

 NATIONAL
GEOGRAPHIC



An
Uncommon
History
of
Common
Things

BETHANNE PATRICK *and* JOHN THOMPSON





An
Uncommon
History
of Common
Things



 NATIONAL GEOGRAPHIC
WASHINGTON, D.C.

An Uncommon History of Common Things

Bethanne Patrick and John Thompson

Published by the National Geographic Society

John M. Fahey, Jr., President and Chief Executive Officer

Gilbert M. Grosvenor, Chairman of the Board

Tim T. Kelly, President, Global Media Group

John Q. Griffin, President, Publishing

Nina D. Hoffman, Executive Vice President; President, Book Publishing Group

Prepared by the Book Division

Kevin Mulroy, Senior Vice President and Publisher

Leah Bendavid-Val, Director of Photography Publishing and Illustrations

Marianne R. Koszorus, Director of Design

Barbara Brownell Grogan, Executive Editor

Elizabeth Newhouse, Director of Travel Publishing

Carl Mehler, Director of Maps

Staff for This Book

Susan Straight, Editor

Susan Hitchcock, Consulting Editor

Patricia C. Click, Consultant

Cliff Owen, Illustrations Editor

Carol Norton, Art Director

Sanaa Akkach, Designer

Judy Klein and Anne Cherry, Copy Editors

Trudy Pearson and Carol Stroud, Researchers

Tiffin Thompson, Editorial Assistant

Al Morrow, Design Assistant

Jennifer A. Thornton, Managing Editor

R. Gary Colbert, Production Director

Manufacturing and Quality Management

Christopher A. Liedel, Chief Financial Officer

Phillip L. Schlosser, Vice President

Chris Brown, Technical Director

Nicole Elliott, Manager

Monika D. Lynde, Manager

Rachel Faulise, Manager



Founded in 1888, the National Geographic Society is one of the largest nonprofit scientific and educational organizations in the world. It reaches more than 285 million people worldwide each month through its official journal, *National Geographic*, and its four other magazines; the National Geographic Channel; television documentaries; radio programs; films; books; videos and DVDs; maps; and interactive media. National Geographic has funded more than 8,000 scientific research projects and supports an education program combating geographic illiteracy.

For more information, please call 1-800-NGS LINE (647-5463) or write to the following address:

National Geographic Society
1145 17th Street N.W.
Washington, D.C. 20036-4688 U.S.A.

Visit us online at www.nationalgeographic.com

For information about special discounts for bulk purchases, please contact National Geographic Books Special Sales: ngspeccsales@ngs.org

For rights or permissions inquiries, please contact National Geographic Books Subsidiary Rights: ngbookrights@ngs.org

Copyright © 2009 National Geographic Society. All rights reserved. Reproduction of the whole or any part of the contents without written permission from the publisher is prohibited.

Hardcover ISBN 9781426204203

Hardcover (deluxe) ISBN 9781426204210

eBook ISBN 9781426212277

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Patrick, Bethanne Kelly.

An uncommon history of common things / by Bethanne Patrick, John Thompson.

p. cm.

Includes bibliographical references and index.

ISBN 978-1-4262-0420-3 (direct mail)

1. United States--Civilization--Miscellanea. 2. United States--Civilization--Chronology. I. Thompson, John M. (John Milliken), 1951- II. Title.

