Folklife Today
March 2019: The Origin of All Folklore Everywhere

John: Welcome to the Folklife Today podcast. I’m John Fenn, the head of Research and Programs at the American Folklife Center. This is Steve Winick, AFC’s writer and editor, and creator of the Folklife Today blog.

Steve: Hi everyone! John just told me some news which I think he should tell all of you too.

John: You won't be able to find Folklife Today as a podcast anymore. We’re going to a new format...from now on, our engineer Jon Gold will be recording this program directly to wax cylinders, which will be laboriously hand-duplicated and mailed to libraries across the country. It’s part of our initiative to get people to actually go to the library instead of getting everything online.

Steve: personally, I think it’s crazy, but...

John: April Fools! Of course we’re not doing that!

Steve: And in case you listeners haven’t caught on, today we’re going to hear about April Fool’s Day, including our own celebrations of it here at the American Folklife Center within the Library of Congress.

John: We have a special guest on this edition of the Folklife Today podcast, Michelle Stefano, a folklife specialist here at AFC. Michelle, what are the origins of April Fool’s Day?

Michelle: Well, one common theory is that it goes back to the Roman Empire. According to the historian Mendacius, in the year 325 a group of jesters convinced Emperor Constantine to make one of them king for a day. So Constantine agreed, and made one of the jesters, named “Kugel,” king for the day. Kugel decreed that that day would be a day of jollity, and that is how April Fools’ Day was born.

John: Interesting! So, it’s possible that a king of fools created the holiday during his day-long reign?

Michelle: Well, no. That story itself is a hoax.

John: What? I fell for that!
Michelle: So did the media! A Boston University professor named Joseph Boskin told the Associated Press that story in 1983. The AP ran the story as fact, and had to retract it a few days later.

Steve: That’s some fake news right there! Michelle and I are high-fiving in here.

John: So, any real theories about the origins of the holiday?

Steve: I actually did some research on that, originally for an article in Library of Congress Magazine, and then for our blog. Michelle’s one of our Europe specialists, so she’s going to stay for a while to help us talk about it too.

Michelle: what I said before had a grain of truth: some people do think the idea of April Fools’ Day goes as far back as Roman times. There was a joyful festival called Hilaria, which was probably originally an equinox celebration. That was celebrated on March 25th. But in Roman terms, March 25th was called “the eighth of the Calends of April,” which associates Hilaria with the Calends of April, aka April 1st. But there’s really no evidence that connects Hilaria with April Fools’ Day explicitly.

John: So that would more of an educated guess.

Steve: or, some might say, wishful thinking.

John: If we aren’t sure about the origins of April Fools’ Day, do we know how long the holiday has been celebrated?

Steve: All we know is that there are references to April Fools in Renaissance Europe, but we can guess that its roots probably stem farther back than that.

John: Can you give some examples?

Steve: Yes. In France, “poisson d’avril,” or “April Fish,” is what you call a prank on April fool’s day. But earlier, it meant the victim rather than the prank itself. The first references to “poisson d’avril” show up in the late 15th and early 16th centuries, including a 1508 poem by Eloy D’Amerval, called *Le Livre de la Deablerie*, or *The Book of Deviltry*. The context is a little fuzzy, though. It seems to mean both an errand-boy and a gullible person, and it’s unclear whether April 1st is involved.
John: I guess fish were plentiful and very hungry in the spring, so an “April fish” could refer to a fish that’s easy to catch because it’s just waiting for the bait. But that reference doesn’t prove that there was a holiday on April 1st.

Michelle: Right. Another theory which a lot of people know about also hints at April Fools originating in 16th century France. This one observes that in some parts of France, the new year was celebrated on March 25th with the advent of spring, and that the celebration extended for a week, ending on April 1st.

John: Looks like there’s a connection with Hilaria’s dates: March 25 and April 1.

Michelle: very much so. So, this particular story says that in 1564, Charles IX’s Edict of Rousillon officially moved the New Year to January 1st. According to this version, many French people resisted the change or forgot about it, and continued to party during the week ending on April 1st. Some jokers then ridiculed these people for stubbornly sticking to the old New Year’s date by sending gag gifts, or invitations to nonexistent parties.

