

Editor's notes:

May 2005, Volume 20-9

There are two schools of thoughts about how May, once the third month in the Roman calendar, got its name. Some historians believe it derives from "Maia," the Roman goddess who was the daughter of Atlas and mother of Mercury. Others say the name came from "Maesta," the Roman goddess of honour and reverence who was also the wife of Vulcan.

However it got its name, we're happy that May is finally here. Take a look at what we celebrate this month:

May Day, May 1 -- was in olden times a date to mark the transition from the colder to the warmer season and has been observed for centuries in various ways.

The most famous May Day tradition: putting up a May pole, originally a live tree brought to the village to commemorate the beginning of summer. Townspeople would also forage in the woods for greenery to decorate their homes.



Hundreds of years ago, May Day focused on fertility, but that aspect and the rather bawdy practices that went with it came under attack by the puritans in the 1600s and have all but disappeared from the festivities.

Today, many European countries officially recognize the day as a worker's day and have designated it a legal holiday.

Mother's Day, May 8 -- More than 46 countries have official days to honour mothers, although the dates of the observances vary. Canada and the United States, as well as Denmark, Italy and Australia, celebrate on the second Sunday of May.

Mother's Day celebrations can be traced back to the ancient Greeks who feted Rhea, the mother of the gods and goddesses. During the 17th century, the English observed "Mothering Sunday" to honour the country's mums.

Limerick Day, May 12 -- This day recognizes the humorous five-line rhyming verse (named after the Irish town of Limerick) and is celebrated on the birth anniversary of limerick master Edward Lear. Here's a typical example of the form:

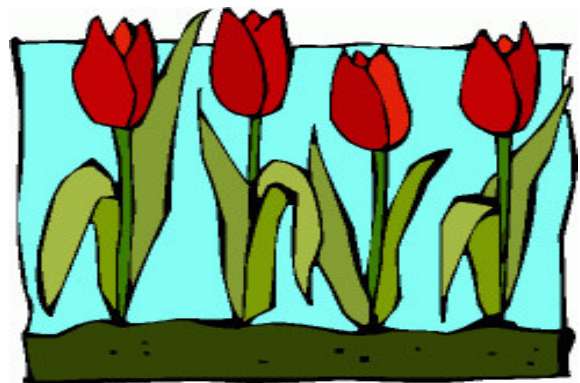
*Out dining, a young alligator,
When asked if he'd have coffee later,
Just shook his large head
And pleasantly said,
"I was planning on having the waiter."*

Canadian Tulip Festival, May 5-23 -- Millions of tulips will blossom in Ottawa, North America's Tulip Capital. This year's Festival will commemorate the 60th Anniversary of the end of the Second World War and the Gift of Tulips to Canadians with the theme "A Celebration of Peace and Friendship."

In the fall of 1945, Princess Juliana of the Netherlands presented Ottawa with 100,000 tulip bulbs. This gift was in appreciation of the safe haven which Holland's exiled royal family received during the Second World War and in recognition of the role which Canadian troops played in liberating the Netherlands. (During the war, the Dutch royal family was hosted at Government House in Ottawa. Princess Margriet was born at the Ottawa Civic Hospital.)

A few years after the Dutch tulips arrived in 1945, they became a strong attraction. Stunning pictures were appearing in newspapers nationwide. More and more events began to centre around the annual bloom of tulips.

The first Canadian Tulip Festival was held in 1953. The Ottawa Board of Trade, at the suggestion of world renowned photographer Malak Karsh whose photographs have immortalized the tulip, formalized the Canadian Tulip Festival to coincide with the tulip's annual bloom. In the next 10 years the Festival grew in size, with a staggering display of over two million flowers. It has grown to one of the largest tulip festivals in the world. More than 750,000 people are expected to attend this year.



Victoria Day, May 23 -- Canada celebrates this day on the Monday before May 25th every year in honour of Queen Victoria's birthday, May 24, 1819. The legislature of what was then called the Province of Canada declared it a holiday in 1845, eight years into her reign. After her death in 1901, the Canadian Parliament made the day a national holiday.

