

Origins of Popular Superstitions

By Sanguinarius

With Halloween time approaching, which is arguably everybody's favorite superstitious holiday of the year, I thought I'd serve up some popular superstitions and their origins. This is by no means a comprehensive list -- an entire encyclopedia could be written filled with thousands upon thousands of superstitions! These are some of the better known ones practiced worldwide. Determining the origins of superstitions is largely a matter of guesswork; some are so old that their origins are lost in the mists of time. "[Some] superstitions are based on sound sense -- don't put hats on beds (head lice), don't walk under ladders (something might fall), cover your mouth when you sneeze (don't spread germs). They were often used to teach as it was easier to scare someone into doing or not doing something than to use lengthy explanations -- especially for children," says Alice Wood (ace76_wood@hotmail.com).

Superstition can be defined as the irrational belief in the existence of unseen forces (frequently thought of as evil spirits) controlling people's fates or the outcomes of events, usually with negative effects, unless particular actions are taken to prevent the ill effects or to produce the desired good effects; this may involve a person's behaviors and actions, avoidance of actions, places, etc., or the use of amulets, etc.

Many educated, intelligent people still hold on to a variety of superstitions, almost as though they are cherished traditions of a sort. If you ask them, when it gets right down to the nitty-gritty, they don't actually *believe* in something, yet they still act upon the belief. Very strange...

Trick Or Treat on Halloween

"Trick or treat, smell my feet, give me something good to eat!" Each year, hoards of crazed children disguised in all manner of scary, funny or just stupid costumes, converge on innocent neighborhoods, knocking on doors and mindlessly saying, "Trick or Treat!" to get free candy or other goodies before going on to the next door to repeat the process. How in heck did this crazy tradition get started?

Earlier practitioners would play tricks, pranks, and practical jokes on those who did not share their goodies. This aspect has faded in many areas in favor of just saying "trick or treat"; if no treat is received, the kids just go on to the next door.

This tradition can be traced back 2,000 years (and quite possibly much longer) to the Celtic belief that the spirits of the dead still remained present on our plane of existence, and required food and drink to be placated. Failing to leave out an offering was sure to invite the disgruntled spirits to cause mischief and ill fortune in retaliation. Later, people began dressing up as the spirits in order to receive these offerings of food, and playing practical jokes on those who did not furnish them.

In Ireland, "an old Irish peasant practice called for going door to door to collect money, bread cake, cheese, eggs, butter, nuts, apples, etc., in preparation for the festival of St. Columbus Kill." ("Trick or Treat", http://www.funmunch.com/events/halloween/trick_or_treat.shtml)

In England, the poor would go around to different households on "All Souls Day" begging for food and be given "soul cakes" in exchange for the promise to pray for the family's dead relatives. This practice was known as "going a-souling".

"In Scotland children or *guisers* will have to impress the members of the houses they visit with a song, trick, joke or dance in order to earn their treats." (Halloween entry @ Wikipedia, <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Halloween>)

In America, the custom has become disgustingly commercialized and defrauded of its power and origins (which may be a contributing factor to it's apparent decline in popularity in recent years). Today, many kids (some not even bothering to dress in costumes!) are queued up into long lines at their local mall, and marched zombie-like past the various retail shops and vendors who have a representative out front to dole out candy. So fun and exciting I could shoot myself if I ever had to do *that* again (either march in the zombie line or pass out the candy)! Drawing customers to their stores aside, the rationale for this god-awful modern phenomenon seems to be keeping the kids "safe" and off the streets where everybody is a psycho with poisoned candy and evil intents. Yeah, whatever. Just go along with the kid (you can stay in the car and still keep an eye on them) and check the candy before the kid eats it.

The phrase "trick or treat" itself is relatively modern, with the oldest printed reference being in 1939.

Thirteen Being Unlucky

The fear of the number thirteen (13) is so pervasive that it even has it's own fancy Greek term: triskaidekaphobia.