Steve: Right, but we can’t completely accept this common story as the truth.

John: Why is that?

Steve: Well, for one thing it doesn’t give any evidence. If people sent invitations to nonexistent parties, wouldn’t we expect some of these invitations to survive? If they survived, why doesn’t anyone ever produce one as evidence? And if they didn’t survive, how can we know this happened—is there a firsthand account? Why isn’t it ever quoted?

Michelle: Also, the situation of the date change is more complicated. Not everyone in France switched to a January 1st celebration in 1564—some switched much earlier. Some French books that were printed as early as 1507 indicated that people observed the New Year on January 1st. So the story also doesn’t hold that much water.

Steve: And it’s also only one of a number of shaky theories that connect the holiday to calendar changes, including the shift from the Julian to the Gregorian calendar in the sixteenth century, which is invoked to explain a lot of other holidays too.
John: So what we really seem to have is a group of legends about the origin of April Fools Day, which share some common motifs with each other and with other holiday origin stories.

Steve: Yeah, that’s basically right. It’s what we call "metafolklore," folklore about folklore. In this case, legends about calendar customs. And none of this can really be proven to relate to April Fools day.

John: So what do you think is the earliest clear reference to April Fools’ Day?

Steve: My vote is for a late medieval Dutch poem by Eduard de Dene, about 1561, called “Refrain on Errand-Day, which is the First of April.” And it’s about a nobleman who sends his servant on some crazy, fruitless errands. At the end of each stanza, the servant says “I’m afraid you’re making me run a fool’s errand.”

John: So it’s a reference to April Fool’s Day because it’s connecting pranks to the first of April?

Michelle: Not only that, but the “fool’s errand” continued to be a popular April Fool’s prank even to today—over 400 years later. You can find a lot of twentieth-century examples in newspapers in the Library of Congress.

John: Can you name some?

Steve: Oh sure. I found an article from Akron Ohio in 1902, which gives three errands for April Fools day. Sometimes people were sent to a bookshop to find “The History of Eve’s Grandmother.” Of course, Eve had no parents or grandparents. Or they were sent to the chemist to get “pigeon’s milk.” Of course, birds aren’t mammals, and they have no milk. The worst was that they’d sometimes send young apprentices to the harness shop where they made leather straps for horsemanship, with instructions to bring back “strap oil,” and that was code for the guys in the shop to spank them with a leather strap!

John: I’m glad times have changed! So when did April Fool’s Day come to the English-speaking world?

Steve: the first mention in English is by an antiquarian called John Aubrey, who included an entry in a 1686 book about Fooles Holy Day, explaining: “We observe it on the first of April. And so it is kept in Germany everywhere.”
And, since we’re asking about the origins of it, In 1760, people had already started to wonder about that, and an anonymous poem appeared in Poor Robin’s Almanac:

*The First of April some do say*
*Is set apart for all Fool’s Day*
*But why the people call it so*
*Nor I nor they themselves do know* [2]

John: so when did it come to America?

Michelle: the first traces of it here come from the 18th Century. There’s a 1771 diary entry written by a school girl named Anna Green Winslow in Boston, which shows that the holiday was known in North America. Winslow wrote her diary as a series of letters, ostensibly to her mother. In this entry, she carefully emphasizes the date twice, and suggests the idea of the “wild goose chase,” implying her father had sent her mother on a wild-goose chase on April Fools’ Day in 1768. The entry ran:

*April 1st.–Will you be offended mamma, if I ask you, if you remember the flock of wild Geese that papa call’d you to see flying over the Blacksmith’s shop this day three years? I hope not; I only mean to divert you. [...] N.B. It is 1 April.*

John: The idea of the wild goose chase goes back at least to Shakespeare, right? So this is a pretty clear reference to a prank on April first.

Michelle: Yes, and we have references to the same prank in 19th century Maryland: teachers apparently called their students outside to see a flock of wild geese first thing in the morning on April Fool’s Day. But by then, April Fools Day was widespread and popular in America, and you find pretty frequent references to it in newspapers. In fact, on the web page of the Library of Congress *Chronicling America* project, there’s a whole topic page for April Fools references in the 19th and early 20th centuries.

