

of fun to read. I'm glad you sent them. The miss on 'the big store,' however, suggests that Mr. Rector's ability to tell his stories well may not necessarily say much about how well those stories mirror the reality they're supposed to represent.

A BIBLIOGRAPHIC NOTE

Maurer's *The Big Con: the Story of the Confidence Man and the Confidence Game* was originally published in 1940 by Bobbs-Merrill (Indianapolis). Pocket Books brought it out in paperback in 1949, and Anchor Books republished it in 1999. I suspect that the same material was published in 1974 by Thomas (Springfield, Ill.) as *The American Confidence Man*, but I haven't had a chance to compare that edition with the others.

MATERIAL FOR THE STUDY OF *EAT CROW*: THREE VERSIONS OF HUMOROUS STORY AGREE THAT SCOTCH SNUFF MADE THE BOILED CROW PARTICULARLY UNAPPETIZING

Barry Popik
225 E. 57 St., Apt. 7P
New York, NY 10022

[ed., G. Cohen: This item is reprinted from *Comments on Etymology*, Oct. 2003, vol. 33, no. 1, pp. 7-9, which in turn is an expansion of a June 22, 2003 message sent by Popik to the American Dialect Society; title: 'Eating Crow (1850, 1880).' He adds two versions of the story to the similar one mentioned in *OED2*, with all three being in basic agreement: A cantankerous old 'Rube'-type farmer is outwitted by his (presumably urban) boarders and winds up 'eating crow,' made particularly unappetizing by the addition of Scotch snuff. The punch line 'I kin eat a crow, but I'll be darned if I hanker after/arter it' now produces at most a wan smile but was probably hilarious in the 19th century. The punch line guaranteed the retelling of the story, and so *eat crow* is one of numerous words/expressions which owe their origin at least partly to humor.]

TREATMENT IN *OED2*

OED2, *crow*, n. #1

...3. a. In phrases and proverbial sayings, as... to eat (boiled) crow (U.S. colloq.): to be forced to do something extremely disagreeable and humiliating.

... [1851 San Francisco Picayune 3 Dec. 1/6, I kin eat a crow, but I'll be darned if I hanker after it.]

1872 Daily News 31 July, Both [are]..in the curious slang of American politics, 'boiled crow' to their adherents.

1877 N. & Q. 5th Ser. VIII. 186/1 A newspaper editor, who is obliged..to advocate 'principles' different from those which he supported a short time before, is said to 'eat boiled crow'.

- 1884 'MARK TWAIN' Lett. (1917) II. 443 Warner and Clark are eating their daily crow in the paper.
 1885 Mag. Amer. Hist. XIII. 199 'To eat crow' means to recant, or to humiliate oneself.
 1930 'E. QUEEN' French Powder Myst. xxiv. 196, I should merely be making an ass of myself if I accused someone and then had to eat crow.
 1970 New Yorker 17 Oct. 39/1, I was going to apologize, eat crow, offer to kiss and make up.

STORY PRESENTED IN THE 1851 REFERENCE CITED BY OED2

OED2 refers to the *San Francisco Picayune*; specifically, it is the *Daily Evening Picayune* (San Francisco, Cal.), Dec. 3, 1851, p. 1, col. 6:

'EATING A CROW.---A worthy old farmer residing in the vicinity of Lake Mahopack, was worried to death last summer by boarders. They found fault with his table, and said he had nothing fit to eat. "Darn it," said Isaac, one day, "wat a fuss you are making. I can eat anything." "Can you eat a crow?" said one of the boarders. "Yes, I kin eat a crow." Bet you a hat," said the guest. The bet was made, the crow was caught and nicely roasted, but, before serving it up, they contrived to season it with a good dose of Scotch snuff. Isaac sat down to the crow, he took a good bite, and began to chew away. "Yes I kin eat a crow! (Another bite and an awful face,) *I kin eat a crow, but I'll be darned if I hanker after it.*"

VERSION IN CHICAGO TRIBUNE, 1880

I've found notes about *eat crow* in several 1880 newspapers, e.g. *Chicago Tribune*, 8 June 1880, p. 4, col. 5:

'EATING CROW

'The politics of "eating crow" is in the application of the original story to people who swallow a disagreeable candidate of their own party rather than vote for the candidate of their opponent. ...The following story explains how that peculiar diet

came into vogue:

'The first allusion to "eating crow" was made in the *Knickerbocker Magazine* a little more than a quarter of a century ago. It was a story of a summer boarding-house-keeper on the Hudson and of an indignant patron. Whenever the latter ventured to suggest that the spring chicken was rather tough, or that the roast beef must have been cut from the cow's beefs, he was directly told that he was entirely "too perticeler," and that the autocrat of the table and the house could eat anything, even a crow. This settled the matter for the time being, but the boarder convinced against his will was of the same opinion, still, at all events, in regard to the quality of the edibles placed before him. So often was the remark, "I kin eat anything; I kin eat a crow," brought down on his devoted head that he finally resolved to try the old man. He went out gunning one day and succeeded in bagging a very fine, fat, old black crow. He went into the kitchen, and, by dint of soft words and filthy lucre, induced the cook to allow him to prepare the crow for the table.

