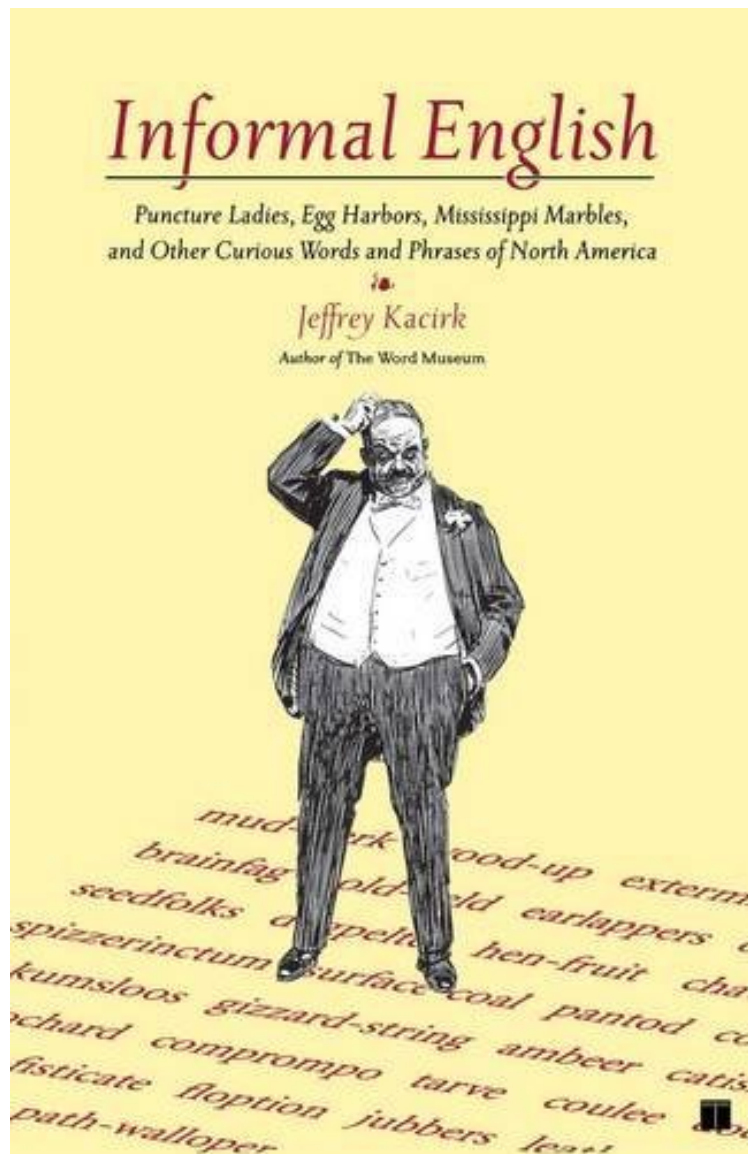


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# Informal English: Puncture Ladies, Egg Harbors, Mississippi Marbles, and Other Curious Words and Phrases of North America

Jeffrey Kacirk

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Gleaned from antiquated dictionaries, dialect glossaries, studies of folklore, nautical lexicons, historical writings, letters, novels, and miscellaneous sources, *Informal English* offers a captivating treasure trove of linguistic oddities that will not only entertain but also shed light on America's colloquial past. Among the gems are: Surface-coal: cow dung, widely used for fuel in Texas Bone-orchard: in the Southwest slang for a cemetery Chawswizzled: "confounded" in Nebraskan idiom. "I'll be chawswizzled!" Leather-ears: to Cape Cod inhabitants, a person of slow comprehension Puncture lady: a southwestern expression for a woman who prefers to sit on the sidelines at a dance and gossip rather than dance, often puncturing someone's reputation Whether the entries are unexpected twists on familiar-sounding expressions or based on curious old customs, this wide-ranging assortment of vernacular Americanisms will amaze and amuse even the most hard-boiled curmudgeon.