John: Thanks, Michelle, I’ll check that out! Steve, there’s one part of the blog that really interested me, which showed that by the late nineteenth century there were three main artistic representations of April Fools tricks. The first one showed a brick under a hat lying on a sidewalk, and the idea was that
someone would kick the hat and stub their toe on the brick. What’s with that, do you think?

Steve: Yeah, that’s kind of a weird one. Luckily, we also have a cartoon that suggests that it was bad luck to see a hat lying on the ground and not kick it, so I think that’s why the pranksters expected folks would kick any hat they came across. Playing on this belief about bad luck, they could put a hat down with a brick in it, and create an instant stubbed toe hazard.

John: Okay, that makes sense. The second one involves a valuable, supposedly lost object, like a wallet or money, set in plain view with a string tied around it. The string led to a hiding-place where a person was waiting to pull it and yank the wallet away from whoever tried to take it.

Steve: A classic, right?

John: And the third is a smoking coin, which indicates that the trickster had heated up the coin with fire or a cigar. The coin would be lying on the sidewalk, and whoever tried to pick it up would be burned.

Steve: Yeah, those are great. There’s actually another version of that where you glued coins to the sidewalk or floor, so they couldn’t be picked up, but the smoking coin is easier to draw! We’ve got one illustration from 1895 called “Trying to Make an April Fool of Him” that shows Uncle Sam surrounded by all of those pranks, representing political risks facing the country at the time. That’s a great piece which you can also see in the blog.


Steve: Fooling teachers is a tradition that goes way back, and we have a guest here to tell us a little more about that. Stephanie Hall is a folklorist at AFC and another of our great bloggers at Folklife Today. So, Stephanie, where in the Library’s folklore collections do we find evidence of kids pranking their teachers on April Fool’s Day?

Stephanie: One great source for that kind of thing is the Federal Writers’ Project collections of folklore and life histories. Since those were written down on paper rather than recorded as audio, they aren’t kept in the American Folklife Center, but in the Library’s Manuscript Division...and a lot of them are online at loc.gov. There’s one from South Carolina, which was a
couple in their 50s named the Skippers, interviewed in 1939. Their school days were around the turn of the 19th to the 20th century. Sally Skipper recounts that the kids all played Hooky in the woods until noon on April Fools Day, and the teachers retaliated by keeping them late for the rest of the week. In books in our reference collection, we have reminiscences of same kind of hooky day observed by children in the 1930s in Tennessee, with the added details that they had a big picnic together, made whistles out of hickory sticks, and showed up at school at the end of the school day blowing the whistles.

Steve: Those are great, but they don't really inconvenience the teacher. Are there any tricks played directly on the teacher?

Stephanie: Yes, one came to light in an interview with a Dr. Samuel Lathan in South Carolina. He was born in 1842 so his school days were way back in the 1850s. He said that on April Fools Day the students would get to school early and bar the door from the inside so the teacher couldn't get in! He said his teacher would take it philosophically and just cancel school for the day.

John: Wow, that teacher's lucky they didn't think of doing that every day!

Steve: I know, right? How about more recent times, Stephanie? Any student pranks in other AFC collections?

Stephanie: Yes, there's one or two recorded in the Center for Applied Linguistics collection. I say “one or two” because the student recounts two pranks but only clearly connects one of them to April Fool's Day. That's the classic thumbtacks-on-the-chair trick. And the other was more serious: taking all the tires off the teacher's car!

Steve: Thanks, Stephanie! Let's hear that interview.

Linguist: Were you ever in a class where the kids played a joke on the teacher, a trick?

Student: Last year, I believe it was April Fools Day, put tacks on a piece of tape and teacher sat on em... and uh, I don't really think it was a joke... teacher
failed the kid, and uh... he took all the tires off her car. And you know he didn’t take em off, he just loosened the wheel, and I think somebody told her before she drove off. I think you know, she never found out who did it, but you know, someone told her that somebody took the wheels loose.

Linguist: What happened when they put the tacks down?

Student: Teacher, she sat on them but... she said she was gonna fail everyone in class, but she found out who did it and I think he was put out of school.

John: So, we're here talking about April Fools Day, and it occurs to me, what about right here in the workplace? Are folks at work exempt?

