

By ANNE DONNELL

*What is the story behind "square meal"? It should be interesting, because, though I've seen square plates, I don't think they ever "made it big." Thanks. □ -More Round Than Square!*

I'm square while round! Ask my grandson, an altogether splendid lad aged 12. I'm having another relaxing week achieved through finding an online answer (see below!) and copying and pasting my way to the finish line. All this did involve some time spent with our excellent local The Computer Doctor, and, finally, some time spent making this old dog (me, and that's as far as we'll go with the dog imagery) learn new tricks with a new computer and yet another version of Windows©. Why do those tech inventor people have to keep inventing and upgrading? It's so tough on us who are still fumbling through setting electric alarm clocks.

This is from a weekly newsletter e-mail, "A Phrase A Week," sent to 125,500 subscribers. I'm one. SO, about square meal: "Meaning - A substantial, nourishing meal. Origin - It is frequently repeated, by tour guides and the like, that the expression '*a square meal*' originated from the Royal Navy practice of serving meals on square wooden plates. Such plates did exist so that is a plausible story, but there's no other evidence to support it. In fact, the lateness of the first printed record (see below) pretty well rules this out as a credible theory....

"This 'square plate' theory is one of the best-known examples of folk-etymology. The phrase exists, the square plates exist, and two and two make five. To be more precise, what we have here is a back-formation. Someone hears the phrase 'square meal' and then invents a plausible story to fit it.

"The word *square* has many meanings, including 'proper, honest, straightforward', and that's the meaning in 'square meal'. This isn't a rectilinear meal on right-angled crockery, but a good and satisfying meal.

"The phrase is of U.S. origin. All the early citations are from America, including this, the earliest print reference...found - an advertisement for the Hope and Neptune restaurant, in the California newspaper *The Mountain Democrat*, November 1856: 'We can promise all who

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patronize us that they can always get a hearty welcome and square meal at the Hope and Neptune. Oyster, chicken and game suppers prepared at short notice.

“... There certainly was a spate of coinages of 'food words' in the USA around that date. The terms below all originated in the 1830s and 40s: *chili con carne, clambake, cottage cheese, cupcake, gazpacho, jerky, restaurant, tea cake, tenderloin, tutti-frutti, seafood.*

[I regret the coinage of

*tutti*

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*frutti*

, even with the subsequent rock 'n roll classic, “Tutti-frutti, all rooty” originally performed in 1955, made famous by Little Richard. I don't like tutti-frutti ice cream, either. We wordies have words we don't like.]

“The use of 'square' to mean honest and straightforward goes back to at least the 16th century; for example, in 1591, in Robert Greene's *Defence of Conny Catching*: 'For feare of trouble I was fain to try my good hap at square play.' Soon after that, Shakespeare used it in

*Anthony and Cleopatra*

, 1606: 'She's a most triumphant Lady, if report be square to her.'”

So Shakespeare's square, just as generations of teenagers have maintained.

ONLINE DEPARTMENT “The New Alphabet” (Thanks, C.G.) *A is for apple, and B is for boat; that used to be right, but now it won't float. “Age before beauty” is what we once said, but let's be a bit more realistic instead. A's for arthritis; B's the bad back; C's the chest pains, perhaps car-di-ac? D's for dental decay and decline; E's for eyesight, can't read that top line! F's for pills for fluid retention; G's for gas, which I'd rather not mention; H's high blood pressure, better if low; I's for incisions with scars you can show; J's for joints, out of socket, won't mend; K's for knees that crack when they bend; L's for lazars so eyes can read text; M's for memory, who knows what goes next; N's for neuralgia in nerves way down low; O's for osteo, bones that don't grow; P's for prescriptions – you'll be good as new; Q's for queasy, is it fatal or flu? R's for reflux, one meals turns to two; S's for sleepless nights mulling your fears; T's for tinnitus, bells in your ears! U's for urinary, troubles with flow; V's for vertigo, that's dizzy, you know; W's for worry, what malady's going round? X's for X-ray and what might be found; Y's for another year in the downward swirl; Z's for the zest you have – but don't try to twirl!*

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**BW (Bigtime Word) *epenthesis* – the erroneous insertion of an extra sound in the pronunciation (and sometimes, eventually, the spelling) of a word. What you guys do to mischievous when you say (incorrectly) mis chee vee ous.**