E169.1.P26 2008

973--dc22

2008040447

v3.1



CONTENTS

Cover • Title Page • Copyright

Foreword • About This Book



CHAPTER ONE

FOOD & DRINK

Daily Fare • On the Side • Beverages • Snacks • Sweets • Utensils & Containers



CHAPTER TWO

SEASONS & HOLIDAYS

Spring • Summer • Fall • Winter



CHAPTER THREE

CEREMONY & CUSTOMS

Courtesies • Weddings • Babies • Funerals • All-American



CHAPTER FOUR

SYMBOLS & MARKINGS

Gestures • Signs • Superstitions • Tributes • Hair & Body Markings



CHAPTER FIVE

HEARTH & HOME

Buildings • Houses • Rooms • Elements • Appliances • Backyard



CHAPTER SIX

GARMENTS & ACCESSORIES

Clothing • Underwear • Headwear • Footwear • Fasteners • Accessories • Laundry



CHAPTER SEVEN

MEDICATIONS & POTIONS

Hygiene • Beautification • Health • First Aid



CHAPTER EIGHT

TOYS & GAMES

Old-fashioned Fun • Classic Games • Sports • Classic Toys • Other Pastimes



CHAPTER NINE

TOOLS & INNOVATION

Tools • Communication • Transportation • Observation • Weapons • Medicine • Economics

Further Reading • Illustrations Credits • Index



Foreword

Everything has a story behind it, and some of the commonest things have the most uncommon stories. This book is a wide-ranging compendium of mini-essays on the curious origins of everyday things, both symbolic and concrete, ranging from the thumbs-up gesture to the red-and-white-striped barber pole. Because so many of the things covered here are so familiar, we seldom give them much thought. How often do we wonder why we knock on wood, or how the dollar sign came to be? The more we see actions performed or objects used, the less we tend to ask questions about them. But asking those questions can lead to fascinating and enlightening answers.

This book provides those kinds of answers. It is full of opportunities for the reader to think, How interesting. That's something I didn't know. I didn't know, for example, exactly how pockets within pants evolved from pouches or "purses" full of valuables that used to hang from a belt outside whatever a person was wearing. To better protect the pouch from "cutpurse" thieves (now known as pickpockets), people cut a slit in their outer garments so that the purse could be concealed and still leave its contents easily accessible. From that practice to a man's pants pocket was, over time, just a matter of sewing. Women continued to wear their pouches beneath their full skirts until more fitted styles and safer societies encouraged a return to the practice of carrying a purse outside one's clothing.

Because so many of the things and traditions covered in this book are centuries old, stories of the origins have often become the stuff of legend and lore that has been embellished over time. The entry on "crossing your fingers" is a wonderful little essay on one of the most widely practiced gestures in the Western world. How interesting then to learn how it may have evolved from pagan practices that predate the Christian cross.

The origins of more modern practices make equally interesting reading. The story behind the now familiar peace symbol reminds us that all things, whether symbolic gestures or clever toys, have a beginning. This book's essay on the "ban-the-bomb" symbol is wonderfully specific, telling us the name of the person who designed it and for what particular purpose. Who knew that the symbol was a deliberate superposition of the semaphore alphabet symbols for *N* and *D*, standing for nuclear disarmament?

Another fascinating story has to do with the discovery of Silly Putty, which engineers at first called Nutty Putty. The funny material—which could be formed into a ball that would bounce higher than any other and could also be flattened over the Sunday comics to take up a colorful image of whatever it touched—was the result of a wartime quest for a cheap substitute for rubber. Although Nutty Putty did not find its way into military use, the more innocently named Silly Putty became a great hit with children.

Among my favorite essays in this book is the one on blue jeans. Its story "involves a purpose from India, a fabric from France, and a business idea from California." I learned that 16th-century sailors bought "thick cotton indigo-dyed cloth" in the vicinity of Mumbai (Bombay), near a fort called Dongarii. The material was taken to Italy, where it inspired an industry that exported a similar material out of Genoa. This came to be known as *bleu de Genes*, or "Genoa blue," which was made into pants and came to be called "blue jeans." A related fabric was known as *serge de Nîmes*, after the French port from which the familiar term "denim" derives.

The entrepreneur who put this all together was Levi Strauss, the manufacturer of what I wore and called "dungarees" as a child in New York, not realizing that in using that name I was evoking the very

remote origins of Levi's in the vicinity of a fort in India. My wife, who grew up in a different part of the country than I, has always questioned my use of the word "dungarees" for what she calls "jeans." Now I can read her the entry in this book that shows that my term reflects the more remote historical origins.

