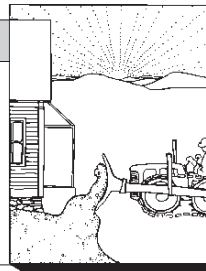


Of Popcorn & Perlite

... and other assorted bits of builders' trivia



by Marylee MacDonald

Ever wondered where a term or saying used in the building trades came from (or in some cases, what it actually means)?

Take perlite, for example. I did some snooping around and learned that those little kernels of styrofoam insulation take their name from the Latin *perlare*—which means to pop, as in popcorn.

Vermiculite, on the other hand, appears to come from the Latin *vermiculare*—to play the accordion. (I still haven't figured that one out.)

So what's the point, you ask? Well, consider this a challenge. Send me any building terms and sayings from your part of the country (either modern or old-time), and I'll track down where they come from and publish a "Builder's Compendium of Little-Known Facts and Obscure Bits of Unrelated Information" ... or something like that.

To give you an idea of what I'm looking for, I offer the following:

- *Dutchman*, a masonry term describing a patch of stone cut to exactly replace a damaged piece of stone wall, appears to have been named by Mary Mapes Dodge, author of *Hans Brinker and the Silver Skates*. She'd never been to Holland or seen a dike, but she pictured a Dutchman putting his finger in the dike to save the day.

- *Plaster of Paris* actually got its name from the gypsum quarries in Montmartre, France, a neighborhood of Paris. It wasn't until the beginning of the 20th Century that we actually started adding gypsum into the lime plaster we used in this country, but we always called it "plaster of Paris" nonetheless.

- Strictly speaking, a *summer beam* actually is a "sommer" beam, and it comes from the French *sommier*, or saddle. That's a pretty good description of how that big center beam carries the load of all the floor joists.

- Those indispensable *glazier's points* to hold in windows actually started out in life as French nails, or *pointes de Paris*—thin wire nails similar to what we now call "brads." Patented by James White, they originally were made only in France.

- *Weights and measurements*: Lots of builders' trivia is waiting to be discovered in this category. Consider the difference between the troy and avoirdupois systems of weights, for example. An avoirdupois pound consists of 16 ounces, while a troy pound consists of 12.

The implications of all this hit home when you consider the proverbial riddle: What weighs more—a pound of feathers or a pound of nails? If you use an avoirdupois scale to weigh the feathers and a troy scale to weigh the nails, the *correct* answer is feathers.

Then there's the case of the cubit, an ancient-day measurement defined as the length of an arm from the end of the middle finger to the elbow. (In fact, in Egyptian hieroglyphics, the symbol for a cubit was a forearm.) According to an article in *Smithsonian*, the cubit of a common man was considered to be 17.2 inches, while the cubit of a king was set at 20.62 inches.

Need some more ideas to get you started? Here are some of the words I'm trying to track down now. (If you have any clues as to how these terms came to be, please pass them on!):

- Cricket (also saddle or hogback; the little sloped "roof" built behind a chimney to help divert water);
- Bird's mouth;
- Bear tracks (hammer marks on wood);
- Furring strips or strapping;
- Gaffer's tape (a form of duct tape); and
- Rake and bargeboard.
- Last but not least, can anyone translate this old plumber's (or glazier's?) saying for me?: "He used to have a plumber that was so straitlaced he wouldn't come in and ask for a square-headed cock." ■

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