Steve: not at all. There’s a lot of documentation of workplace pranks, from calling a worker just getting off a 10-hour shift and telling her she has to go back for another, to break-room pranks like replacing the sugar with salt or putting pepper in someone's coffee beans. In fact, right here at the American Folklife Center in the Library of Congress, some people get really creative on April Fools’ Day. Like our next guest, AFC folklife specialist Jennifer Cutting. She’s pulled many really intricate pranks on people over the years, and she’s had some pulled on her too. And she actually maintains a file of them!

John: Welcome Jennifer! Can you tell us about some of the pranks you pulled?

Jennifer: There were a lot of them. Often I would have friends disguise their voices and call in with fake reference questions. So I had my musician friend call, then head of reference Jerry Parsons to say that he knew enough about the child ballads and was now researching the teen ballads. And years later I had my folklorist friend Liz Milner make up her own fake question, and she made up a pretty good one, she called Todd Harvey, who's our Bob Dylan expert, and told him her mother had insisted that the real name of Dylan’s 1965 song and album was "Highway 61 Resurfaced," instead of “Highway 61 Revisited.” And could he please give all the background on why the real title
had been suppressed? I tapped Liz again to call our vinyl records specialist Matt Barton, who is now curator of recorded sound, asking for details on how she could buy “78 Records” as a gift for her husband who was a collector. And after Matt when into all kinds of details about different vendors, who had the best prices, the fastest shipping, she said with great surprise: “oh thanks but I meant records that came out in 1978; great songs like Boogie Oogie Oogie.” So all these gags draw on the specialized knowledge we have here at the Library. And the thing is, as government Librarians we have to be polite and answer these questions even if we suspect they’re pranks!

John: Did you have a favorite workplace prank?

Jennifer: my favorite is a fake letter of reference I wrote up in 1987 for the signature of Alan Jabbour, our director at the time. It was for a Guggenheim Fellowship, and my goal was to get Alan to sign it before reading it because he trusted me so much. So I wrote a very conventional first paragraph, but just went off the rails by the second paragraph. Here’s my letter with the name of the candidate changed to protect the innocent.

“John Simon Guggenheim Memorial Foundation. Confidential report on candidate for fellowship. Candidate: Auto Wildwood. Date: April 1, 1987. Folk art is a lively subject of discussion these days. At the Washington meeting on folk art held in 1983 here at the Library of Congress, people from public and private sector networks all around the country shared their definitions of folk art and folk art environments. The book Folk Art and Art Worlds, which ensued, though covering American bases thoroughly, does little to explore the international dimensions of the subject.”

Jennifer: Now I read Auto Wildwoods application for a Guggenheim Fellowship and I see that he is proposing precisely that.

"What will it take for you boobs on the selection panel to give this application some attention?" As evidence by the 1986 fellowship recipients you seem to be enormously preoccupied with inconsequential subjects such as reconstruction of the global economic order. And molecular mechanisms for enzyme regulation in cutaneous biology. While some poor truffle digger in Provence is practically withering away for want of attention to his spare time
activity of bellybutton painting. So far as I am concerned, you are the biggest collection of pusillanimous cretins ever to sit on a selection panel.”

“Mr. Wildwood writes with a profound incisive, penetrating, vigorous trenchancy which is exceeded only by the perceptive discerning panoramic intuitive but prudent perspicacity of his photography. I issue this encomium not because Mr. Wildwood is my cousin and financial advisor, oh no, in all objectivity I believe that Auto Wildwoods work will be a significant contribution to the better international understanding you mention in your fellowship guidelines. And which once funded, will be the object of innumerable pubic accolades.”


Jennifer: Well I almost got away with it. Allen just skimmed the beginning, saw the conventional part and he actually signed it! But just as he did, his eye was caught by the words truffle digger and he realized it was a gag.

John: So what did he do?

Jennifer: He called my bluff! He sent it back to me with a note that said "Ready to go, Jennifer. Send it right out!" He knew if it went out, we’d BOTH get in trouble!

John: wow...that took some guts.

Steve: And we still have a copy of that, with Alan's note as well! One of my favorites of Jennifer’s pranks involved the famous folklorist S. Turgeon. Remember that one, Jennifer?

