

Now, the VOA Special English program Words and Their Stories.

Different people have different ways of saying things -- their own special expressions.

Each week we tell about some popular American expressions.

The bag is one of the most simple and useful things in the world. It is a container made of paper or cloth. It has given the world many strange expressions that are not very simple. Some of them are used in the United States today.

One is "bagman." It describes a go-between. The go-between sees to it that money is passed -- often illegally -- from one person to another.

Another widely-used expression is to "let the cat out of the bag." It is used when someone tells something that was supposed to be secret. No one can explain how the cat got *into* the bag. But there is an old story about it...

Long ago tradesmen sold things in large cloth bags. One day a woman asked for a pig. The tradesman held up a cloth bag with something moving inside it. He said it was a live pig. The woman asked to see it. When the dishonest tradesman opened the bag, out jumped a cat -- not a pig. The tradesman's secret was out. He was trying to trick her. And now everybody knew it.

The phrase to be "left holding the bag" is as widely-used as the expression to "let the cat out of the bag."

This expression makes the person left holding the bag responsible for an action -- often a crime or misdeed. That person is the one who is punished. The others involved in the act escape.

Where the expression came from is not clear. Some say that General George Washington used it during the American Revolutionary War.

One of Washington's officers, Royall Taylor, used the expression in a play about Daniel Shay's rebellion. The play was in 1781, after Taylor helped to put down Shay's rebellion.

Shays led a thousand war veterans in an attack on a federal building in Springfield, Massachusetts. Guns were in the building. Some of the protesters were farmers who had no money to buy seed. Some had been put in prison for not paying their debts. They were men who fought one war against the King of England, and were now prepared to fight against their own government. Most of the rebels were captured. Shays and some of the officers escaped.

In his play, Taylor describes Shays as disappearing, giving others “the bag to hold.”

A bag is useful in many ways. Just be careful not to “let the cat out of the bag,” or someone may leave you “holding the bag.”

You have been listening to the VOA Special English program, Words and Their Stories.

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