

POGEY – WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

It has come to my attention that even though the term “pogey” is widely used all across Canada as a colloquialism for Employment Insurance nobody seems to know the origin of the term. This was once pointed out to me by an American friend who took the opportunity to impress upon me that understanding one’s own slang is an important part of understanding one’s history, and that this was just another example of the lackadaisical nature of Canadians. Twenty years later I got a strange bug to answer his question. I suppose he was right.

The starting point of the search was, of course, the Internet. A limited set of hits were returned that appear to offer enough information to formulate a solid hypothesis for why the word pogey became synonymous with Unemployment Insurance (UI). In recent years UI was renamed to Employment Insurance (EI) for no apparent reason beyond government spin doctoring. There is also enough information to propose a more tenuous hypothesis for the origins of the word.

Numerous related questions and fewer answers were found, validating that this is indeed a hot topic in need of resolution. Who knows how many are losing sleep over this unsolved mystery? An example Q&A pair follows¹.

[Q] “Can you tell us the derivation of the word ‘pogey’ which was used in parts of Canada during the Great Depression to mean government relief—similar to ‘the dole’ and also disparaging. I grew up in western Canada and never heard ‘pogey’ used but it is often referred to in Ontario.”

[A] It seems to have come from a general North American term for a workhouse, homeless hostel or poorhouse, which is recorded from near the end of the nineteenth century. However, that is merely to move the problem back half a century, since the origin of ‘pogey’ in that sense is also unknown.

¹ <http://www.worldwidewords.org/qa/qa-pog1.htm>

Someone has made the effort to collect a few literary references relevant to the subject and dated as far back as 1891². The following three are consistent in describing a “poorhouse” or temporary housing for the poor. The unemployed are generally poor. That was even more true in the late 1800’s and early 1900’s than today.

1891: "Begging is called 'battering for chewing'; railway brakemen, 'brakies'; poorhouses, 'POGIES'."—'Contemporary Review,' August, ii. page 255

1927: "A 'POGEY' is a poorhouse. Government homes for disabled veterans are also known as 'POGIES.'"—'American Speech,' June, page 387/2

1959: "Lean and hungry alley-cat men swung down from the freights and headed for a fifteen-cent mission meal or the innumerable POGIES and scratch houses for a ten-cent cot."—"Maclean's Magazine" (Toronto), 15 August, page 21/1

The next definition uses the word “workhouse” instead of “poorhouse”, but qualifies it as hobo slang³. Hobos were also generally unemployed and very poor.

pogey; poggy; [pogi] n. Originally, hobo slang for "workhouse".

The next definition nicely ties the preceding references and definition together into one, and adds the additional constraint that the home is supported by a charity or the government. Interestingly, it follows with a commentary about a much older meaning of the word – to be drunk⁴. This suggests the word may possibly be an aspersion implying that a pogey is a place where drunks go to find refuge. Hobos, the poor and the unemployed of a century ago were definitely stereotyped with alcoholism by those who were better off.

pogey; pogie; poggy; n. 1. Any home provided by charity or government funds for the aged, disabled, etc. ; a poorhouse; a government home for disabled veterans; an old-age home; a workhouse. 1891: "Tramps' use."

² http://wordwizard.com/ch_forum/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=8774

³ http://pointask.com/pointask/f_q.php3?qid=30083

⁴ http://www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin_board/12/messages/1050.html

Interestingly, 'Pogy' in 1811 was slang for 'drunk'. It prevailed until perhaps 1890 in the U.K. but survived longer in the U.S., according to Eric Partridge's "Dictionary of Slang and Unconventional English", "pogy" with a hard "g", meaning tipsy. He doesn't say how much longer.

It is interesting that the word pogy is used as a name for a government home for disabled veterans when the origin of the very similar sounding word "fogy" is considered. It is possible that there is a relationship between fogey and pogy in this context, and that over time its use was expanded to describe any funded home for the aged or poor.

He's an old fogey, used to describe someone as a bit old fashioned: out of touch with modern things. Why Fogey? In 1811 an "Old Fogey" was a nick name for an invalid, wounded soldier; derived from the French word fougueux, fierce or fiery⁵.

