

DID YOU KNOW...?

Did people condemned to death in medieval England actually tip their executioners?

By Jack Bagley didyouknowcolumn@gmail.com

Spring is just three weeks away!

Baseball will be getting back into the swing of things with spring training ... robins will be making more and more appearances in our back yards ... the chill will flee and the warmth begin ... days get longer, nights get shorter ... what's not to love about spring?

The sap flows ... and so, sadly, do some of the saps. But we can cope, we always do.

Flowing of trivia, however, never ends, so let's get ready to welcome a new batch of silly stuff right now!

Did you know ...

... a book was once published to counteract one written by Dr. Seuss? In his book, *The Lorax*, Seuss (born Theodor Geisel, 1904-1991) takes the environment down to a child's viewpoint, especially the need for trees. In response, the foresting industry in 1995 published *Truax* by Terri Birkett (born 1957), a satirical response to Seuss' work. It discusses the need for a hardwood flooring industry. The book is told from the point of view of a logger. (I'm trying to work out a way to name a book NoAxe but I got nothing.)

... the richest man in history probably isn't who you think it is? Sure, everybody figures that Bill Gates (born 1955) or Elon Musk (born 1971) are right up there with the highest of them. And adjusted for inflation, John D. Rockefeller (1839-1937), founder of Standard Oil, had a net worth about ten times as much as Gates or Musk. But most likely, the richest in history – again adjusted for inflation – was the Malian ruler Mansa Musa (1280-1337), who was worth in today's money about \$900 billion. (At that point, the numbers are really meaningless, you know.)

... an ethnic group in Asia is allowing themselves to become extinct? The Taron people of the Himalayan foothills of Asia, known to some as "East Asian pygmies," have been a pure and isolated ethnicity, but inbreeding over the centuries has caused physical and developmental problems to the point where, decades ago, they decided to allow themselves to die out. At this writing there are only about five pure Taron people left.

... people condemned to beheading in medieval England would tip their executioners? The idea was to ensure the headsman would complete the job in one blow. Those who refused to give their executioner a gratuity didn't get an easy death; for example, Mary, Queen of Scots (1542-1587) needed a total of fifteen whacks of the blade before her head was severed, because she did not offer her executioner a coin. Additional trivia note: Mary's execution was one of the most bizarre in history. After the deed was done, the executioner held up her head by the hair and said, "God save the Queen!" At that, the head fell to the platform, but the hair was still in the executioner's hand – Mary was wearing a wig, and nobody knew it. If that wasn't weird enough, as Mary was beheaded, a small dog ran out from under her skirt. (Well, that's nothing to lose your head about.)

... zombies really do exist? Yes, I know in previous columns I said zombies cannot exist, and I stand by that – the classic trope about "undead humans" coming back to some form of animation is physically impossible. But in nature, there is a kind of fungus that can take over the body of an insect and turn it into a mindless "zombie." Spores of the tropical fungus *Ophicordyceps* land on an ant's body and grow into the insect's nervous system. After nine days, the fungus has total control of the ant – it forces the ant to climb to a high level of a tree or bush, clamp its jaws around a leaf, and then – at exactly noon – kills the ant and grows through its body to release its own spores. (The spores then go on to enter politics, I'm told.)

... you could be a victim of tyrotoxicism? If you are, you have been poisoned by cheese. (Not a gouda way to die; there are many cheddar ways to go, if you ask me.)

... you may be suffering from matutolypea? If you are, a trip to the doctor is not necessary. Matutolypea is an old term for "getting up on the wrong side of the bed," or basically having a bad day. (I have another term for it, but this is a family newspaper.)

... fish can suffer from depression? Not exactly the same as human depression, we're told, but the condition has its similarities. (If all you had to do was swim and look at other fish, you'd be depressed, too.)

... a popular late-night talk show host got his start as a magician? Johnny Carson (1925-2005), who would host *The Tonight Show* for 30 years, began his entertainment career as a teenage magician. Carson entered the Navy during World War II and received his commission as an ensign. Following the war, the young officer was in a conversation with Secretary of the Navy James Forrestal (1892-1949), and the cranky Forrestal asked Carson if he planned to remain in the service. Carson said he wanted to be a magician, and the secretary asked him to perform. Carson did a card trick that caused the notably dour Forrestal to laugh, and he later said that convinced him he had a future in the entertainment industry. (Heeere's Johnny!)

...the word karaoke has a specific meaning? The Japanese word means "empty orchestra." Kara means empty, and oke is a short word for orchestra. (I thought it meant "lousy singing." It does when I do it.)

Now ... you know!



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