He boiled it nicely, and it wasn't such a bad-looking dish after all. His heart misgave him; the flinty old cuss would eat it after all. The cook was a Scotch woman, and used snuff. He borrowed all she had and sprinkled it liberally over the crow, gave her another simmer, and then, taking it on a salver, brought it before his host, saying as he set it down, "Now, my dear sir, you have said a thousand times, if you have said it once, that you can eat crow. Here is one very carefully cooked." It is said the old man turned pale for a moment, but braced himself against the back of his chair, and with "I kin eat crow," he began, cutting a good mouthful. He swallowed it, and then, preparing for a second onslaught, he looked his boarder straight in the eye, while he ejaculated, "I've eaten crow," and took his second portion. He lifted his hands mechanically, as if for a third onslaught, but dropped them quickly over the region of his stomach, and, rising hurriedly and unsteadily, retreated for the door, muttering as he went, "but dang me if I hanker arter it."

The American Periodical Series Online doesn't have it in *The Knickerbocker*, but has it here; this version is very close to the 1851 one cited by OED2 (from *Daily Evening Picayune*, San Francisco), presented above in full.

Saturday Evening Post (1839-1885), Philadelphia; Nov 2, 1850; Vol. XXX., Iss. 0, Article 15 -- No Title; page 4:

CAN YOU EAT CROW?--Lake Mahopac was so much crowded, the past season, or, rather, the hotels in its immediate vicinity were, that the farm-houses were filled with visitors. One of the worthy farmers residing there, it appears, was especially worried to death by boreders.--They found fault with his table--this thing was bad and wasn't fit to eat--and at last the old fellow got so tired of trying to please them, that he undertook as the last resource to reason the matter with them.

"Darn it," said old Isaac, one day, "what a fuss you're making; I can eat anything."

"Can you eat crow?" said one of his young boarders.

"Yes, I kin eat crow."

"Bet you a hat," said his guest.

The bet was made, a crow caught and nicely roasted, but before serving up, they contrived to season it with a good dose of Scotch snuff.

Isaac sat down to the crow. He took a good bite, and began to chew away. "Yes," he said, "I kin eat crow (*another bite and awful face*,) I kin eat crow, (*symptoms of nausea*,) I kin eat crow; but I'll be darned if I hanker arter it." -- Isaac bolted.'

1935 NEW YORK SUN ARTICLE ON RACKET SLANG

Barry Popik
225 E. 57 St., Suite 7P
New York, NY 10022

[G. Cohen: Barry Popik spotted this *NY Sun* item and drew it to the attention of the American Dialect Society, Sept. 24, 2001. I then numbered the paragraphs, compiled the slang items in alphabetical order, and added a few comments and minor revisions. The resulting article was first presented in *Comments on Etymology*, vol. 31, no. 2, Nov. 2001, pp. 2-9.]

From the *New York Sun*, 19 February 1935, p. 28, col. 1:
title: 'Racket Slang Explains Itself'

subtitle: 'Odd Phrases That Are Ingeniously Devised to
Trap the Unwary Customer'

[1] 'The slang of gangsters is treated more with amusement than personal interest by the average man, who sees in it no practical application to his own affairs. The chance that he will ever be taken for a ride is remote. But the commercial underworld has a language of its own that is worth learning. The man who understands it has some insurance against the risks of losing his money on bad merchandise or financial rackets.

[2] 'Living on the fringe of legitimate trade are merchants and salesmen who find profit in ignoring copybook ethics. With special words and phrases they can even discuss the details of the crime in the presence of a sucker without alarming him.

[3] 'To the prospective buyer of an automobile from a disreputable second-hand dealer there might seem to be nothing sinister in a remark about "bushing him \$100 on the smacko," but this should be the signal to leave in a hurry. A smacko is a badly wrecked car that has been rebuilt. The process of bushing is to get the customer "in the bag for a d. p." (signing up with a down payment), and then, when the final contract is to be signed, to raise the price above that which was set originally.

[4] 'The price-raising is not disclosed until after the dealer has