The belief that thirteen brings bad luck is an extremely pervasive belief throughout many societies, and is strong enough that many major hotels and high rises traditionally either build only twelve floors, or, if they want to go higher, skip labeling the 13th floor entirely! Many people refuse to stay on the 13th floor, or in room 13. People stay home from work, for fear of something bad happening. Most airports don't have a thirteenth gate. And in Topeka, Kansas, where the zip code starts with 666- (really, it does! I know because I live there), they skip from 66612 to 66614 – which highly stinks because it would be highly notorious to be able to boast having **66613** as my zip code.

There are many theories as to why this belief is held. One is that Judas, known as "the Betrayer of Jesus", was the 13th member present at the Last Supper.

Not all ancient cultures held the number in fear. The Chinese and the Egyptians thought of it as lucky.

"To the ancient Egyptians, we are told, life was a quest for spiritual ascension which unfolded in stages — 12 in this life and a 13th beyond, thought to be the eternal afterlife. The number 13 therefore symbolized death — not in terms of dust and decay, but as a glorious and desirable transformation. Though Egyptian civilization perished, the death symbolism they conferred on the number 13 survived, only to be corrupted by later cultures who associated it with a fear of death instead of a reverence for the afterlife." ("Why Friday the Thirteenth is Unlucky", p. 2, http://urbanlegends.about.com/cs/historical/a/friday_the_13th_2.htm)

In the *Code of Hammurabi*, an early law code dating from ancient Babylon, the laws are numbered and skip from 12 to 14. It is not clear why the Babylonians considered 13 to be extremely unlucky. Matt Rhodes (MRhodes@FARS.IDINC.COM) offers one explanation: "One of my English professors from college (Mythology class) told me that the earliest documented example of the number thirteen as something bad came from the Song of Ishtar, an ancient Babylonian epic poem. The thirteenth line contains the name of the Goddess of the Dead (which is never a good thing)."

Unlucky Friday the 13th

This one is closely related to the previous superstition. Paraskevidekatriphobia is the official term for the fear of Friday the Thirteenth. Jesus was said to have been crucified on Friday and the number of guests at the party of the Last Supper was 13, with the 13th guest being Judas, the traitor.

There is also the tradition that roots of this belief stem from when the order came to rout out the Knights Templar on Friday the 13th. Many were rounded up and killed. "...It was a well coordinated raid that took place on Friday the 13th. The action was so swift, brutal and efficient that the day has lived on in infamy ever since," writes Richard Douek (richard_douek@mvbms.com).

"On October 13, 1307, a day so infamous that Friday the 13th would become a synonym for ill fortune, officers of King Philip IV [Philip the Fair] of France carried out mass arrests in a well-coordinated dawn raid that left several thousand Templars — knights, sergeants, priests, and serving brethren — in chains, charged with heresy, blasphemy, various obscenities, and homosexual practices. None of these charges was ever proven, even in France — and the Order was found innocent elsewhere — but in the seven years following the arrests, hundreds of Templars suffered excruciating tortures intended to force 'confessions,' and more than a hundred died under torture or were executed by burning at the stake." (Katharine Kurtz, *Tales of the Knights Templar*, Warner Books, 1995).

Another idea is that Friday is just considered an unlucky day, and thirteen is unlucky, and when the 13th of the month falls on a Friday, that's about as bad as you can get.

Black Cat Crossing Your Path

As one version of the belief goes, if a black cat crosses your path, bad luck will befall you.

Another version claims that if a black cat walks towards you then it brings very good luck to you -- but if it walks away from you, then it takes its good luck with it!

In ancient Egypt, the Goddess Bast was a black, female cat. Christians, wanting to rid society of all traces of other religions, convinced the ignorant that black cats were demons in disguise and should thus be destroyed. In the process, they also destroyed the kindly women who cared for the cats, believing them to be witches. Being demons, a black cat crossing your path would create a barrier of evil, cutting you off from God and blocking the entrance to heaven. ("Silly Superstitions", <http://www.islandnet.com/~luree/silly.html>)

In England, black cats are thought to bring good fortune.

