

Those Yankees

Russell Lowke, November 7th, 2000

They've done it again. The New York Yankees are front page news, winning their 26th World Series. With Baseball being Americas sport, and the teams amazing track record, the term "Yankees" is now simply understood to mean "Baseball — The New York Yankees."

The Yankees, unlike most other teams, don't wear their names on their shirts. I'm told this is tradition — some excuse that is. We are expected to know the players by number, by heart. Such is the love/hate for the New York Yankees. <http://www.yankees.com> is the Yankees web site, regardless of the fact that, last I remember, "Yankees" was a broad word meaning "all citizens of the United States or, more narrowly, of New England." I don't see what the Yankees have in common with New England, or the Red Sox for that matter. Regardless, George Steinbrenner would be happy to have us believe that he invented the term "Yankees."

So where does this odd sounding word come from? What does it really mean? Who coined it, and why "Yankees?" There are Connecticut Yankees, New York Yankees, Yankees in World War II and Mark Twain has a Yankee at King Arthur's Court. Yankees origins are obscure and cannot be absolutely determined. According to the Facts on File Encyclopedia of Word and Phrase Origins, Yankee is likely a shortened form of "John Cheese."

The earliest known suggestion of the origin of Yankee comes from Thomas Anbury, a British officer serving under Burgoyne in 1789. He says it is from the Cherokee word eankke meaning slave or coward and that it was first applied by Virginians to New Englanders who refused to help them in their war with the Cherokees. A problem with this theory is that no such word actually exists in the Cherokee language.

Others, starting with the Rev. John Heckewelder (1819) and James Fenimore Cooper (1841) claim that Yankee is a corruption of the word English in American Indian. Various supposed Indian words such as Yengees support this hypothesis.

The Earliest usage of Yankee cites from the 1680s. It was a nickname used among the Dutch pirates of the Spanish Main. There were pirates named Yankee Dutch (1683), Captain Yankey (1684), and Captain John Williams (Yankee) (1687). The next earliest reference is an estate inventory from 1725 listing a slave named Yankee.

During the French and Indian war the British General James Wolfe, hero of the battle of Quebec, took to referring derisively to the native New Englanders in his army as Yankees. He is attributed with the first recorded usage of the term for general Americans and it was derogatory.

Perhaps the most widely accepted explanation was advanced by the newsman-scholar H.L.Mencken, who derives the expression from the words "John Cheese." This was a belittling nickname bestowed upon the Dutch by the Germans and the Flemish in the 1600s. A more recognizable modern variation would be "Joe Shmoe." Holland has long been famous for its cheeses, so the nickname is appropriate.

"John Cheese" in Dutch reads "Jan Kees," the "j" being pronounced with a scandinavian "y" sound. This became bastardized into Yankees by others. It was mistaken for a plural, and the word Yankee was born.

The English applied Yankee to Dutch pirates in the Caribbean (hence the 1680's references) and English sailors adopted Yankee as a derisive name for Dutch freebooters. New York was originally a Dutch settlement (New Amsterdam) and Dutch New Yorkers became very familiar with Yankee under their English conquerors. Noting its unpleasant significance the Dutch began applying Yankee to the English settlers of Connecticut, feeling that those settlers trading practices were piratical and far more enterprising than ethical. The term later shifted to New Englanders.

Yankee was in popular use in Britain by the time of the Revolutionary War and British soldiers are recorded using it as a term of derision. "Yankee doodle" was coined by British troops as a satire upon the bumpkin American militia. The original song of Yankee Doodle was written by the British to mock the Americans and was played on route back to Boston following victories at

Lexington and Concord (1775). As the British passed American militia fired upon them from roadside houses, barns, trees and stone walls establishing a guerrilla style war.

There is no evidence of use of the word Yankee by New Englanders before the battle of Lexington but after Bunker's [Breeds] Hill the Americans adopted "Yankee Doodle" as their own tune and Yankee began to acquire a complimentary sense. "Yankee Doodle" became a favorite of favorites in the American army and it widely popularized use of Yankee during the Revolutionary war. It was not a little mortifying for the British when the Americans played "Yankee Doodle" as their army marched down to British surrender at Saratoga.

The Oxford English Dictionary tells us that "perhaps the most plausible conjecture" is that Yankee comes from the Dutch nickname Janke which is an extension of Jan ('John'). Examples of other Dutch words adopted into the English Language include: kool slu (coleslaw), koekje (cookie), wafel (waffle), baas (boss), landschap (landscape), schaats (skate), snoepen (snoop) and jacht (yacht).

Various British dialectal words have also been suggested as the origin of Yankee. Yankee was supposedly a Lincolnshire word for gaiters or leggings. In Scots, yankie means a forward, clever woman and yanking is an adjective meaning pushy or forward. Yank could conceivably mean excrement, from a dialect word jank. Tell that to George Steinbrenner. Though jank is pronounced using the "j" sound and not the "y."