

Some of our favorite quotations never quite went that way

Did They REALLY Say It?

WHEN ABC'S SAM DONALDSON COMPARED BILL Clinton's persistence with Ross Perot's quick exit from the Presidential race, he concluded: "You know, Harry Truman said it best: 'If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.'"

Did Truman say that? Not originally. He got this comment from his old friend Harry Vaughan. Truman liked Vaughan's comment so much that he kept using it, now saying that he'd got it from an unnamed colleague back in Missouri. By the time he published his autobiography in 1960, Truman wrote, "I used to have a saying that applies here, and I note that some people have picked it up: 'If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen.'"

An impressive number of familiar quotations are actually *misquotations*. Many of our best-known sayings, phrases and comments are inaccurate, misattributed or both. Leo Durocher, for example, never said, "Nice guys finish last." When he was managing the Brooklyn Dodgers in 1946, Durocher did say (about the New York Giants): "The nice guys are all over there. In seventh place." His words lacked pizzazz. Reporters perked them up and gave America one of its most famous quotations.

Other perked-up remarks:

- *War is hell.* What Gen. William

Tecumseh Sherman really said was, "There is many a boy here today who looks on war as all glory, but, boys, it is all hell."

- *The business of America is business.* Calvin Coolidge's words were, "After all, the chief business of the American people is business."

- *What's good for General Motors is good for the country.* Charles E. Wilson actually said, "...for years I thought that what was good for our country was good for General Motors and vice-versa." In this case, Dwight Eisenhower's Secretary of Defense may have been helped into the quotation books by someone who recalled the words of a corrupt banker in the 1939 film *Stagecoach*: "What's good for the bank is good for the country."

Retro-quotes. Putting words in the mouths of famous people works best when the people are dead. That's how some of America's most familiar quotations came into being. Among them are: "Taxation without representation is tyranny!"; "Give me liberty or give me death!"; and "We must all hang together, or most assuredly we shall all hang separately." These are all retro-quotes, comments attributed to James Otis, Patrick Henry and Ben Franklin long after their deaths.

Nathan Hale's "last words" before his 1776 execution as a spy—"I only regret that I have but one life to give for my country"—first appeared in the 1848 memoirs of his friend William Hull. Hull said he'd been told that these were Hale's last words by a British officer who attended his execution. If said at all, Hale's words almost certainly were inspired by these lines from Joseph Addison's 1713 play *Cato*: "What pity is it/That we can die but once to serve our country!"

Famous quotes need famous mouths. Words carry more weight if they're attributed to someone we've heard of. Winston Churchill is thought to have introduced "iron curtain" in a 1946 speech on the USSR. But that phrase had been used for decades by such forgotten commentators as Vasily Rozanov, George Crile and Ethel Snowden, who in 1920 wrote: "We were behind the 'iron curtain' at last!" Since Churchill's name is better known than Snowden's, he got author credit.

The same thing happened to "There's a sucker born every minute." P.T. Barnum, right? Wrong. The Barnum Museum curator Robert Pelton calls this "one of the few things he didn't say."

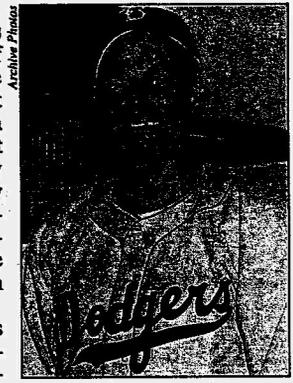
Who did? According to one report, a con man named "Paper Collar Joe" (Joseph Bessimer) told a New York police inspector in the 1880s, "There is a sucker born every minute, but none of them die."

How about "Never give a sucker an even break"? Although often credited to W.C. Fields, the writer-gambler Wilson Mizner used that phrase long before Fields. Fields also gets undeserved credit for "Any man who hates dogs and children can't be all bad," an observation made by Leo Rosten *about* Fields as he introduced the comedian at a 1939 banquet.