All things considered, I have two wonderful black cats (Bat and Boo), and I am not dead yet. (*Sangi knocks on wood*)

A few other interesting cat-related superstitions I came across (from "Silly Superstitions", <http://www.islandnet.com/~luree/silly.html>) and thought worthy of inclusion are:

* If you can take the one white hair off an otherwise all black cat without getting scratched, you have a very powerful good luck talisman.

* Cats can physically see spirits, so they make excellent guardians against evil spirits. They also love to play with friendly or beneficial spirits.

Spilling Salt

If you spill some salt, you must take a pinch of the spilled salt and throw it over your left shoulder.

Historically, salt has been highly valued and considered to be a purifying substance, capable of driving away evil. The Romans paid their soldiers in salt – hence the word "salary". It has long been useful as a preservative, in medicine, and is also used in magick, ritual, and superstition to purify, bless things, and drive away evil.

Taking a pinch of the spilled salt and throwing it over your left shoulder was thought to drive away the evil spirits that lurked there, waiting to cause harm and misfortune.

Walking Under a Ladder

Walking under a ladder will bring bad luck.

Excluding the obvious – that something might fall on you from above – the belief that walking under a ladder will bring bad luck seems to stem from the ladder forming a triangle with the wall and the ground. This represents the "Holy Trinity", and if you violate this by entering the space, it puts you in league with the devil, and you're likely to incur God's wrath.

According to Tia Dawson (984020568@98.lincoln.ac.uk), "The reason 'It's bad luck to walk under a ladder' is that hangmen used to use a ladder to hang someone from the gallows, and it was believed that if you walked under a ladder, the hangmen would turn his gaze your way, or 'Death would notice you'. I'm from Yorkshire England, and I was told this by a museum historian."

Breaking a Mirror

Breaking a mirror will bring seven years of bad luck.

One's reflection in a mirror is thought to be the representation of his or her soul or spiritual state. Breaking the mirror, and therefore the person's reflection, would bring damage to their soul and spiritual hardship. Taking the pieces outside and burying them in the moonlight could avoid this.

"The true reason that breaking a mirror was 7 years bad luck is because when mirrors were first made they were so expensive that if you broke on you would serve 7 years as an indentured servant to the owner of the mirror because not too many people could afford to buy another one to replace it."
(JUMPMAS842@aol.com)

"Origin of Common Superstitions: Breaking a Mirror" (<http://www.trivia-library.com/a/origin-of-common-superstitions-breaking-a-mirror.htm>) states: "Before the invention of mirrors, man gazed at his reflection, his 'other self', in pools, ponds, and lakes. If the image was distorted, it was a mark of impending disaster. The 'unbreakable' metal mirrors of the early Egyptians and Greeks were valued items because of their magical properties. After glass mirrors were introduced, it was the Romans who tagged the broken mirror a sign of bad luck. The length of the prescribed misfortune, 7 years, came from the Roman belief that man's body was physically rejuvenated every 7 years, and he became, in effect, a new man."

Knocking on Wood / Touching Wood

You must knock on wood 3 times after mentioning good fortune or the evil spirits will ruin things for you.

The American version is "knock on wood", while the British version is merely "touch wood". The tradition traces back to an ancient pagan belief that spirits resided in trees, particularly Oaks, and that by knocking on or touching the wood, you were paying a small tribute to them by remembering or acknowledging them, and could call on them for protection against ill-fortune. Also, you were thanking them for their continued blessings and good luck.

It may be traced back even further to an ancient Greek belief, according to Sauren Dessai ("Touch Wood!", <http://www.buzzle.com/editorials/6-25-2004-55884.asp>) "that if they touched an Oak tree, they communicate with Zeus, who would protect them from misfortune."

A variation to this superstition involves knocking on one's own head (think "blockhead") if wood is not to be found. I thought I was the only one to do this in humorous self-deprecation and was surprised to find a number of references to others doing so during my research for this article.