About the AuthorJeffrey Kacirk is the author of *Forgotten English*, *The Word Museum*, and *Altered English*, as well as a daily calendar based on *Forgotten English*. He can be found on the web at [www.forgottenenglish.com](http://www.forgottenenglish.com) and lives in Marin County, California.Excerpt. Reprinted by permission. All rights reserved.IntroductionThe conversations we hear around us are often filled with words and phrases that would be out of place in formal writing. The following collection is a tiny sample of the vernacular expressions that have been used over the last four centuries in North America. I have tried to present a diverse cross section of these gems, drawing from different-size communities and various walks of life ranging from white-collar and blue-collar workers to hoboes. Throughout the gathering and editing process, my focus has been on forgotten and less commonly encountered Americanisms, although some are still used today.Growing up, I was fortunate to live in a number of linguistically distinct parts of America -- Milwaukee, San Diego, New Orleans, and briefly New York and Portland, Oregon -- and visited other parts of America's "lower 48" and Canada as time permitted. This serendipitous introduction to North America's cultural diversity planted a seed in me that led roundabout to this book. In Louisiana, such phrases as "like a one-legged man in a behind-kickin' contest," describing a person experiencing difficulties, regularly whetted my appetite for entertaining localisms. Since my interest was piqued in the 1970s, I have enjoyed countless moments just listening to people talk.Elizabethan English in America?It is intriguing that more than a few current "Americanisms" originated in Shakespeare's Britain before the first European settlements were founded in America. Baggage, for example, a fifteenth-century word used by Shakespeare in *As You Like It* and *The Winter's Tale*, faded in England during the 1700s, leaving most of its duties to luggage. Meanwhile, both of these terms thrived among English transplants across the Atlantic. In fact, baggage is now found in more than two dozen combinations in America, such as baggage-car, and is even used metaphorically in the realm of pop psychology, meaning someone's undesirable habits and attitudes.Disencourage and many other archaic Anglo terms disappeared in the land of their birth but flourished among British settlers, especially in the Ozarks and Appalachia. These older anachronisms were kept alive along with more recent Briticisms like fair and square (used by both Francis Bacon and Oliver Cromwell) and the slang coinages fib, bamboozle, and fun, which can be found in Francis Grose's 1796 *Dictionary of the Vulgar Tongue*. Americans were roundly ridiculed for their use of these lowbrow terms by British-language commentators who believed these were of Yankee origin. In 1908, for example, English critic Charles Whibley wrote pompously in his *American Sketches*:That a country which makes a constant boast of its practical intelligence should delight in long, flat, cumbrous collections of syllables such as locate, operate, antagonize, transportation, communication, and proposition is an irony of civilization. These words, if words they may be called, are hideous to the eye, offensive to the ear, and inexpressive to the mind. They are the base coins of the language. They are put upon the street fresh from the [coin] smasher's den.But thirteen years later, American linguist Gilbert Tucker rightly refuted these misguided accusations in his own book, *American English*:Mr. Whibley[']s...objection...rests on his supposing that they are very recently invented by Americans....The fact is every one of them has been in use in England for decades, all but one of them [transportation, c. 1776] for centuries.The use of barbarous expressions by Americans was only a part of what offended some educated ears. Reporting on one of Abraham Lincoln's state banquets at which he was a guest in 1861, American William Howard Russell was amazed at the discordant variations of English he noticed at this affair. Afterward, he wrote of hearing "a diversity of accent almost as great as if a number of foreigners had been speaking English." Without personally leaping into this divisive fray, I have included what I hope is a provocative and revealing quotation before each of the twenty-six alphabetical groupings of entries to briefly introduce some widely varying British and American attitudes toward the emerging language of the New World.American English Comes of AgeThe tide began to turn during the nineteenth century as the works of Mark Twain and his cohorts and subsequent writers softened the