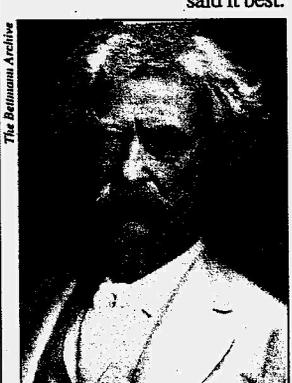
Flypaper figures. W.C. Fields is a "flypaper figure"—someone to whom orphan quotes routinely stick. Abraham Lincoln is another. Lincoln could be the single most misquoted American. Even some of his most famous comments are doubtful. Take, "You can fool all of the people some of the time; you can even fool some of the people all of the time; but you can't fool all of the people all of the time." This was attributed to Lincoln by a book published four decades after the President's death. Historians don't take it seriously.

Rivaling Lincoln as a flypaper figure is Ralph Waldo Emerson. When James Baker was Secretary of State, he quoted Emerson as having said, "We have not inherited the earth from our fathers, we are borrowing it from our children." Emerson didn't say that. Who did? A Celestial Seasonings tea box calls this an "Amish belief." The saying is more often called a "Native American proverb." Neither is likely. The maxim is a little too perfectly tailored to today's headlines. Its origins remain a mystery. Why did Baker (or his speechwriter) think the remark was Emerson's? Probably because it "sounded like" him.

The "sounds-like" syndrome. Many comments are misplaced in mouths simply because they "sound like" that person. Mark Twain is a leading beneficiary. Putting words in Twain's mouth is a national pastime. But many of our favorite comments by him are apocryphal. They include: "The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco"; "To cease smoking is the easiest thing. I ought to know, because I've done it 1000 times"; and "When I was a boy of 14, my father was so ignorant, I could



"Nice guys finish last."
—Leo Durocher



"The coldest winter I ever spent was a summer in San Francisco."
—Mark Twain



"If you can't stand the heat, get out of the kitchen."
—Harry Truman

"Play it again, Sam."
—Humphrey Bogart



"Why don't you come up and see me sometime?"
—Mae West

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hardly stand to have the old man around. But when I got to be 21, I was astonished at how much he had learned in seven years." None of these remarks has been found in Twain's vast body of work.

Introducing a humorous remark as Twain's is like "an insurance policy," says Robert Hirst, who works with Twain's papers at the University of California at Berkeley. "Attributing something to Twain adds to the joke," he explains. "When they hear his name, people are disposed to laugh."

The immutable law of misquotation. At any given moment, certain things demand to be said—and by the right person. Who cares if they're accurate? Take "Sometimes a cigar is just a cigar." That's something we desperately want Sigmund Freud to have said. But there's no evidence that he did. Where did these words originate? Alan Elms, a psychology professor at the University of California at Davis, thinks the quote may have begun with a comedian who was spoofing Freud.

We've had more luck with "The opera ain't over till the fat lady sings." The basketball coach Dick Motta put this adage in play during the 1978 NBA playoffs, saying he got it that year from the San Antonio sportscaster Dan Cook. But the 1976 book *Southern Words and Sayings* includes, "Church ain't out 'til the fat lady sings." Some Southerners recall hearing variations on this theme for decades.

How about "Winning isn't everything, it's the only thing"? Although thought to be the signature line of the Green Bay Packers coach Vince Lombardi, he denied paternity. Football coach Red Sanders used this maxim in the '40s and '50s.

Signature misquotes. A surprising number of these turn out to be apocryphal. Even Sherlock Holmes' immortal observation, "Elementary, my dear Watson," appears nowhere in the collected works of his creator, Sir Arthur Conan Doyle. That phrase comes from the 1929 movie *The Return of Sherlock Holmes*. Other apocryphal lines include Humphrey Bogart's "Play it again, Sam" (which no one said in *Casablanca*); James Cagney's "You dirty rat!" (origins unknown); and Charles Boyer's "Come with me to the Casbah" (ditto). Mae West's line "Why don't you come up and see me sometime?" began life as "Why don't you come up sometime and see me?" (in the film *She Done Him Wrong*).

Does it matter that we misquote so routinely? Not really. Still, if only for the record, we ought to know the actual wording and source of famous quotations. By discovering who really said what, we learn other things too. What makes us respond to apocryphal words at a given time? Why do we want noted figures to say things they didn't? The answers may tell us something about ourselves that we couldn't learn any other way. ■

Ralph Keyes is the author of "Nice Guys Finish Seventh: False Phrases, Spurious Sayings and Familiar Misquotations."