Also, it should be noted that in modern times, when many items are manufactured to only appear wood-like, it has become acceptable to knock on a table with a wood veneer, or even on something that is not wood at all, such as plastic or Formica. Interestingly, if no wood is to be found, or knocking is just not convenient, it is sufficient to say "knock on wood" or "touch wood". This indicates to me that the original reason for knocking is becoming forgotten, even in folk memories, in favor of the knocking action itself.

Itching Palm

If your left palm itches, it means you will soon receive money; if your right palm itches, it means that you will lose or have to pay money.

If your left palm itches, scratch it on wood and you will be sure to receive money; if your right palm itches, do not scratch it at all, because then you will lose money.

This superstition seems to have the most variations, some of which are complete opposites of others. The ones I've listed above seem to be the most prevalent, as well as holding true time and again for my mother (I think it must be a psychic impression, rather than a superstition, in her case).

Some other variations of the "itchy palm" superstition include:

* Itchy hands = right to receive and left to leave (fortune and luck), rub on wood and it's sure to be good, rub on brass and it will come fast. ("Silly Superstitions", <http://www.islandnet.com/~luree/silly.html>)

* If the palm of your right hand is itchy, then it foretells that money is coming to you, but DON'T scratch it as that stops the money from coming! If it's your left palm that is itchy, then scratch away, as that means that you'll soon be paying out money for something! ("Superstitions", <http://jksalescompany.com/dw/superstitions.html>)

* If your left hand itches, you're going to be rich. If your right hand itches, you're going to be poor. ("Silly Superstitions", <http://www.islandnet.com/~luree/silly.html>)

* If your palm itches, you will receive money, and if the back of your hand itches you will lose money. ("Silly Superstitions", <http://www.islandnet.com/~luree/silly.html>)

* If your palm itches, you will soon receive money. If you itch it, your money will never come. ("Superstitions", <http://halloween-website.com/superstitions.htm>)

According to the old time radio presentation, *The Origin of Popular Superstition*, "Episode #33: Itching Palm" (from 1935), this belief originated with the Saxons, who felt that rubbing diseased skin with silver would cure it.

It seems possible to me that this superstition is at least loosely related to the Celtic belief that touching wood would invoke good fortune (see above). This is due to the reference to rubbing the itching hand on wood, scratching it, and other variations.

Having an "itching palm" is an idiom for greed, or the desire for money.

Lucky Rabbit's Foot

It is not uncommon for someone to carry around a rabbit's foot for luck, and these can frequently be found in bins at the drugstore checkout or dispensed from gumball machines. They are often dyed bright colors and come on a keychain. The proper foot for luck was the left hind foot of the rabbit, although I suspect that manufacturers today produce these charms using any of the rabbits' feet. Dying the foot bright colors is modern and contains no significance; it's only for visual appeal.

Although the practice is also prevalent in England, it was originally considered a Southern (United States) tradition to carry a rabbit's foot; particularly among African Americans. The tradition made its way to the States with African slaves, and it is thought to be among the oldest traditions in the world, dating from around 600 BC.

Rabbits and hares have long been considered symbols of fertility and, by extension, abundance. To have rabbits traipsing through your yard was a sign that your garden would be fertile. When a rabbit runs, its stride is unusual because the back feet hit the ground ahead of its front feet, and so the back feet were considered lucky. Therefore, to possess the rabbit's hind foot would be to acquire good fortune.

Over 10 million rabbits feet are bought every year in the United States to feed the rage for this fetish. Animal lovers and animal rights activists alike (and rabbits) discourage the practice due to the cruelty and senseless deaths involved in producing these amulets.

Crossing Your Fingers

Crossing two fingers (the middle and pointing fingers) on one hand as a sign of hopefulness or desire for a particular outcome.

"This is probably the superstition that is most widely used today. By making the sign of the Christian faith with our fingers, evil spirits would be prevented from destroying our chances of good fortune," according to "Superstitions" (<http://jksalescompany.com/dw/superstitions.html>). It is also used as an expression: "Cross your fingers" is often told to someone hoping for good luck or a particular outcome.