These mini-essays are models of concision. Though entire books have been written on the history of devices like the bicycle and the pencil and the zipper, here the stories of these familiar objects—and many more—are summarized in just a few paragraphs. These might whet the appetite for a fuller story should the reader so desire, but they also serve as a reliable digest of the key ideas, providing the gist of the history, for the essence of each is nicely encapsulated.

In all the artifacts we read about in this book, we can see the creativity and ingenuity of our human ancestors. Everything was created, invented, and developed for a purpose; everything is the result of a kind of everyday engineering. Like modern engineers who are called upon to solve problems that arise in the course of living in a technological society, so the oldest and most enduring things that everyday people devised in times past came about in the course of organizing civilization itself.

These stories equip us to view the world of things in a fresh way. The next time we see people shrug their shoulders, we might remember that we read here the movement may be "one of the most instinctive and universal of human gestures," and when combined with upraised palms may also be among the oldest ways of nonverbally saying, "I don't know." We might also remember that shoulders shrugged in conjunction with raised eyebrows and pursed lips say, "I'll think about it." We don't need a book to tell us these things, of course, but the book does tell us why we do some of the things we do and reminds us of how subtle our means of communication can be.

Every book can be read in many different ways, and all readers have their own favorite ways of progressing through a volume. Though, like every book, this one can be read serially from front cover to back, this is also a book that lends itself to the random sampling method, in which the reader dips in here and there at this time and that, as schedule and circumstance allow. However it is read, this is a book to keep on the bookshelf, ready to refresh our memory about April Fools' Day or split-level houses.

With its wealth of information and a great deal of food for thought, this is a book that will reward the reader with old memories of things of the past and with new knowledge of things of today. And, like any book worth reading, it will change the way we look at the world and the people who inhabit it and how they themselves have changed it.

—Henry Petros

About This Book

AN UNCOMMON HISTORY OF COMMON THINGS TELLS THE STORY OF HOW HUNDREDS OF everyday things came to be what they are. Pencils, buttons, forks, coffee, and napkins are just some of the humble items that we take for granted but depend on greatly. Who first thought of removing the hull from the red coffee “cherry,” roasting it, grinding it, and then steeping it into the liquid we consume daily? What garment frustration or embarrassments led people to discover they could hold their clothes together with a combination of small, flat disks and holes in fabric? Some of these short histories describe necessity as the impetus for invention; other inventions were the result of fortuitous accidents. Some of the descriptions shed light on common misconceptions, while others fill in gaps in popular knowledge. Over the course of nine chapters, organized by topic, we explore the earliest known origins and current uses or observances of hundreds of things. We start with Food & Drink, then move on through Seasons & Holidays, Ceremony & Customs, Symbols & Markings, Hearth & Home, Garments & Accessories, Medications & Potions, Toys & Games, and Tools & Innovations. Within each chapter, look for subheads, fast facts, uncommonly known trivia and historical items, and timelines. One characteristic all of these things have in common: our lives would be quite different without them.



CHAPTER INTRODUCTION

Each of the nine chapters starts with an introduction, which gives the overview of the topic and describes what is included—and not included—in the chapter, using examples from the text. At the top, a quote from a famous personality provides a humorous or popular opinion of the topic.



SECTION INTRODUCTION, ENTRIES

Within each chapter, the items are divided into subtopics, each with its own introduction, to explain what you'll encounter there and why it's significant. A color photo of each item is followed by three lines of "fast facts"—interesting tidbits about etymology, alternative uses, best examples, and inventor's name and date of invention, if known. The item histories span earliest known origins through modern usages.



UNCOMMONLY KNOWN, PARALLEL HISTORY

Items of special interest are highlighted in Uncommonly Known blue boxes and Parallel History tan boxes. The Uncommonly Known stories reveal little-known facts about familiar things, such as origin, use, or common misconception. Parallel Histories put entries in historical context, describing related world and local events, competing items, and the impact of their invention, evolution, or usage.



