

Tom Marshall's Weekly News, October 29, 2007

Our American Language: Our everyday language changes with time, and I would guess all languages are the same. How many young people know what “fill the bill” means? Things that are very nice (in the beholder’s opinion) have been “peachy,” “swell,” “neat,” and now “cool” or “awesome.” I still use “neat,” but this is no better description of something very nice than is “cool.” I first heard kids use “cool” in the early 1970s when describing our Mountain Wagon. I told them no, it was hot, not cool. Cool went into submission for a good many years, but when it resurfaced, it was here in a big way.

On our 1908 Stanley Model K’s water tank is written large with permanent crayon “OK.” First I thought this had been rebuilt and tested in the 1970s, and then I realized it had probably been there since the car was first built. “OK” dates back to 1836! Martin VanBuren, nicknamed “Old Kinderhook” from his home town in the Hudson Valley, used the abbreviation in his successful campaign for the presidency. Like “cool,” it may have been in remission for many years, and I doubt that it was in Abe Lincoln’s vocabulary. But when it came back, it endured for 100 years so far, and younger people than I use it at the end of a sentence when explaining something, followed by a question mark.

We have really never liked to call people *men* and *women*. Men are often *fellows* (or *fellas*) and became *guys* long before women did. Now everybody is a guy. Women were *girls* or *gals*, or less flattering names. A lot of new expressions have arrived in our language that I never heard of until the past 25 years or so. You could grow vegetables or flowers, but you could not grow a system or a business until 25 years ago. You could make it grow or cause it to grow, but you couldn’t *grow* it. Terms such as “the bottom line” and “at this point in time” have crept into people’s conversations, especially when eyebrows are raised to stress an important point. Until a couple of years ago, I didn’t know what “24-7” meant.

My grandmother Shallcross and her three daughters would not say “hello,” because it had “hell” in it. They greeted friends with “hey-o.” She called an automobile, new to her at age 60, a “machine,” as did many her age. Going ‘way back to the mid-19th century, passenger trains were called “steam cars.” They mean something else to us now. When I was young, if one of my friends had been named Jason or Joshua, they would have been the laughing stock of their class. Now George, Henry, Albert, and Thomas are in that category. Almost all Cheryls were born in the 1950s. Oh well, more serious stuff will come along next week. By that time, something new may have crept into our American language.