Sometimes, when someone tells a lie, they will cross their fingers (usually behind their back). This somehow absolves them from the consequences or makes the lie not count.

Opening an Umbrella Indoors

Open an umbrella indoors and bad luck will "rain" on you.

Although this superstition likely evolved from coincidental attribution of bad luck to somebody blaming the umbrella being opened, it is claimed by some that the origin can be traced back to when umbrellas were used as sun protection. Opening one indoors supposedly was offensive to the sun (or sun god) and would bring his wrath down upon the offender. If this were so, then why would not opening an umbrella anywhere, especially *outdoors*, offend the sun god?

Opening an umbrella indoors was not always considered to bring bad luck, according to some – only if certain factors apply. "Many believe it is only bad luck when the umbrella is opened without it first being outdoors. That means bringing a wet umbrella in and leaving it open at the door is not part of the superstition," according to "Are You Superstitious?" (<http://www.fifty-five-plus.com/family/SP0028.htm>). Others insist it's only bad luck if the umbrella is black, was a gift, has never been used outdoors, or if there's someone sick in the

house (it will supposedly cause them to become sicker). Having an umbrella on a ship was also considered bad luck. Dropping an umbrella on the floor means someone in the house will be murdered.

Holding Your Breath When Passing a Cemetery

You must hold your breath when you go past a cemetery or else you will breath in the soul of someone who has recently died.

Supposedly, this is because you will either wake a spirit with each breath or else you, still being alive, will make the spirits jealous. Some people think that it is order to avoid inhaling evil spirits. This last idea seems to be the most prevalent and the one that makes the most sense as a belief; the others may just be variations on the idea.

I believe this superstition is related to the one that admonishes people to cover their mouths when they yawn -- not so much out of politeness as to block (usually evil) spirits from entering. Breath has long been analogous with life; in the Bible, God breathed life into Adam. This could mean that God imbued Adam with life force, a soul or spirit, or both, through his mouth.

The associations between breath, life, and spirits are as old as human thought and cannot be traced back to any specific origin. Once early peoples developed writing and began recording their beliefs, these thoughts appeared. This excerpt from "Origin of Primitive Religion, 'Soul' & Rituals" by Lawrence C. Chin (<http://www.geocities.com/therapeuter2002/genealogy.html>) sums everything up rather nicely:

Let us consider that in Indo-European languages the word for "soul" always derives from the word for "breath", "wind", "air" etc.: *psuche*, "breath"; *anima* and *spiritus* meaning breath and wind; *ghost* and *Geist* "breath"; *atman* and *prana* "breath". In classical Chinese as well *qi* (氣) meaning air was thought to be the life principle running through and animating the body and mind, and even the whole cosmos.³ So are Hebrew *ruah* and *nefesh*, Egyptian *ka*, Iroquoian *orenda*, Polynesian *mana*, all meaning "air" or "breath" (c.f. Ellison Banks Findly, "Breath and Breathing", *Encycl. of Rel.*, vol. 2, p. 302; consider also the Algonkian *manitou*). The primitive humans made this identification between their self-awareness (soul) and breath probably because all life breathes and so they saw the essence of being alive -- and thus being sentient -- in breathing. [...] "Soul" thus came from a compactification of consciousness-breath-metabolism, i.e. (sentient) "life force" in general. When the father dies, his lungs collapse, and the last breath gushes out his mouth. It is easy for the tribal men, already convinced of the immortality of the soul, to take the last breath as the soul (the consciousness) exiting the body.

On the discussion board *Ghost Stories, Spirit Pictures and Paranormal Discussion* (topic "hmmmmmmmm....." at http://www.ghostplace.com/forum/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=3270), Fullmoondolphin speculates, "...some cultures would ensure that their mouths and noses were covered when around corpses so that they would not breathe in whatever illness had killed them. So it is possible that over time people have, as they are wont to do, twisted the stories of some of those old practices."

