

"A Lesson on English" is a series of short lessons created for people who want to become fluent in conversational English. The lessons are practical and useful for students learning English in a traditional classroom setting or on their own.

A Lesson on English

Volume 3, # 5 May 2009

International Leadership Institute

American Superstitions

by Sara Tusek

Friday the Thirteenth

Friday the thirteenth is one of the most common American superstitions. Some believe that the reason for this comes from the Bible. During the Last Supper, Jesus ate with all twelve of his apostles (making 13 at the table), and this was considered unlucky. Because there are twelve months in the years and twelve hours in the day, the thirteenth hour is considered outside of normal and therefore dangerous. The fear of the number thirteen has also spread to the numbering of floors; there is no thirteenth floor in most buildings.

Americans are not the only ones who fear the number thirteen. The Chinese also do not like it because one plus three equals four and four is associated with death in China.

Step on a Crack, break your mother's back

This superstition arises simply out of the power of rhyme and is therefore intimately tied to the English language. Of course, a crack is also in and of itself a break, so the association is not altogether strange.

Why a mother and not a father, however? Psychologists think that this is simply because of the primacy of the mother in caretaking roles in our society.

Walking Under a Ladder

One of the more logical of American superstitions is the one that says it is unlucky to walk underneath a ladder. This superstition is just an extension of common sense. It is simply the case that if you walk underneath a ladder, you are increasing the chances that something will fall on you.



A Black Cat Crossing your Path

This superstition has to do with the associations of black cats with sorcery and witchcraft. To understand why, you have to understand the history of domestication. Unlike dogs that have been domesticated for 50,000 years, cats have had a more ambivalent history with humans. Although the Egyptians worshipped cats, most Europeans did not start to associate with cats until the Middle Ages, when cities began to grow and cats controlled the mouse and rat population.

Breaking a Mirror

Some historians believe this superstition may have an economic origin. Because the material used to make mirrors was limited (as was glass during the Colonial period in America), breaking this object put a hardship on a family. The superstition may have grown out of the need to be especially careful with such precious items.

http://www.knowledgalaxy.net/american_superstitions/american_superstitions.html

APPLE: Think of five or six names of boys or girls you might marry, As you twist the stem of an apple, recite the names until the stem comes off. You will marry the person whose name you were saying when the stem fell off. *An apple a day Keeps the doctor away.* If you cut an apple in half and count how many seeds are inside, you will also know how many children you will have.

BABY: To predict the sex of a baby: Suspend a wedding band held by a piece of thread over the palm of the pregnant girl. If the ring swings in an oval or circular motion the baby will be a girl. If the ring swings in a straight line the baby will be a boy.

CAT: If a black cat walks towards you, it brings good fortune, but if it walks away, it takes the good luck with it. Keep cats away from babies because they "suck the breath" of the child. A cat onboard a ship is considered to bring luck.