Jennifer: I sure do. That was a prank I played on the former head of our archive, Michael Taft. Michael had spent many years in Canada, and there’s a well known Canadian folklorist named Laurier Turgeon who is good friends with Michael. So on April Fools Day, I was on the reference desk while the rest of the staff had a meeting. And I interrupted the meeting to tell Michael that there was a person named S. Turgeon who was asking for him in the reading room. He just assumed I got the name wrong and it was Laurier, or else that it was a relative whom Laurier had asked to visit. So he came into the reading room and found...a big wooden fish!

Steve: because S. Turgeon spells “sturgeon.”
John: So on the one hand, that’s a terrible pun. But also, I see what you did there. The French word for an April Fools gag is “Poisson D’Avril” or April Fish. So that was a literal Poisson D’Avril!

Jennifer: Exactly!

Steve: You know, John, Jennifer eventually pranks everyone on the staff, and I don’t think she’s gotten to you yet. I think you should be careful! We’ve also preserved some of her best pranks in an April Fools file in the Folklife Research Center at the Library of Congress, and anyone can come look at them.

John: In that case I’ll read up on her pranks so I’ll get to know her M.O. In the meantime, that’s our historical roundup of April Fools Day, from its earliest times to the present day. Now, Steve, there was one more item you wanted to share, wasn’t there?

Steve: Yes. Believe it or not, there’s a traditional song in our collections about an April Fools Day prank. It’s a broadside ballad called “The First Day of April,” also known as “Campbell the Drover” or “Three English Rovers.” It’s about three Englishmen who take an Irishman, Pat Campbell, to a tavern and skip out, leaving him to pay the bill. Campbell pays the prank forward by tricking the landlord in order to get away. And his trick is really clever. It was a well-known ballad in Ireland. Alan Lomax collected a version in 1938, sung by John Green in the Irish-American enclave of Beaver Island, Michigan.

John: Let’s check that song out. But first, let’s thank Michelle Stefano, Jennifer Cutting, and Stephanie Hall for appearing on the Folklife Today podcast. And Steve, thanks for producing this podcast with me.

Steve: Thank you John! And let’s also thank the other Jon, Jonathan Gold, our fantastic engineer, and Mackenzie Kwok, our intern who helped write the script.

John: Thanks for listening! As you go forth today, remember to watch for tacks on your chair, don’t pick up coins from the sidewalk—

Steve: And don’t go around kicking hats. Just accept the bad luck! And now, we’ll hear that very funny ballad about April Fools Day Pranks, “The First Day of April” sung by John Green.
The first day of April I’ll never forget
When three English blades together had met
They mounted on horseback and swore bitterly
That they’d play a trick on the first man they see

Chorus: And sing fol the rol dol daddly
Fol the rol dol daddly
Fol dol the rol dol daddly
Fol the rol dee

Pat Campbell the Drover they happened to spy
He came from Tyrone, a place called Dun High
They’ve greeted Campbell and he’s done the same
And in close conversation together they came.

They rode right along and they made a full stop
They called upon Paddy for to take a drop
And Paddy consented, and said he with a smile
“I long for to taste some good ale from Carlisle”

They ate and they drank and they sported as well
Until 48 shillings to pay up the bill
Likewise for their horses, some oats and good hay
And they thought they’d leave Paddy the reckoning to pay

Out of the house they stole one by one
They thought they’d leave Paddy to pay for the whole
The Landlord came in, and this he did say
“I’m afraid, Irish Pat, they’ve a trick on you played.”

“Never mind them” says Pat, “although they’re gone away
I’ve got plenty of money the reckoning to pay
If you sit down beside me before that I go
I will tell you a secret perhaps you don’t know”

“I'll tell you a secret contrary to law
There's three kinds of wine from one puncheon I'll draw”
The Landlord was eager to find out that plan
And away to the cellar with Paddy he ran

He bored a hole in a very short space
And he bade the landlord place his thumb on that place
The next one he bored, “place the other one there,”
And I for a tumbler will go up the stair

Pat mounted his horse and was soon out of sight
The hostler came in to see if all was right
They hunted the house, from the top to the ground
And half dead in the cellar, their master he found