Blessing Someone Who Sneezed

As mentioned above, humankind has long been equating the soul with breath. It was thought that when one sneezed, the soul briefly flew out of the body, and this might allow an evil spirit to take up residence within. Nowadays, demon possession does seem a rather extreme consequence for just having sneezed; but because early peoples didn't know all about germs, disease transmission and the like, they equated sickness with evil spirits.

On the other hand, it is also said that blessing someone who sneezes is necessary because their heart skips a beat when they sneeze; it is wishing them continued good health.

"The blessing of those who sneeze started when the great plague took hold of Europe. Sufferers began sneezing violently, and as such, were bound to die. The Pope therefore passed a law requiring people to bless the sneezer. At the same time, it was expected that anybody sneezing would cover their mouth with a cloth or their hand. This was obviously to stop the spreading of the disease, but many believed that it was to keep the soul intact. Sneezing 'into the air' would allow the soul to escape and death would be imminent. Up until this time, the opposite was true. Those who sneezed were congratulated [Sanguinarius notes that this practice dates from the 6th century], as it was believed that a violent sneeze would expel evil from their bodies." ("Superstitions", <http://jksalescompany.com/dw/superstitions.html>)

I will go out on a limb and say that this practice did not *start* with the great plague, but long, long before, although the earliest known record of the practice may have been during that time. There is some documentation that at least as far back as 150 AD, during Roman times, Tiberius Caesar rode around in his chariot blessing those who sneezed during an epidemic.

OldWivesTales.com (<http://www.oldwivestales.net/QandAarticle1112.html>) stated: "The reason why Tiberius would say 'Bless you' was due to the belief that the more blessings offered to the sufferer may help lessen the chance of death. However, according to Claudia DeLys in *A Treasury of Superstitions*, the phrase wasn't a simple 'Bless you'. The disease running through the Roman civilization at that time made sneezing a dreaded symptom. So when someone sneezed it was felt this warranted a short prayer to the gods. 'Long may you live', 'May you enjoy good health', or a simple 'Jupiter, help me.' Whatever variant used was

uttered and offered up in hopes that it would help protect those present and, hopefully, expel the disease from the person who happened to have sneezed."

As a final comment, it seems somehow appropriate that I was sneezing my head off (allergy attack) while I was working on this superstition.

Horseshoe Over a Door

A horseshoe hung above the doorway to a home will attract good fortune.

According to "Superstitions" (<http://helpdesk.ebid.tv/showthread.php?t=33376>), "A horseshoe, hung above the doorway, will bring good luck to a home. In most of Europe protective horseshoes are placed in a downward facing position, but in some parts of Ireland and Britain people believe that the shoes must be turned upward or 'the luck will run out.'"

Throughout Europe, the horseshoe has been nailed to doors to ward off the evil eye, evil spirits and to bring good luck. Charms in the shape of horseshoes are often carried or worn by believers for the same reasons. Rings made of horseshoe nails can also be worn for luck. The origin of the horseshoe superstition is a rich convergence of many ancient roots, beliefs, and traditions. The horseshoe, or crescent shape, fits in well with numerous ancient beliefs and forms of worship.

In Scotland, iron was used as protection against fairies, and usually was a horseshoe placed over a door. As iron is stronger than other metals and able to withstand fire, it has long been thought to be imbued with magical properties and hold the power to ward off spirits, witches, fairies, and other malicious or mischievous supernatural beings.

"One legend [dating from the 10th Century] says that the Devil called on St. Dunstan, who was skilled in shoeing horses. St. Dunstan recognized him and fastened him to a wall. He then set to work with such roughness that the Devil roared for mercy. St Dunstan turned the Devil loose after making him promise never to enter a home on which a horseshoe was fixed. Witches fear horses, so they are also turned away by a door with a horseshoe mounted on it, The horseshoe must be hung with the points up to keep the luck from spilling out." ("Animal Superstitions", <http://e-musicbox.com/super.htm>)

The horseshoe was used as protection against the evil eye in Mediterranean and Middle Eastern cultures; the Hebrews had an amulet shaped like a crescent moon, to ward off the evil eye. The crescent shape represented the various moon goddesses in ancient Europe. This even dates back to the Chaldeans and before.

