

VILLAGE VIEW

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Certain words, phrases and expressions I was accustomed to hearing while I was growing up are seldom used today. As time passes, of course, language changes and there's usually nothing wrong with that. Sometimes, however, I catch myself using what some people may call outmoded speech; or, on the other hand, a newer form. And I wonder why.

For instance, in our family we always spoke of Oster-ville's business area on Main Street as "upstreet." The first time I heard someone say she was going "downstreet," I thought she must have come from outer space.

Today almost nobody uses either term; instead we say, "I'm going into the village." We don't often hear "up to the library," or "up at the post office," either. The direction of these localities has been deleted, and we say, instead, "at the post office," or "in the library."

Still, almost everyone continues saying, "down at the shore" and "down at the A&P," and almost as often people include the direction "over" when talking of trips to Center-ville, Barnstable and Hyannis.

"Over" is also used when speaking of another person's residence. "I'm going over to John's house," is commonly heard, although the simpler, "I'm going to John's house," is equally explicit.

The question in my mind is "Why?"

And the reason for using up, down, or over seems to lie in the nautical background of this part of the world. In years past, when most travel and transportation was by sea, any port to the eastward was "down" because it was downwind. That's the reason for "down Maine" or "down east." It's easier to sail with a fair wind, and it's easier to walk downhill.

Likewise, we say "up to Falmouth" or "up to Woods Hole." Since prevailing winds come from the southwest in these latitudes, going from the mid-Cape to Falmouth or Woods Hole, by water, meant beating up the coast against the wind. It was still the easiest way to get there before horses were replaced by automobiles. And walking uphill is no easier than it ever was.

And over? Its use indicated a trip by land. It wasn't practical to go from the Cape's south shore to Barnstable by sea; far easier to get there by an overland path, trail, cartway or eventually a road. Hence, over.

There were other expressions, once common in our household, now obsolete. When an article of clothing was too large, it was said to be "big enough for Uncle Joe Lawrence." Who Joe Lawrence was, or whose uncle, nobody knew.

My grandmother would often exclaim when something was dropped with a clatter, "Hailstones, come down!" It's descriptive, but how did that particular choice of words come to mean, "What a dreadful racket you're making!"? No one remembers. Nor can we explain why she always called a thunderstorm a tempest.

Borrowed from seagoing relatives is the term "sing out"; "If you need any help, sing out," was an offer of ready assistance. Today people say, "let me know." Or, in letters, we read, "If you have any questions, please don't hesitate to call me." How much more expressive the old-fashioned "Sing out!" rings in my ear. Aboard ship, it was the lookout who sang out, "Thar she blows!" or "Land ho!"

You've doubtless known people, under stress, in the throes of discussion or while reaching a decision, to pace the floor. That was termed "walkin' deck" when I was growing up.

A child coming home from playing in the mud was described as being "covered from clew to earing" with dirt. It's another shipboard expression. The clew is the lower corner of a square sail or the thimbles at its corner; earing, the upper corner, where it fastened to the yard or gaff. It also applied when someone managed to get a severe case of poison ivy or spill the contents of the cod liver oil bottle all over herself.

The word "making" implies putting things together to produce a product; but it once also meant "attempting to reach an objective" when used with "for"; a youngster "making for home" was skedaddling for the safety of his own doorstep, just as a ship making for port is on course for a safe harbor.

A threat or a promise of interference was referred to as a "roundturn" by which someone was about to be brought up short. When a parent firmly directed a child to conduct himself differently from the manner in which he was behaving, he was said to have "brought him up by a roundturn." It's another sailor's expression; when a ship's headway is halted by a twist of hawser over a piling, that's a roundturn.

As these words slowly fade from common usage as they are doing, most assuredly, our speech loses a certain flavor. I'm sorry to see it go for these lend character and zest to language that's more recent and more commonly-used words lack.

Perhaps more recent additions, introduced during the past few decades, such as "rip-off" for theft, "split" for depart, "laid back" for out-of-this-world, "luck out" for meet with good fortune are substitutes for the expressions I miss hearing.

My objection is not to their inclusion in our language but rather the absence of a reason for them. Behind them lie no romance, no experience, no challenge, no way-of-life that depends upon an understanding of the terms. They've been coined, not to extend one life-style to encompass another, but rather, it seems, to confuse the uninitiated.

With time, of course, these words and phrases have come to be interpreted easily by a large number of people and, although such terms are now common to our language and widely spoken, even written, they truly add no more than any other slang to our speech. Less, in most cases.

The tang and taste of the ocean breeze, the pitch and roll of the ship at sea, the wind-whipped voice of the lookout perched atop a towering mast echoes in the words, sing out," in "walkin' deck," and in "from clew to earing." Even when we hear "upstreet" and "downstreet" or "over to West Barnstable," we're able to relate to our historic past and lick a grain of salt from our lips.

Those of us to whom such expressions come naturally, a heritage of which we're justly proud, may choose to continue employing the wealth of language forms, once familiar, now almost foreign to the ear. It helps us retain a small but significant part of our birthright.

If that's how you feel about it, sing out!

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