TIMELINE

Each timeline focuses on a specific topic (such as footwear, currency, clocks, etc.) and follows its evolution throughout history, from the earliest known appearance of the item through to its modern form. Dates and spacing on the timelines are approximate, providing a broad overview of the progression of technology, style, materials, or manufacturing processes that contributed to the development of these important objects.





Life itself is the proper binge.

—JULIA CHILD (1912-2004)

Food & Drink

Natural selection and discriminating palates have seen to it that we choose our foods carefully, so it's not surprising that much of what we consume has been part of our diets for a long time. We've sprinkled salt on our food for thousands of years; there are grains that we have eaten for 17,000 years; for millennia we have steeped tea leaves in hot water. Not that humans haven't made great strides in food production and preparation over the ages; the variety of available foods is greater now than ever. In this chapter we take a look at many of our most common foods and beverages, and track them back as far as we can. Some of our foods date back only to the previous century—the first baking mix, Bisquick, was born in 1931. But it might come as a surprise to learn that chewing gum goes back to ancient times, both in Europe and the Americas. Among other revelations, salt has been used in warfare; the spread of margarine caused an interesting backlash by dairy farmers; ninth-century Arabians were expert distillers. You'll also discover what is the most popular dessert in the United States, which grain was generic for “local grain,” and what is the world's oldest alcoholic beverage—and that people may have been consuming it as far back as 10,000 years. The fact that some foods have been on the menu for a long time does not seem to make them any more or less popular than recent items. The birth of cheesecake is separated from that of the peanut butter and jelly sandwich by 2,000 years, yet both these delicacies seem poised for a long and happy future. While we have more packaged, easily prepared foods than did our ancestors, we have more choice in what we eat and thus every reason to fill our shopping carts with the market's best offerings, both ancient and modern.

Daily Fare

Modern nutritionists caution that one of the worst things for human diets is too little variety; the more kinds of foods people eat in a day or week, the more likely they are to get all of the necessary nutrients to make their bodies strong and healthy. Societies have instinctively evolved diets that rely on a diverse array of nutritious staples—and, of course, the choice of those foods depends on geography, religion, climate, culture, and many other things. Following are a few of the foods that modern Americans like to eat, even if not every one of them is entirely healthful.



Pancakes

ALSO KNOWN AS: HOTCAKES, CRÊPES, CRESPELLE, GRIDDLE CAKES, FLAPJACKS, JOHNNYCAKES, PALATSCHINKEN, NALESNIKI, PANNENKOEKEN

The humble pancake truly spans the globe—regional variations can be found in Europe, Asia, Africa, Central America, and North America. Whether they're called pancakes, griddle cakes, flapjacks, johnnycakes, hotcakes, *Pfannkuchen*, *crêpes*, *crepelle*, *Palatschinken*, *nalesniki*, *Pannenkoeken*, *blin*, or *dosa* (and that's not a complete list), this common and versatile food starts with a batter, usually sweetened, that can be poured onto a griddle or into a pan and cooked through.

We may never know which culture or cook made the first pancakes, but one Christian tradition may provide a clue: “Fat Tuesday” or “Pancake Day” is the day before Ash Wednesday, which starts the liturgical season of Lent. It was the last day people could use fat or oils in their cooking before the 40-day fast. In other words, pancakes may have developed as a means of quickly using up cooking fat before they spoiled.

The modern pancake is similar to the Roman flatbread *alita dolcia* (“another sweet”), made from flour, milk, eggs, and spices; they were often served with pepper and honey. The first reference to pancakes in English is in a culinary book from the 1430s.

Native Americans of the Narragansett tribe made a soft batter shaped by hands called a *nokehio*. Other cornmeal pancakes were called Indian cakes as early as 1607, while buckwheat pancakes were made by Dutch settlers, and by 1740, colonists were cooking “hoe cakes” in the fire on the flat blade of that tool.

American pancakes are traditionally served with maple syrup and butter, a practice that may have its roots in the recipe for *crêpes Suzette* (perhaps originally served by one Monsieur Joseph at the Restaurant Marivaux) that Henri Charpentier, a French *maître d'hôtel*, brought to the United States in the 1930s. *Crêpes Suzette* are covered with a sauce of caramelized sugar, citrus juice, and liqueur, and their sweet stickiness brought about a vogue for pancakes with similar toppings.

