

How did that get started?

by Kay Zickefoose

Has anyone ever said to you that you *can't have your cake and eat it too*? Or, how about *He's barking up the wrong tree*? Ever wonder what those common quirky phrases mean or where they originated? We decided to take a look.

You can't have your cake and eat it too dates back at least to a book by John Heywood in the 1500s, meaning "you can't have it both ways." He is quoted as saying, "Would you both eat your cake and have your cake?" In other words, if you eat your cake, you will no longer have it.

Barking up the wrong tree is said to have originated with hunting dogs who chase an animal, such as a raccoon, up a tree. The animal escapes and the dogs continue to bark at said tree. So, if you're *barking up the wrong tree*, you are pursuing a totally incorrect assumption.

People say *that's a feather in your cap* when you accomplish something good. This is said to have originated with knights who were awarded plumes for their helmets for exhibiting bravery. American Indians also earned feathers for their headdresses for successful battlefield deeds.

When you make peace with another person, this is sometimes referred to as *burying the hatchet*. There is a Native American origin for this. When two tribes decided to settle their differences and live in harmony, the chief of each tribe buried a war hatchet in the ground to symbolize their agreement.

Being caught red-handed (or *caught in the act*) derives from criminals in 15th century Scotland — murderers caught with bloody hands.

What about someone being *happy as a lark* (or *happy as a clam*)? Are larks happier than other birds, and how

can you tell if a clam is happy? These two sayings are murkier but refer to being happy and carefree. Larks' songs are melodious, and clams can only be dug at low tide—presumably a safer time for both the digger and the clams!

How did the phrase *mad as a hatter* come to be? This one actually comes from Mad Hatter Disease (mercury poisoning) during the 19th century when hat makers used mercury to make felt hats. They worked in small spaces and became quite ill from the fumes.

How did *it's raining cats and dogs* come to be? It's claimed that in 16th century England, houses had thatched roofs and they were among the few places that animals could sleep to stay warm in the winter. However, when it rained hard, cats and dogs would slip off the roofs — making it appear that it was raining cats and dogs.

And if you're procrastinating about performing a difficult or unpleasant task, you can *bite the bullet* to get it done. This saying comes directly from the battlefield when there was no time to administer anesthesia. Soldiers literally had to bite the bullet as they were being treated.

So keep expressing away, perhaps with a little more understanding of where these phrases originated. You may want to investigate other idioms common to your family...or often heard in your *neck of the woods!*