The shape can also be taken to symbolize horns, another protection against the evil eye. At Knossos on Crete, a Minoan sacred bull horn sculpture stands at the palace of Minos.

Various other symbolisms such as arches (providing divine protection), bowls, pots or other receptacles (to collect the good fortune), the lucky number seven (a horseshoe is nailed on with 7 nails), vague attributions to Christian mythology, horses (also bulls and cows), the blacksmithing profession (was considered to be lucky and magical profession), serpent-worship, psycho-symbolic associations with various gods and goddesses, and other possibilities tenuous enough not to bear mention in this brief article, may also have provided origin-material for the belief in horseshoes. Indeed, a whole book could be written on this one superstition alone, and that is far beyond the scope of this one little section in this one little article!

"Somebody once asked Niels Bohr why he had a horseshoe hanging above the front door of his house. Surely you, a world famous physicist, can't really believe that hanging a horseshoe above your door brings you luck? Of course not, Bohr replied, but I have been reliably informed that it will bring me luck whether I believe in it or not."

-- Arthur Koestler, *The Act of Creation* (1964), quoted from *Encarta Book of Quotations* (1999)

Breaking a Turkey Wishbone

Thanksgiving is coming up soon after Halloween, so I thought I'd include this one for those who celebrate the holiday (mainly in the USA). During Thanksgiving, it is traditional to roast a turkey. When it is served, it's also traditional for two people to take the wishbone (the bird's clavicle), -- which resembles the lowercase Greek letter lambda (λ) or an inverted lower-case "y"; each making a wish, they pull apart the bone to break it. The person ending up with the larger piece will supposedly get his or her wish.

Thanksgiving is a US holiday based on the Pilgrims' giving thanks for having the resources they needed to survive a long winter in the new world, and was not actually celebrated in the form most Americans are familiar with today until the 1860s. Although Thanksgiving is an American holiday, the wishbone custom was brought over to the new world by the Pilgrims from England, where it had long been in practice. The ritual of breaking apart the wishbone can be traced back to the ancient Romans, who used other forms of fowl such as a guinea fowl or a chicken. The Romans, in turn, adopted the tradition from the Etruscans. Most likely, the Romans brought the practice to England.

The Etruscans were the earliest civilization to live on the Italian peninsula, settling in between 900 and 800 BC; although much is not known about this mysterious early people, they were actually responsible for much of which is mistakenly attributed to the Romans, -- and from whom the Romans drew a substantial portion of their culture, ideals, etc. The Etruscans practiced a form of divination involving a hen pecking at grains of corn scattered about in a circle divided into sections with letters (which could be viewed as an early form of

Ouija-style fortune telling). "When the fowl was killed, the bird's collarbone was laid in the sun to dry. An Etruscan still wishing to benefit from the oracle's powers had only to pick up the bone and stroke it (not break it) and make a wish; hence the name 'wishbone'. For more than two centuries they wished on unbroken clavicles," according to the Useless Info Archives (http://www.livejournal.us/archives/useless_info/index.php). "We have inherited more than the Etruscan wishbone superstition. Etymologists claim that the expression 'get a lucky break' initially applied to the person winning the larger half in a wishbone tug-of-war."

* * *

Final Thoughts

I would like to conclude this article with a couple final thoughts about superstitions.

The world moves and civilization progresses, but the old superstitions remain the same. The rusty horse-shoe found on the road is still prized as a lucky token, and will doubtless continue to be so prized; for human nature does not change, and superstition is a part of human nature."

– From Robert Means Lawrence, M.D. (*The Magic of The Horse-Shoe, Chapter XX. RECAPITULATION OF THEORIES OF THE ORIGIN OF THE HORSE-SHOE SUPERSTITION*, <http://www.harvestfields.ca/ebook/01/016/04.htm>)

And from Pamela Lucia (pam007mt@yahoo.com): "I think that certain superstitions can be fun but should never be taken too seriously because it can take over one's mind and make life unnecessarily strict."