The next definition is markedly different from the previous ones, but does to some degree validate the relationship to drunkenness.

Pogy/Pogey/Pogie – Probably originally cant. "Pogy!" or "pogeyaqua!" (means "little water") means "Make the grog strong!" British & US, since the 1800s⁶.

Anyone exclaiming "pogeyaqua!" to the bartender was obviously intending to get drunk, but what a strange word. "Poco" is an Italian musical term meaning "little". Somehow poco turned into pogey, hence "little water". Today, an Italian ordering a drink with little water would say, "Con poca acqua." This gives us a second candidate for the origin of the word pogey revolving around little.

The following text was found in a Canadian grade 11 social studies teacher's marking guide for the essay question "To what extent was the Canadian government successful in its attempts to deal with the Depression?"⁷ It gives support to the possibility that pogey is in some way related to little. Specifically, to have and/or receive little.

⁵ http://www.phrases.org.uk/bulletin_board/5/messages/785.html

⁶ http://freaky_freya.tripod.com/Drunktionary/P-S.html

⁷ http://www.bced.gov.bc.ca/exams/marking_materials/ss11/SS11_papers.pdf

Though the ultimate origin of this term is obscure, it became current in Canada and was in general use throughout the Depression in a variety of applications, all related to the widespread public-relief programs.

...

The Government distributed "Pogey" to those who qualified. This was a type of welfare that was given to those who were approved by an inspector. If a person owned a radio or some type of valuable product, they were denied Pogey. Those who received Pogey sometimes got food vouchers, which for some was humiliating.

...

[The] government offered "pogey", a form of welfare for the especially impoverished during this time. Unfortunately, this assistance was too small to provide much relief, and was only available to those who had no money, property employment or housing at all.

...

The government's first attempt to "help" was by setting up a program that would allow people to get "pogey" relief payments. These payments were nothing more than food vouchers and could not take care of any other expenses. The process of receiving these vouchers was also humiliating and you needed to qualify before you could receive the relief payments; you weren't able to own anything and you had to be in the process of being evicted from your house.

...

Food was scarce, and most lived off the "pogey", which they obtained only through a public admittance of bankruptcy. The Canadian government failed to make the acquisition of the dole less humiliating.

Pogey was obviously a very different form of support than "the dole" during the depression. The dole is a term that is used interchangeably with pogey in Canada, and is also used in the UK as a slang for government assistance. During the depression the dole was in fact "able-bodied relief" of six cents a day⁸, and pogey was nothing more than food vouchers. So, if you had less – you got less.

⁸ <http://www.uccs.mun.ca/~melbaker/confederation1949.htm>

To recap, the word “pogey” was English slang derived as early as 1811 from the Italian musical term “poco”, meaning “little”. Since then we have a trail of two possible meanings for the word. The first is it’s original meaning, little, and the second is to be drunk via the compound term “pogeyaqua”, a way to order a strong drink. From at least 1891 until the depression the word pogey was used as a slang for a poorhouse. Whether the word was chosen because those who stayed or lived in pogeys were either poor (i.e. had little) or believed to be drunkards is hard to tell because the two meanings were tangled up in “pogeyaqua”, and the similarity to the word “fogey” must also be considered. However, it is clear that the term pogey was used during the depression in Canada as the name of the government assistance for those unfortunate souls who had the least property. In fact, it was necessary to have virtually no property to qualify for pogey. So, in the context of Canadian government income assistance, the word pogey surely finds its roots from the original Italian word “poco” meaning “little”, albeit via the slang “pogeyaqua” that has an altogether different connotation.

The following definition is very complete and includes references to all the uses of the word pertaining to assistance⁹. But it comes with an interesting twist in the first adjective definition.

POGEY/POGY:

1) adjective – Slang. a) a package of food, candy, or other treats sent to a child at boarding school, a person in an institution, etc. b) candy or a treat.

