

The Name's Familiar

**The
Name's Familiar**

**Mr. Leotard, Barbie, and
Chef Boyardee**

By Laura Lee



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Introduction

Mary Elizabeth Sawyer had a little lamb. The followers of Franciscan John Duns Scotus were the first “dunces.” James Kilroy was here. Yes, Virginia, there was a Good King Wenceslas. The Reverend Thomas Lushington was the first “lush.” Jules Leotard wore tight pants. And yes, there really was a Peggy Sue, a Duke of Earl, a Barbie, a Dennis the Menace, a Dr. Pepper, a Mother Goose, a Chef Boyardee, a Huey, Louie, and Dewey, a Sweet Adeline, and a Rambo.

The names are familiar, and now you can place the face. *The Name's Familiar* introduces you to the actual people who inspired, conspired, or were just plain unlucky enough to have their names immortalized. Names such as “lynch,” “goblin,” “hooligan,” “boycott,” “hooker,” and “guillotin” once belonged to real people.

And then there are the scientists who have given their names to comets, electrical currents, parts of the body, and deadly diseases, and the entrepreneurs whose names are found in your pantry, bathroom, and garage.

This book began as the story of a girl named Alice, and a radio program. As the morning announcer at radio station WAGE in Leesburg, Virginia, I was always looking for interesting questions for Tuesday Trivia.

I lived in a small apartment that was sparsely furnished, with the exception of large piles of reference books. One afternoon, while browsing through my collection, I came across the story of Alice Liddell, the inspiration for Alice in Wonderland.

Although she bore little physical resemblance to her Walt Disney animated namesake, Alice was real. Not only had I

found my Tuesday Trivia question for that week, I had found a new hobby—collecting the stories of the people behind familiar names.

Whenever I went to the supermarket I began to wonder: was there an Oscar Mayer? A: Yes. Was there a Mr. Pringle behind Pringle's Potato Chips? A: No. The plant was originally located on Pringle Street in Chicago. (And no, there was no Mr. Coffee or Mr. Clean, either.)

A growing number of "people questions" appeared in my show. For example:

Which were there more of, Ringling Brothers or Warner Brothers? What do the M&M on the candy bag stand for? What were the first names of Harley and Davidson? (You can find the answers in this book.)

In addition, a growing number of biographies began appearing in the "Names" file on my hard drive. Those biographies eventually became this book. Each entry in the book tells the story of a real person, and how his name managed to slip into the language. Most save the familiar word or product name for the very end so you can play along and try to guess the magic word before the final sentence.

Of course, every field has its own jargon and its own set of words derived from people's names. Some of the references in this book may seem somewhat obscure. On the other hand, you may use terms every day that do not appear in the book. For the most part, I used a completely subjective selection process. If I've heard of it, I figured other people probably have too. Since I have a degree in theatre and a career in broadcasting behind me, you'll find more entries related to things such as stage lighting that border on the obscure than doctors who gave their names to relatively uncommon diseases, for example.

Then there were the people who fall into the "way too obvious" category. For example, I didn't think I needed to waste too much ink pointing out that Washington State and Washington, D. C., were named for George Washington.

Similarly, there are some expressions that other authors

have included in collections of eponyms (words derived from people's names) that I have not. Many prominent people are familiar enough that people make references to them. If the expression outlasts the celebrity's fame, then it is included in this book. If, however, the expression is in vogue during a celebrity's heyday and fades quickly thereafter, I consider it to be a reference to a celebrity, and not an eponym.

At one time, people referred to a life jacket as a "Mae West," a reference to the actress' shape. Mae West is still a film legend, but the expression has fallen out of use. It is doubtful that anyone ever fastened on a "Mae West" and wondered how it had gotten that name.

Many people today refer to wire-rimmed glasses as "John Lennon glasses," an allusion to the member of the Beatles who helped popularize what were once known as "granny glasses." Perhaps people will still call their glasses "John Lennons" after they have forgotten the Beatles, but I doubt it.

Similarly, Sigmund Freud, though long gone, has not faded from our cultural memory. People who use the expression "Freudian" these days generally know that they are making a reference to Sigmund Freud. It is likely that the expression "a Freudian slip" will still be around after most people have forgotten its origin, but I don't believe that has happened yet, and so you will not find a Freudian entry.

While compiling this book, I discovered that I was getting an education in the origins of ordinary things. Behind the names are a lot of firsts and a lot of improvements and innovations that helped lay the foundation for the way of life we take for granted today. I hope that you will enjoy meeting the people behind the names as much as I did.

The Names