

Superstitions

Mother wasn't superstitious, usually, but she had an amazing collection of folk lore relating to such things as spilled salt, black cats, ladders, and broken mirrors. Many of these phenomena she explained away logically. While she pantomimed throwing a few grains of spilled salt over her left shoulder (I've just learned that the purpose of that maneuver was to throw the salt into the face of the devil, who had caused the spill), she derided the superstition, but she still observed the custom. She tended to hoot at the fear of bad luck if a black cat crossed her path. She pointed out that walking under a ladder *could* be foolish or even dangerous if paint or a hammer should be dislodged from the ladder, and just the inconvenience of cleaning up a broken mirror, not to mention the expense of replacing it, was enough to show me that I should handle mirrors carefully. As a child, however, I scrupulously honored the saying, "Step on a crack, break your mother's back" whenever I walked anywhere on a paved walk.

Mother set an example of sophistication about these and other folkways, but at the same time she left me with lasting memories of a great many fascinating examples of handed down mandates or taboos in behavior. I've had much pleasure with one about eating black-eyed peas on New Year's Day to assure good luck for the rest of the year. One time I tried to pass that custom on by giving friends, especially those from other parts of the country, a jar of pickled black-eyed peas made with a recipe from Helen Corbitt's first Neiman Marcus cookbook. When Corbitt first came to Texas from New York, her customers dismayed her by demanding black-eyed peas, and she felt she had to civilize the peas in some way; pickling them seemed to be the solution. (They're good that way!) One of the friends I favored with the lucky peas promptly tossed them out in my presence because of her conviction that anything given with the promise of luck inevitably brought just the opposite. Was she creating a superstition to replace a superstition?



Black-Eyed Pea Salad is a grander version of the original Pickled Black-Eyed Peas created by Helen Corbitt (1906-1978). Corbitt's creation later became known as Texas Caviar. *Laura Gutschke/Reporter-News*

Mother also repeated the saying that whatever you do on the first day of the year will become a daily habit for the rest of the year. Combining that belief with the one about black-eyed peas, I found for myself that the peas have no good quality in and of themselves when, one New Year's Day, I burned the bottom out of my favorite pot by leaving our peas cooking vigorously while I took the nap that I thought would be a nice custom for the rest of the year. The pot was a total loss, and the nap concept was a washout, too.

A similar superstition was Mother's belief that to start anything on Friday that couldn't be finished that day was to court sure disaster, although there was no bad luck attached to Friday the thirteenth. I began to suspect that deep down she must have been superstitious because she was very unhappy when Paul and I selected Friday as our wedding day. She may have had other reservations about the probable permanence of our marriage, but she clearly didn't want us to tempt fate by beginning our life together with a two-thousand-mile trip to Oregon on Friday. We did both - we defied the Friday "curse."

No matter how *she* felt, I encountered one of Mother's superstitions early in my dating life, when I had a date with Edgar for a movie I really wanted to see. As we pulled out of the driveway into the street, a neighbor's black cat ran in front of the car. Edgar stomped the brake and demanded to know whether the cat had any white marks on it. It didn't. He backed hastily, turned into the driveway, returned to the house, and wouldn't stir. No movie that evening. He refused to say anything except that he wouldn't risk a catastrophe. I was far from pleased and refused to make a date for the following evening - or ever. When he left, he cautiously turned in the opposite direction.

I've enjoyed adding other beliefs to Mother's list. My favorite is one I discovered right after we moved to Virginia. I was shopping with my friend Peggy at Miller and Rhoads in Regency Square. We had entered from the lower covered parking deck and had moved on to the next level. When we were ready to leave the store, we were at the exit into the mall and I started through. Peggy was horrified. We had to retrace our steps to the parking lot in order to leave by the door we had used to enter. I don't know what disaster might have overtaken us if we had used the wrong exit. I've since found other Richmonders who believe in the necessity of entering and leaving by the same door. Sometimes it's more than a minor annoyance, but these folks feel that superstition must be honored.