bad luck.

"There are many people who believe a falling window blind a bad omen -- usually a forewarning of death in the house. We can readily understand how a window blind, falling suddenly and for apparently no reason, would strike terror into the hearts of superstitious people. Early man, keen as an animal trained to the jungle, could sense the slightest rustle near his cave, the faintest approach of beast or man. Fear of enemies made man sensitive to every sound, alert, fearful. As he slowly developed man lost much of his keenness, but he has never lost entirely his fear of unexplained sounds, of rustlings and noises that seem to come from nowhere. A blind falling suddenly and noisily in an empty room makes the bravest person tense and alert for a moment. We can understand how superstitious people would have accepted this falling blind as an omen of ill luck -- of death. The superstition, like many others, has survived and is a part of modern life.

Some Food Origins

"It is said that coffee was discovered by the Shiek Omar, though whether the tale is authentic or not is still in doubt. The story is that the Sheik, starving in the desert, found some bitter berries growing on a shrub. He tried to improve their taste by roasting them, but he found to his surprise that they became

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very hard. To soften them he dropped them into boiling water, but they would not become soft again. The liquid he noticed, became dark in colour. Finally, in desperation, the Sheik drank the liquid, and so discovered coffee.

"According to Lamb ('A Dissertation on Roast Pig') the custom of roasting food to improve its flavour originated by accident. Bo-bo, a Chinese boy, burned down his father's hut. As he was digging among the embers, his fingers came in contact with a pig which had been roasted in the conflagration. He put his burned fingers in his mouth to cool them and tasted -- for the first time -- crackling.

"Of course, this is just a myth made popular by Lamb. The true story of the origin of roasting or cooking food goes back very much farther. It is very possible that man discovered the value of 'putting food through fire' when he began to make animal sacrifices to the deities. We can imagine a tribe of primitive men frightened by a great storm, or a drought, or some other calamity. Believing that in some way they have angered the deities of their tribe, they decide to sooth their ruffled feelings by making gift offerings in the form of food.

"To leave the food on a scaffold or on the ground would be unsafe. The prowling animals would get it before the gods. Therefore they conceived the idea of burning the food so that its fragrant smoke would rise up to the sky and delight the nostrils of the deities.

"But the burning food delighted the nostrils of mere mortals too! An so we find man cooking his own food, roasting in the fire the meats he had formerly eaten raw.

"Some day someone may write a book on the meanings and origins of our words for various foods -- bread, coffee, cake, potatoes, meat, carrots, onions. Behind each name there is a long history and an interesting origin. To give but one example, let us choose the word 'halibut'. In the good old Saxon days a fish was called a 'but'. Taken into the German language, the word came to be 'Butte'. In England, at a later date, the word 'halibut' was originated, meaning 'holy fish', that is, fish that is eaten as a holiday dish on feast days. The halibut is still a special holiday fish in England.

"Frequently we hear the expression 'to roast' a person. A scolding is spoken of as a 'Roasting'. This is a relic of cannibalism when human beings actually were roasted for food. Thus among the Samoans, who at one time practiced cannibalism, to speak of 'roasting' a person is the very worst language that can be used. It carries with it a grim significance. We have borrowed the phrase, have given it a place in our vocabulary of slang, and use it to indicate scolding.

Pin Money

"For a long time after the invention of pins, in the early 14th century, makers were allowed to sell them only on the first and second of January. The reason for this regulation was that women, delighted with the novelty and the usefulness of the pins, spent money intended for household purposes to secure them. They were extremely expensive, and only the wealthy could really afford them, but everyone bought. Therefore the regulation became necessary, and the custom originated of placing aside a bit of money every now and then so that one would have a sufficient amount to buy pins on January first and second. This money came to be known as 'pin money'.

"The phrase has remained, and even we frequently refer to small amounts of money, intended for trifles, as 'pin money'."

Signs of Good and Bad Luck

There is a long list of things closely associated in the popular mind with good or bad luck, or what one may do to obtain the favors or turn aside the frowns of fortune. The lucky horse shoe, the four leaf clover, seeing the new moon over the right shoulder and the wish bone are all symbols of good luck. The horse shoe seems to be the favorite symbol of good luck the world over. Although the iron of which the shoe is fashioned is no longer endowed with magic power as it once was, no sooner has it been beaten into the form of a shoe than presto, it becomes a power to conjure with. Popular opinion decrees that the shoe be placed with the prongs upward, or its virtue will be lost. It must, moreover, be a cast off shoe, or the charm will not work. It has been used as a trade mark with manufacturers and dealers in all sorts of wares. It is elaborately worked up in gold and silver charms for those who would rather be lucky than not, regardless of the original dictum that to be serviceable the shoe must be made of iron and nothing else.

The horseshoe was always the favorite emblem of the tavern and inn in all countries. Such signs as the three horseshoes once swung in Boston streets. It is not uncommon to see horseshoes hung over house and barn doors and one person even reports having seen one nailed to a bedstead.

The origin of this superstition is involved in the obscurity of past ages. It is usually attributed to the virtue of cold iron to keep witches out through their inability to step over it and is probably allied to that other superstition about driving of iron nails into the walls of Roman houses with a like object. The conjunction, so essential to perfect the charm, between iron in any form and the horse is said to have come from the magical properties attributed to the animal by the ancients in whose mythology the horse always plays an important part. King Richard offers his kingdom for a horse and Poor Richard in the Almanac tells us how a man lost his life for want of a nail in his horse's shoe. Reference is made in various places of evil spirits being chased away by dint "of sickle, horse shoe, hollow flint." In an old fable the witch laments "Straws laid across my path retard; the horse shoes nailed each threshold's guard."

Reasoning people recognize these numerous symbols of good luck as bits of superstitious nonsense. America being a new world has kept herself free from many of the old superstitions yet some of our customs here in America are tinged by primitive belief. Thus superstitions originating in the fear and ignorance of primitive man have found their way into all countries and among all people.

(By Helen Rocke, State Extension Agent, Clothing)
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