The History of Checkers

People have been playing checkers for centuries. Archaeologists discovered a similar game in the ruins of Ur in Iraq, dating back to 3000 B.C.E. In Egypt, people played a version of checkers as long ago as 1400 B.C.E.; it was brought to Europe when the Moors invaded Spain in the 700s. In 1100, a Frenchman began using a chessboard for the game, with 12 pieces on each side. (Previously, the game was played on a board with horizontal lines). In 1535, a rule was introduced that made it mandatory to jump your opponent's pieces when possible, and the resulting game was called "Jeu Force" (or "game of force"). In the mid 1500s, the game reached Britain, where it was called "Draughts," and to America, where it became known as "checkers" after the checkered-pattern board. Today, millions of people play the game and participate in tournaments worldwide.

Where Did These Common Phrases Come From?

Bringing home the bacon -- According to one story, this phrase originated in the 12 century, when an English village church promised a side of bacon to any man who could swear he had not quarrelled with his wife for a year and a day. The man who "brought home the bacon" was held in high regard.

Flying by the seat of your pants -- In the early days of aviation, pilots lacked today's sophisticated instruments. They had to feel the plane's response to their actions, largely, as it were, through the seat of their pants, figuring things out as they went along.

Put your two cents in -- This phrase comes from gambling, where poker players had to place a small bet called an "ante" before they would be allowed in the game.

Bite the bullet -- Before the invention of anaesthetics, physicians would prepare their patients for surgery with a stiff drink and a lead bullet or stick to bite down on. The alcohol would dull the pain, and the biting would give them something besides the pain to focus on. (It probably also cut down on the screaming.)

Close, but no cigar -- In old-time carnivals, the prize for winning a game of skill was often a cigar. If you missed the target, even if you were close, you didn't win the cigar.

Sleep More, Weigh Less

Several research studies have recently found that lack of sleep may increase your appetite. Columbia University Professors reported in one study that participants who slept five hours per night were 73 percent more likely to become obese than those who slept seven to nine hours a night. Those who slept less generated increased amounts of the hormone ghrelin, which increases feeling of hunger, and less leptin, a hormone that suppresses appetite.

The Niagara's Magnificent Falls

Niagara Falls, a popular honeymoon destination, is located on the border between the Canadian province of Ontario and the state of New York, and includes the American Falls, the Canadian/Horseshoe Falls, and the Bridal Veil Falls. It is the second highest falls in the world, after Victoria Falls in southern Africa. More than 12 million tourists visit each year. Between 1901 and 1995, 10 daredevils went over the falls in barrels or other containers and lived to tell about it. (Another five who tried were not so fortunate.) Water from the Niagara River was first used to generate electricity -- 22,000 kilowatts -- in 1893. Today, hydroelectric plants on both sides of the river create more than 4 million kilowatts of electricity (5 million horsepower). The rate of erosion of Horseshoe Falls used to be as much as 3.8 feet a year, but since much of the water is now diverted to create electricity, erosion is less than a foot a year. Since 1846, millions of visitors have donned souvenir raincoats and cruised to the base of the falls on the Maid of the Mist.

Tulip Season

Tulips are native to Turkey, Iran, Syria, and parts of Asia. The Turks were the first to cultivate and hybridize the flowers. In fact, the word tulip comes from the Turkish word for "turban."

In the late 1500s, a European envoy spied them in an ornamental garden of a Turkish sultan and brought some to Holland. The Dutch began breeding the flowers in 1593. They became a status symbol for the rich, who called them "pots of gold." By 1633, the Dutch were trading tulip futures and prized strains were selling for several thousand dollars a bulb. A few years later, the bottom fell out of the market, and many Dutch families lost fortunes.

Nevertheless, this bout of "tulip mania" helped cultivate the 3,500 varieties of tulips that we know today. Holland produces 3 billion tulip bulbs a year on more than 21,000 acres.

Facts or Fiction

Can you tell which of these sundry statements are true or false?

1. Penguins are native in the Northern Hemisphere. True/False
2. Alaska typically experiences more wildfires than California. True/False
3. Toenails grow faster than fingernails. True/False
4. Europe is the only continent (other than Antarctica) without a desert. True/False
5. The human brain is about 85 percent water. True/False