UNCOMMONLY KNOWN ...

Waffles Its batter similar to pancakes, the waffle gains distinction through its cooking method. The “wafer,” as medieval people called it, was cooked between hinged metal plates often embossed with heraldic symbols. Today, the waffle’s indented pattern (source of the term “waffling,” both for fabric and for back-and-forth behavior) provides nooks for toppings.



Breakfast Cereal

THE TOP FOUR MANUFACTURERS ACCOUNT FOR MORE THAN 80% OF INDUSTRY REVENUE: KELLOGG, GENERAL MILLS, POST, AND
QUAKER

Cold breakfast cereals composed of flakes were invented in the United States (see [Parallel History](#)), but breakfasts of different kinds of grains have been consumed for many thousands of years. Not just a millennia or three, either; emmer and einkorn wheat consumption have been dated back 17,000 years. The word *cereal* derives from the name Ceres, for the Roman goddess of the harvest and refers to grasses with edible grains or seeds.

Most cereal grains need to be soaked or at least softened with liquid before eating, making “porridge.” An example is the rice congee popular in China, or Indian *poha*. Congee is often eaten cold but many porridges are served hot, particularly in northern climates.

In their unrefined form, cereal grains are extremely nutritious; the grains contain all the nutrients that the plant in its embryonic form needs to grow. Unfortunately, in some Western countries, milled cereal grains, with fewer nutrients, have become popular because they have a longer shelf life—the outer layers of unmilled grains are high in fat and can spoil more quickly.

Although there are many different cereal grains, including spelt, teff, quinoa, barley, sorghum, buckwheat, and grain amaranth, most American breakfast cereals (hot and cold) are based on wheat and oats. Oatmeal, Cream of Rice, Cream of Wheat, and Wheatena are usually served with hot or cold milk and sweetened to individual taste. Residents of southern states often eat hot cornmeal known as “grits” for breakfast, served with butter and salt or sugar. Besides being cheap and easy to make, porridges of cereal grains are easy to digest, and thus are often given to people recovering from illness.

Kellogg and Health Foods

William “Will” Keith Kellogg did not set out to invent corn flakes. He was soaking wheat bran to make bread dough in the health sanitarium he ran with his brother John Harvey Kellogg when he noticed that the finished dough was breaking into smaller pieces. He baked the pieces and served them. The crispy wheat “flakes” became a huge hit with the patients, who asked to have packets shipped to them at home after they were discharged. Soon Will discovered that corn made a lighter, tastier flake. He founded the world’s first ready-to-eat-cereal company, the Battle Creek Toasted Corn Flakes Company, now known, of course, as Kellogg’s.



Sandwich

NAMED AFTER THE FOURTH EARL OF SANDWICH, JOHN MONTAGU (1718-92), WHOSE TOWN, SANDWICH, LIES IN EAST KENT, IN
SOUTHEAST ENGLAND

John Montagu, the fourth Earl of Sandwich, certainly contributed his title's name to the popular snack of two pieces of bread holding some type of filling. In 1762, Montagu, a notoriously avid gambler, realized that the type of food he'd seen in his Middle and Near Eastern travels would allow him to sate his appetite while remaining at cards.

However, the snack itself dates back to the first-century B.C. Jewish sage Hillel the Elder, who placed lamb and bitter herbs between pieces of matzo bread during Passover; the Romans called the concoction *abus Hilleli*, or "Hillel's snack." Other cultures, including Middle and Near Eastern, made sandwiches long before they caught on in the West, and in Europe it seems the Dutch *belegde brood* ("filled roll") was popular a century before the Earl of Sandwich ever saw a cribbage board.

