

Farm Expressions: It's Not Worth a Hill of Beans

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

In the early days of human history, people survived by hunting wild animals or gathering wild grains and plants for food. Then, some people learned to grow crops and raise animals for food. They were the first farmers.

Since the 16th century, the word "farm" has meant agricultural land. But a much older meaning of the word "farm" is linked to economics. The word "farm" comes from the Latin word "firma," which means an unchanging payment.

Experts say the earliest meaning of the English word "farm" was a yearly payment made as a tax or rent.

Farmers in early England did not own their land -- they paid every year to use agricultural lands.

In England, farmers used hawthorn trees along the edges of property. They called this row of hawthorns a "hedge."

Hedging fields was how careful farmers marked and protected them.

Soon, people began to use the word “hedging” to describe steps that could be taken to protect against financial loss.

Hedging is common among gamblers who make large bets. A gambler bets a lot of money on one team. But, to be on the safe side, he also places a smaller bet on the other team to reduce a possible loss.

You might say that someone is “hedging his bet” when he invests in several different kinds of businesses. One business may fail, but likely not all.

Farmers know that it is necessary to “make hay while the sun shines.”

Hay has to be cut and gathered when it is dry. So a wise farmer never postpones gathering his hay when the sun is shining -- rain may soon appear.

A wise person copies the farmer. He works when conditions are right.

A new mother, for example, quickly learns to try to sleep when her baby is quiet -- even in the middle of the day. If the mother delays, she may lose her chance to sleep. So, the mother learns to "make hay while the sun shines."

Beans are a popular farm crop. But beans are used to describe something of very little value in the expression "not worth a hill of beans." The expression is often used today. You could say, for example, that a bad idea "is not worth a hill of beans."

Language expert Charles Earle Funk said the expression was first used almost 700 years ago. He said Robert of Gloucester described a message from the King of Germany to King John of England as "altogether not worth a bean."

This VOA Special English program *Words and Their Stories* was written by Marilyn Rice Christiano. Maurice Joyce was the narrator. I'm Shirley Griffith.



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