

# A Pig in a What?

Edward M. Reingold\*

611 Harding Drive

Urbana, IL 61801

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“What? A pig in a *what?*” asked a friend with whom I’d been chatting in the locker room after a squash match.

“A poke,” I said, “a bag, a sack.”

We’d been discussing some purchase of his, and I’d automatically used the expression “a pig in a poke” in remarking on the folly of buying something sight-unseen. Suddenly, I was brought up short by the memory of my mother—although she had died of breast cancer many years before, during my freshman year in college, at that moment I clearly heard her say, in her light Southern accent, that it was foolish to buy a pig in a poke.

Anyone who has lost a parent within memory has moments like that. A sound, an aroma, or an object will bring that parent abruptly and forcefully to mind. For me, it’s often a turn of phrase that does it, a phrase that pops out of my own mouth.

Until I was eight or nine years old, I hadn’t realized that my mother’s speech was unusual for my middle-class Chicago neighborhood. The revelation came one weekday afternoon, when a new boy at school was leaving my house after coming over to play for the first time; “Wow,” he said, “your mother sure has a Southern accent!” I knew vaguely what he meant, because all of my mother’s far-away family spoke in a strange way—lots of “y’alls” and oddly stressed words; but after living in the north for most of her adult life, my mother’s speech had been somewhat neutralized, and I never heard in it what I heard clearly in the speech of various cousins, uncles, and aunts (always pronounced “ahnt” in my house).

My mother’s upbringing was certainly not rural. She was born and raised in the World War I bustle of Portsmouth, Virginia with its shipyards busy building for the Great War, her parents Jewish immigrants from Lithuania in the late 1880s who ran a small store that primarily served the naval personnel of the area. But her otherwise refined, articulate, educated speech was occasionally peppered with expressions that seemed to come straight from the farm: Getting a Master’s degree from Smith during the Depression had been a hard row for her to hoe. We ate high off the hog, compared to the poverty she saw daily as a social worker. My brother and I could cry till the cows came home, but she was *not* going to give us our druthers and let us go see that violence-filled movie we’d begged for. Such

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\*Edward M. Reingold is a professor of computer science at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign.

rich, agriculturally-oriented expressions became a part of me, deeply ingrained, but rarely apparent.

Until, that is, one inadvertently popped out of my mouth, surprising me and whomever I was talking to.

Enjoying a sumptuous meal or a rich dessert in a restaurant, I might remark that I was in hog heaven, much to the amusement of sophisticated, urban companions. If one of them criticized my choice of food, I'd try *not* to respond that there was no accounting for taste, said the farmer as he kissed his cow. I'd be lecturing to a large class and catch myself just before saying that some alternative was not good, but was better than a sharp stick in the eye. Having found near at hand something that one of my daughters had misplaced, I'd like as not point out that if it was a snake, it would've bit her. If one of them got hurt, I could be counted on to reassure her that it would get better before she got married. When we played a family game of Parcheesi<sup>®</sup>, it was every man for himself and devil take the hindmost.

As the years progressed, I became too aware of the expressions that might perplex or amuse, and self-consciously censored my speech when I felt I might be embarrassed or misunderstood. Phrases that caused sudden, vivid flashes of my mother became rarer and rarer, my memories of her triggered only by other, more ordinary things—the sight of her sabbath candlesticks, an old photograph, a reminiscence with my brother, a piece of her jewelry worn by my wife.

Then, after many years, while watching *Driving Miss Daisy*, it happened again. The familiar-but-forgotten feeling of being brought up short by some turn of phrase. Jessica Tandy, as Miss Daisy, remarks to her chauffeur that Old Man Freitag would be so furious at his granddaughter that “he'd snatch her bald-headed.” The audience in the central Midwestern movie theater tittered from the oddness of the expression, but I was startled, instantly conscious of my mother's voice using just that phrase to describe someone's anger. I lost track of the movie as I luxuriated in Mother's memory for several minutes, stunned that someone else in the world had used those very words that I thought were coined by Mother, used once, and never heard again. What serendipity!

Now, coming full circle, I am occasionally amazed to hear one of my fully urban, Northern-raised, daughters use a phrase of my mother's. Amazed because my mother died nearly thirty years ago, when they were but a twinkle in my eye. They have no memory of her, of course, but she lives on in them nonetheless, in their genes and in their speech.