It took a while for sandwiches to progress from late-night men's fare to general society snack, but by 1824, oyster loaves appeared in *The Virginia Housewife*, and by the end of the 19th century sandwiches had become so accepted that they appeared in the 1887 *White House Cookbook*. As sandwiches grew in popularity, they also grew in variety: From ham biscuits to deli Reubens, muffulettas to BLTs, loosemeats to cheesesteaks, Americans found many ways to put meals between pieces of bread. From their British forebears Americans also took the concept of "sandwich bread," also known as the Pullman loaf, that was shaped in a convenient rectangle and had a firmly packed crumb so that sandwich eaters would not lose most of their bread in their laps while eating.

Today sandwiches are made for and eaten at every meal. While many sandwiches are made at home (especially those with sweet fillings, like peanut butter and jelly), the market for custom and prepackaged sandwiches has gotten bigger. Sandwiches like Vietnamese *banh mi* and Scandinavian *smorrebrod* are available everywhere in the world, proving that one man's snack has become the world's favorite.

UNCOMMONLY KNOWN ...

Sliced Bread Invented by an Iowan in 1917, the bread-slicing machine got its commercial start in Chillicothe, Missouri, in 1928 but got its commercial breakthrough when it was used to section nutrient-enriched Wonder Bread in 1930. Though the U.S. government attempted to impose a World War II ban on the machines, it lasted only three months.



Canned Goods

NICOLAS APPERT, PARISIAN CONFECTIONER 1810 | AWARD FOR HIS HEAT PROCESSING METHOD CANNING ELIMINATES MOST MICROORGANISMS

The history of canned goods owes a great deal to two modern conflicts. During the Napoleonic Wars (1792–1815), the famous French general realized that in order to keep his armies fed, he needed a new method of food preservation. Bonaparte decided to offer a prize to the man who could figure it out, and in 1810, Nicolas Appert won with his method of heating and then sealing food.

Also in 1810, Englishman Peter Durand developed his own way of heating food, then sealing it in unbreakable containers made of tin. For many years, in Europe and the United States, commercial canning methods remained the same (home canners, of course, used glass jars and bottles, sterilizing them in a water bath, as they do today): After preparation, foods would be heated to about 250°F, then sealed into containers. It wasn't until Louis Pasteur's experiments later in the 19th century that people began to understand that the heating process killed off bacteria already contained in the food, and the airtight sealing prevented any further bacteria from contaminating the processed edibles.

The canning process's simplicity is probably why no great leaps in its development were made until World War I, when once again large armies needed foodstuffs that would last a long while and be portable over great distances. Not only did commanders agitate for cheap, high-calorie fare—they also tried different regional favorites in attempts to keep their soldiers happy. This resulted in manufacturers experimenting with many of the dishes we keep in our cupboards today, like canned bean dishes, pasta, and tomato sauces.

Meanwhile, manufacturers were finally making improvements to the tin cans, which, while strong and convenient, were also prone to leaks and often harbored botulism toxin when leaks were unnoticed or ignored. The new, tin-coated steel, double-seamed cans with welded side seams keep food airtight for much longer.

- **[download online The Language of Flowers for free](#)**
- [The Annotated Peter Pan \(The Centennial Edition\) \(The Annotated Books\) pdf, azw \(kindle\), epub](#)
- [Hot Night in the City for free](#)
- **[read online Claudius the God here](#)**
- [read Dynamics of the Contemporary University: Growth, Accretion, and Conflict \(Clark Kerr Lectures on the Role of Higher Education in Society\)](#)

- <http://hasanetmekci.com/ebooks/--lgebra-lineal-para-Administraci--n-y-Direcci--n-de-Empresas.pdf>
- <http://www.shreesaiexport.com/library/The-Annotated-Peter-Pan--The-Centennial-Edition---The-Annotated-Books-.pdf>
- <http://drmurphreesnewsletters.com/library/Applied-Stochastic-Processes--Universitext-.pdf>
- <http://interactmg.com/ebooks/Claudius-the-God.pdf>
- <http://metromekanik.com/ebooks/Dynamics-of-the-Contemporary-University--Growth--Accretion--and-Conflict--Clark-Kerr-Lectures-on-the-Role-of-Hig>