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## Words and Their Stories: Chickenfeed

I'm Susan Clark with WORDS AND THEIR STORIES, a program in Special English on the Voice of America.

Almost every language in the world has a saying that a person can never be too rich.

Americans, like people in other countries, always want more money. One way they express this is by protesting that their jobs do not pay enough. A common expression is, "I am working for chickenfeed." It means working for very little money. The expression probably began because seeds fed to chickens made people think of small change. Small change means metal coins of not much value, like nickels which are worth five cents.

An early use of the word chickenfeed appeared in an American publication in nineteen thirty. It told about a rich man and his son. Word expert Mitford Mathews says it read, "I'll bet neither the kid nor his father ever saw a nickel or a dime. They would not have been interested in such chickenfeed."

Chickenfeed also has another interesting meaning known to history experts and World War Two spies and soldiers.

Spy expert Henry S. A. Becket writes that some German spies working in London during the war also worked for the British. The British government had to make the Germans believe their spies were working. So, British officials gave them mostly false information. It was called chickenfeed.

The same person who protests that he is working for chickenfeed may also say, "I am working for peanuts." She means she is working for a small amount of money.

It is a very different meaning from the main one in the dictionary. That meaning is small nuts that grow on a plant.

No one knows for sure how a word for something to eat also came to mean something very small. But, a peanut is a very small food.

The expression is an old one. Word expert Mitford Mathews says that as early as

eighteen fifty-four, an American publication used the words peanut agitators. That meant political troublemakers who did not have a lot of support.

Another reason for the saying about working for peanuts may be linked to elephants. Think of how elephants are paid for their work in the circus. They receive food, not money. One of the foods they like best is peanuts.

When you add the word gallery to the word peanut you have the name of an area in an American theater. A gallery is a high seating area or balcony above the main floor.

The peanut gallery got its name because it is the part of the theater most distant from where the show takes place. So, peanut gallery tickets usually cost less than other tickets. People pay a small amount of money for them.

(MUSIC)

This Special English program, WORDS AND THEIR STORIES, was written by Jeri Watson. This is Susan Clark.