

Bigwigs and Chairmen of the Board: American History Reveals the Secrets of Success

Hi again! Nice to have you with us on As It Is. I'm Kelly Jean Kelly.

And I'm Caty Weaver.

Today we are talking about language, and how modern English uses old words. For instance, if we met in a formal situation, you might call us Mrs. Kelly and Mrs. Weaver. But do you know what M-R-S means?

Joan Bines—that is to say, Mrs. Bines—wrote a book explaining where the abbreviation “Mrs.” and other words came from. The book is called “Words They Lived By.” It tells the story of some of the first Europeans to come to what is now the United States.

“They had left everything that they had known and they made this very radical move to come to a country with wild animals, wilder natives, still wilder climate, and set up a life for themselves where they could worship the way they wanted to worship God.”

The Pilgrims settled in today's eastern Massachusetts. Their origins were mostly British, but traditions from Holland and other European countries also influenced them. As a result, Joan Bines says, the Pilgrims already had a rich language. And, when they started lives in the area they called New England, they invented words or changed words to describe their new experiences.

One word the Pilgrims often used was “board.” A board is a flat piece of wood. But it could also be used as a simple table where people could eat, play games and talk. And when they were finished, the board could be cleaned and stored to save space.

Today Americans use several phrases with “board.” For instance, when someone offers room and board, they are offering a place to sleep and at least one meal. “Board” in this case is a synonym for food.

We also say people are “above board” when they are acting correctly and being honest. Joan Bines says the expression may have come from someone keeping his hands on the table where everyone could see them. An “above board” person was probably not carrying a gun or cheating at a card game.

And you have probably heard of a “chairman of the board.” That is the person who leads a corporation or group. Joan Bines says the first colonists did not have very many chairs. Most people sat on benches or stools. But a special guest or respected family member might be invited to sit in a chair at the board. Joan Bines says the chairman of the board meant having a place of honor or authority.

Another theme in the early colonists’ language involved hair.

“I was really impressed with how many people wore wigs and how many expressions did come from that.”

Joan Bines explains that in the 1700s, many men and women of European origins wore wigs. And, starting in about 1710, she says people put powder on them.

Powdering was messy. Joan Bines explains that people covered their shoulders with a cloth, and they held paper over their faces so they did not choke.

As a result, some people had a special room in their house just for fixing their hair. Today, "powder room" is a polite way to say bathroom.

Wigs were also a sign of social status. Joan Bines writes, "The bigger the wig, the more important the wearer; thus the expression 'big wig.'"

Today, a bigwig is someone important or powerful. The magazine "Mental Floss" also notes that bigwig can mean someone who perhaps shows his wealth or power too much.

But what if you could not afford a wig? Joan Bines says some women just shaped their long hair high above their heads. Sometimes they put objects underneath their hair to make it look even bigger. Then they put grease on the style to keep it in place.

Joan Bines includes part of a young woman's diary in her book. In 1771, Anna wrote that she showed her new, special hairstyle to her family. It made her head itch and burn, she said. And she added that one aunt said the style should not be so big. Another aunt said the style should not be worn at all.

Joan Bines explains that when a woman “let her hair down,” she allowed her hair to become soft and natural again—but only in the privacy of her own home.

Today, we might invite someone to “let her hair down” as a way of saying relax, or be yourself.

Of course, many words or expressions the American colonists used did not survive. Joan Bines tells of an example related to a funeral.

One group of early settlers, called Puritans, often left private messages and poems near the dead person’s body. At least one person, Governor Thomas Dudley, wrote a poem for himself before he died!

Joan Bines includes some lines from Mr. Dudley, writing in the mid-1600s. He says,

“My shuttle’s shot, my race is run,
My sun is set, my deed is done,
My span is measur’d, tale is told,
My flower is faded and grown old.
My dream is vanish’d, shadow’s fled,
My soul with Christ, my body dead...”

In his poem, Mr. Dudley advises the living not to permit anyone to break the rules of the church or to act immorally.

Joan Bines says Mr. Dudley and his fellow Puritans might call bad or secret behavior “hugger-mugger.”

Mr. Dudley compares hugger-mugger to an egg that hatches a “cockatrice.” A “cockatrice,” Joan Bines says, was an evil, mythical creature that could kill a person just by looking at her.

We don’t usually use the words “hugger-mugger” and “cockatrice” today, although they are in the dictionary.

And what about that abbreviation M-R-S? Today, we use “Mrs.” as a respectful title for a married woman.

But Joan Bines explains that early American colonists used “Mrs.” as a short way of recognizing a married or unmarried woman from a high social class. “Mrs.” was an abbreviation for “Mistress.”

In comparison, a woman of a lower social class was called Goodwife—or, Goody for short. And her husband was called Goodman.

Today, only the abbreviation “Mrs.” remains common.

That’s As It Is. I’m Kelly Jean Kelly.

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