Further Reading & Research

If you're interested in learning more about superstitions, you might check out the following books, available at your local bookstore, library, or online through Amazon.com:

Dictionary of Superstitions, The, by David Pickering (Cassell, 2003).
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0304365610/sanguinarius>

Encyclopedia of Superstitions, The, by E. Radford (MetroBooks, 2003).
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/1586636170/sanguinarius>

Knock On Wood: An Encyclopedia of Superstition, by Carole Potter (Longmeadow Press, 1991).
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0681410884/sanguinarius>

Origin of Superstition (old radio presentation, 1935; mp3 format),
<http://www.otrcat.com/originsuperstition.htm>

Treasury of Superstitions, A, by Claudia Delys (Gramercy, 1997).
<http://www.amazon.com/exec/obidos/ASIN/0517181304/sanguinarius>

Footnotes:

3. Joseph Adler wrote about the Chinese concept of *qi* in "Varieties of Spiritual Experience: *Shen* in Neo-Confucian Discourse" (<http://www2.kenyon.edu/Depts/Religion/Fac/Adler/Reln471/Spirit.htm>): "The original meaning of *qi* was mist, or the vapor rising from a sacrificial offering;.. 'spirit' comes from the Latin *spiritus*, meaning 'breath.' Note also... the analogous words in Hebrew, classical Greek, and Sanskrit (*ruach*, *pneuma*, and *prana*) that similarly cover the range of meanings from wind and breath to spirit.... However, most uses of *qi* in Neo-Confucian discourse do not carry the religious implications that 'spirit' in English would convey. In fact they tend to emphasize more the physical end of the psycho-physical spectrum... [This has no effect on our exposition of the experiential foundation of the concept of soul with early humans, who must have conceived of soul as literally, i.e. physically, breath. Abstraction of it came after the later efforts of the speculative mind.] *Shen* [神], on the other hand, is used in ways that suggest all the variations: 'spirit,' 'spirits,' 'spiritual,' and 'spirituality.'... And since *shen* is understood to be the finest form of *qi*, it is implicitly related to breath or vapor."

In my opinion the earlier generations of scholars of religions were coming much closer to understanding religious phenomena, experiences, and behaviours than the contemporary generation. For example, Raffaele Pettazzoni, in his *La religion dans la Grèce antique* (traduction de Jean Gouillard, 1953), still retains the memory of the experience of the breath-soul -- this most fundamental component of religiousness -- and speaks of "animism": "Pour les Grecs, l'âme (*psyché*) est un souffle, une haleine, un vent (*anemos*, lat. *animus*), une respiration. Et la respiration, c'est la vie. L'âme peut sortir du corps. Son 'séjour au dehors' est l'*extase* (*ék-stasis*). L'homme, en ce cas, perd connaissance, tel Sarpédon que 'son âme abandonne' sous la violence du coup reçu, telle Andromaque qui s'évanouit, 'exhale son âme', à la vue du cadavre d'Hector. Mais l'un comme l'autre reviennent ensuite à eux, lorsque l'âme rentre en eux par les voies respiratoires. Durant le rêve aussi, l'âme se trouve en dehors du corps et vague dans des lieux étranges, en proie à des aventures non moins étranges. De retour dans le corps, elle en garde le souvenir." This lays the foundation for many divinatory praxes. "*Mais un jour, l'âme quitte le corps pour de bon. C'est la mort. Le corps meurt, mais l'âme continue de vivre et reçoit les hommages des survivants. C'est alors une forme éthérée, rappelant le corps auquel elle fut unie, mais d'ordinaire en plus petit -- un eidolon: une figurine -- et en plus léger. Elle est si légère qu'elle peut voler de-ci de-là. C'est pourquoi elle a des ailes; les figurations de la céramique (les lékythoi) la représentent le plus souvent ailée, quand elles n'en font pas tout simplement un oiseau ou un papillon.*" (p. 36; emphasis added.)