

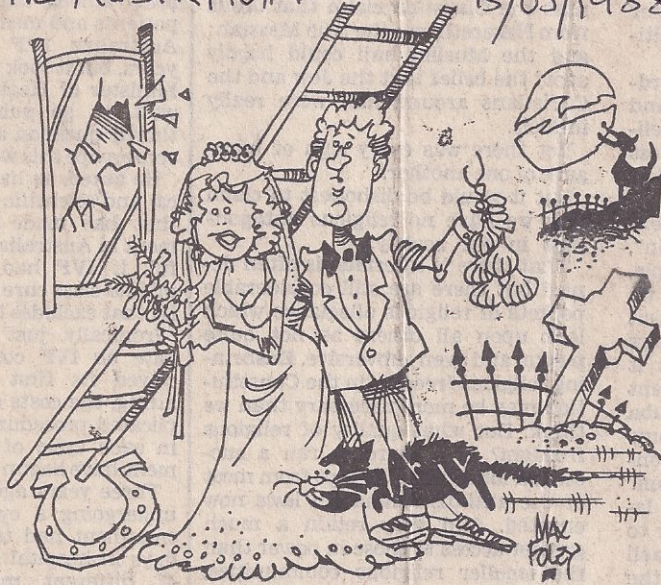


Superstitions cast a spell on black day

THE AUSTRALIAN

13/05/1988

Today is Friday the 13th — or Black Friday. But, as **BERWYN LEWIS** reports, most people will tell you — touch wood — that they are not superstitious at all. Read on ...



AS you go about your business today, you may wonder why people are wearing garlic or white feathers, winking at white horses, avoiding cracks in the footpath and watching out for black cats.

They could also appear to be confused about ladders — which today are either more dangerous to walk under or completely safe.

Ask them to get married, have an operation, take a plane trip, launch a boat or go to a funeral today and you may get quite weird reactions.

Believed to be the day of the earliest recorded eviction — when Adam and Eve were thrown out of the Garden of Eden — and the traditional day for the execution of criminals, Friday the 13th is also known as Hangman's Day.

For some, the dread of the number 13 — triskaidekaphobia — combined with a fear of Fridays — friggaphobia — leaves no choice but to spend Friday the 13th in bed or, better still, under it. Others will choose to enter doorways backwards, refuse to look in a mirror, wear odd-coloured socks and, when in doubt, knock three times.

If a mirror breaks, a picture drops from a wall, a stranger comes to the door carrying coal or two people say the same word simultaneously, there is no alternative today but to link little fingers and say Jack Robinson, white rabbit or snap.

Bob Renphrey, a bus conductor in Barmouth, North Wales, is one triskaideka-friggaphobic who will rejoice wildly

if he and his bus make it through the day without mishap. On previous Friday the 13th's Mr Renphrey has had car accidents, been knocked over by a motorcycle and walked through a plate-glass door. He is crossing his fingers hard today because, besides it being Friday the 13th, the year itself is ominous — it is 1988; when you add up these individual digits they tally 26 ... which is 13 doubled.

Married

According to a recent estimate by the American science magazine *Discover*, it costs the United States \$US1 billion (\$1.3 billion) a year in absenteeism, cancellations and lost business on the 13th day of each month. Add Friday, which together with Monday is always bad for absenteeism, and you will discover that switchboards around the world are jammed with calls from employees seeking a day off due to ill health, unforeseen circumstances or any other similarly flimsy excuse.

John Franklin, a clinical psychologist at Macquarie University in Sydney, says phobic

and anxiety-related disorders increase on Friday the 13th, especially if people have to make decisions like which side of the bed to get out of and what to have for breakfast.

Some may scoff at the suggestion by triskaideka-friggaphobiacs that the 13th day of the month falls more often on a Friday, but it was published as fact in *Mathematical Gazette* (Vol. 53) after it was proved by 13-year-old Eton schoolboy S.R. Baxter.

Churches, hospitals, medical practices, registry offices or mortuaries do not report increases or decreases in deaths, divorces, births or marriages on the ominous day. But Black Friday is quieter than usual for car sales, property transfers and stock movements.

As secretary to the Reverend Ted Noffs, Mary Henderson handles all weddings and christenings at the non-denominational Wayside Chapel in Sydney, where she has worked for 11 years.

"Friday the 13th is not a popular day on which to get married. We've had one or two in the past 10 years," she says.

Those who carry Christian-Judaic-based superstitions will

blame their fear of Friday the 13th on the fact that Christ was crucified on a Friday, while the night before the 12 apostles joined Him, to make up 13, for the Last Supper.

Others hold the Scandinavian god Loki (who caused the death of the fun god Balder at a gathering of 13 people) responsible for 13 being associated with bad luck.

The poet Byron was a friggaphobic. Despite his belief in Friday as an unlucky day, he defied his conviction to sail to Italy on a Friday, dying not long afterwards ... on a Friday. Sir Winston Churchill believed Fridays spelt D-for-disaster and refused to travel without his "lucky" walking stick on it.

Even with satellite navigation gear, computers, radar and sonar tracking equipment, superstition about the day continues to rule the waves. Ships are never launched or begin voyages on Friday the 13th, despite numerous attempts to dispel this belief that stems from a seeming endless number of doomed craft setting off on that day.

One outstanding example occurred during World War I when the British Admiralty arranged to start the construction of a warship on a Friday. By coincidence it was ready for launching on a Friday and the Sea Lords decided to lay the old belief to rest by sending the ship on her maiden voyage on a Friday under the command of a Captain Friday. And so she set sail ... never to be heard of again. Shipping records of any major port show, however, that Friday the 13th is as busy as any other day of the week.

The much maligned Friday is named from the Anglo-Saxon word *Frigedaeg* — Frigg's day. Frigg, a goddess of love in Norse mythology, was associated with good luck; accordingly, Scandinavians held Fridays in high esteem.

The author H.G. Wells suggested that suspicions of the number 13 were aroused as a result of the fascination with the facile manner in which 12 can be split up — three times four, twice six and so on, whereas 13 cannot be divided. Wells claimed this contributed to its bad reputation.

Some people, however, find Friday the 13th a challenge. While baying at the moon, dancing on graves, getting married in black or boiling cane toads, they will be convincing each other that Friday the 13th is just like any other day of the week.