resistance felt by many toward America's words and patterns of speech. Walt Whitman's poetry, the plays of Tennessee Williams and Arthur Miller, and the novels of Twain, John Steinbeck, and Ernest Hemingway, to name a few, all thrust the American dialect before readers. As a partial result, Britons began adopting -- or in some cases reclaiming -- words from America, especially after "talkies" were introduced in 1927. With the language stigma rapidly disappearing, American filmmakers joined in during the late 1930s and 1940s, first introducing generalized accents for character actors, and later crafting such accent-rich films as *To Kill a Mockingbird* in 1962. The advent of television provided an opportunity for such early sitcoms as *Amos 'n' Andy* and *The Beverly Hillbillies* to exploit elements of dialect speech, including quaint expressions, pronunciation, and mannerisms. Although the dialogue often evoked laughter at the expense of those they depicted and did so without representing true dialects, this paradigm shift toward lively, if exaggerated, conversation helped pave the way for more serious Hollywood fare. Soon afterward, *Bonnie and Clyde* and *Midnight Cowboy* refined these improvements, followed by *The Godfather* and many others. Today, some movies would sound dull or absurd if the specialized language of their scripts was overlooked. The original gathering of a minor portion of these entries was done not as an academic pursuit, but as an extension of an individual's employment, or lack thereof. I was surprised to learn that in order to compile his *American Tramp and Underworld Slang*, Godfrey Irwin drew from notes he had jotted during his twenty-year stint as a vagrant. In another instance, George Matsell reformatted vocabulary he had collected from criminals (much of which had been borrowed from British thieves' cant) during his long tenure as police chief of New York City. Likewise, Hyman Goldin and two associates cobbled together the clandestine records of thirty carefully selected "convict-editors" from America's state prison system for their gritty but credible *Dictionary of the American Underworld Lingo*. The definitions of Noah Webster and his competitor Joseph Worcester are largely absent from these pages because they tended to reject many informalisms in favor of more mainstream English. Most of their entries, while certainly used in normal conversation, were conservative choices that have predictably survived the test of time. Webster's limited interest in American dialect words and slang prompted him to underestimate in 1828 that fewer than fifty words used in America were not also current in England. Although vernacular terms constitute the bulk of my selections, many were also found in fiction and nonfiction writings. The Boontling Language Between 1880 and 1920, a community lingo developed in the Anderson Valley of California's rural Mendocino County. In and around Boonville, a patois containing more than a thousand words and phrases came into being that deserves a place among America's most curious subdialects. In the "Boontling" language, the habits, traits and appearances of local residents were preserved in a manner similar to the baseball prowess of Babe Ruth, whose name became synonymous across America with a home run in the 1920s and 1930s. Blevins, meaning an inept carpenter (from the name of a family of mediocre tradesmen), is one of several hundred Boont terms that reflects characteristics of valley citizens. Another grouping consists of roughly rephrased phrases such as bowgley, a mispronunciation of "big lie." We also find intriguing tidbits like dom-on-the-saddlehorn, an expression defined by language researcher Charles Adams as meaning "payment for sexual favors." It seems that a local romance involved a man who would carry on his horse's saddlehorn a dead chicken, or dom, as a gift to a woman who savored these fowls. Notes on the Text My aim has been to encourage the appreciation of colorful and often neglected expressions in part by reducing the unnecessary detail that some readers associate with books on language. To this end, I opted for a less cluttered and more readable format, with a minimum of dates, footnotes, small print, and cryptic abbreviations. These entries are presented verbatim because I feel that just as Renaissance music is more enjoyable when played on authentic instruments, old expressions often contain more subtle nuances when explained by earlier field linguists, who could then be properly credited for their valuable work. Where multiple definitions of a term were available, I did not necessarily select the oldest but tried to present the most clear, concise, and thought-provoking descriptions and in some cases combined two or more. A small minority of entries needed to be edited lightly for clarity or in order to add brief notes regarding their origins, but their contents have remained substantially unaltered. The times of usage I supplied for entries are not intended to be precise. The dates found in my bibliography offer only a sense of when these accumulations were first published, which was sometimes a decade or more after some of the entries were collected. Beyond this it is possible, or even likely, that a fair number of the entries in these source works had been used for decades before being recorded, and some may still be in circulation. So what might seem like an authoritative date could easily prove otherwise. But in general, these dates may...