2) noun – Canadian Slang a) [1891] an institution maintained by private charities or government funds for the housing of the aged, sick, orphaned, or feeble-minded; an old-age home, charity hospital, orphanage, or the like. b) any form of charity or government relief. c) [1960] relief given to the needy from national or local funds; unemployment insurance provided by the government;

⁹ http://wordwizard.com/ch_forum/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=8774

3) adjective – Canadian slang. Of, pertaining to, or obtained through charity or government relief: 'pogey shoes.'

The twist is that the definition doesn't just include food, in keeping with the Canadian depression era experience, but also includes a candy or a treat.

Origin of the Term "Pogey Bait"

There's an old story going around the [US Marine] Corps - has been for years - about the origin of the term "Pogey Bait". The Marines in China before WW II were issued candy (Baby Ruths, Tootsie Rolls, etc.) as part of their ration supplements. At the time, sugar and other assorted sweets were rare commodities in China and much in demand by the Chinese, so the troops found the candy useful for barter in town. The Chinese word for prostitute, roughly translated, is "pogey". Thus, Marines being Marines, candy became "Pogey Bait".¹⁰

What a strange coincidence it is that there is a more recent story involving a Chinese word that sounds like pogey that may have contributed to that first definition. I think it is unlikely that the story of Chinese origin has any relationship to the use of the word pogey as a slang for government assistance, but it certainly is curious.

This means that there is a fairly tangled web of origins for the word pogey. In the context of a charity or government funded **residence** for the disabled, poor or elderly the origin may be the French word "*fougueux*", meaning fiery. At first it was specifically used as slang for a home for disabled veterans, but over time its use became more general. When referring to Canadian government **assistance**, originally in the form of food but more recently including all forms of assistance, the origin may be the Italian word "*poco*", meaning little. This word originates surprisingly from the request for a strong alcoholic drink. Both of these slang terms appear to have originated in England and, while the initial meanings were quite different, they have converged to include the government as the source. Lastly there is the use of pogey as a US Marine slang for candy based on the sound of the Chinese word for

¹⁰ <http://www.hmm-364.org/pogey-bait.html>

prostitute. It appears that the reference to food handouts from Italian origin and candy from this more recent source is entirely coincidental.

The term pogeey continues to be used in Canada to the present day. Here are a few more literary references as evidence of its persistence¹¹.

1960: "Today unemployment-insurance payments are often referred to as POGHEY. But POGHEY in the depths of the thirties meant something as different from present-day unemployment insurance as panhandling is from drawing money from your bank account. The word expresses by its very sound, the sometimes harsh and always meager allowances doled out to the unemployed."—"Maclean's Magazine" (Toronto), 2 April, page 54/2 [first appearance as 'unemployment benefits']

1961: "Said a jobless Hamilton steelworker, father of six children: 'Why should I sweat for \$40 a week? I'm getting more than that from the POGHEY, the welfare and the baby bonus.'"—"Time," 31 March, page 9/2

1964: "During the winter we lived on turnips, potatoes, canned clams and the pogy, and Mother and I would hook rugs for the tourist trade."—"Ice Road" by H. T. Barker, page 49

1976: "The Kingston area's fourth largest and fastest growing industry is unemployment insurance—POGEY or, if you wish, the dole."—"Whig-Standard" (Kingston, Ontario), 6 January, page 1/6

2005: "Last I read, Liberal Pogeey Minister Joe Volpe was scrambling to restore \$1 billion worth of seasonal-work EI benefits by cabinet order heading into last year's election."—"Calgary Sun," 11 November¹²

The path of a century or more that lead to this word becoming commonplace in the Canadian vernacular is indeed a winding one. But the answer to the question about the meaning of

¹¹ http://wordwizard.com/ch_forum/topic.asp?TOPIC_ID=8774

¹² http://calsun.canoe.ca/News/Columnists/Byfield_Link/2005/11/18/1311827.html

“pogey” turns out to be quite simple. **To be “on pogey” is to have little.** To depend on EI in 2006 is certainly less than desirable, unless you’re on the “EI Ski Team”. But to depend on pogey during the depression was to be in as dismal a state of human existence as can be imagined. Yet, paradoxically, pogey also emotes the merriment that accompanies a good stiff drink among friends.

Russ Bonny – 12 February, 2006