



Pass the Black-Eyed Peas!

by Scott Sosebee

The East Texas Historical Association provides this column as a public service.

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(Jan 1 2023) New Year's Day is also a time for tradition and one of those close to Texan hearts is eating black-eyed peas. Another tradition is a look at the origin of that practice in this space, so again I offer my annual New Year's Day tribute to Black-eyed Peas!

I would be willing to bet that at this moment, all across East Texas, thousands of people are preparing to put on a traditional pot of black-eyed peas for New Year's Day. Legend dictates that those delectable legumes—they are called “peas,” but are actually beans, although both peas and beans are members of the legume family—will bring good luck to all who eat them. One of the tenets of such folklore is that if you “eat poor on New Year's Day, you will be rich the remainder of the year.” I am not sure about that as it never seems to work for me, and I eat my black-eyed peas without fail on January 1. Like all good folklore, the ritual of eating black-eyed peas has become part of southern culture, but where did such a tradition begin? Well, as are almost all things in the South, tradition is somewhat shrouded in mystery, and there are two “competing” storylines, and which of those origin stories you believe—remember it is the South—also depends on where you get your information.

The origin of black-eyed peas on New Year's in the South that most cultural historians believe accurate has its roots back in Africa and was brought to the South by slaves. Tobacco was the crop that spawned slavery in the South, but those Europeans who lived in areas in which tobacco was not suitable sought some other crop that could bring profits. The slaves who were involuntarily dragged to the New World came from West Africa, a region that had great knowledge about growing rice, thus slave owners south of the tobacco growing areas began to cultivate rice as a cash crop. Along with rice came another African crop: peas of all kinds, including what became known in the New World as black-eyed peas.

The West African slaves, with two of their native staples now available, began to prepare a favored dish they consumed in their native lands. It was a combination of rice and beans (peas) that they came to call “Hoppin’ John.” The origin of the name is one that is also shrouded in mystery, but whatever moniker it took is irrelevant to the fact that the dish evolved, by the eighteenth century, to demote “luck” among African Americans. While some traditions claim that it was because the peas looked like coins—which makes sense only if our coinage was oblong shaped—the most common explanation is due to a seasonal ritual in which “Hoppin’ John” became a centerpiece of a feast. The period between Christmas and New Year’s Day was one of leisure and rest for slaves. The harvest was done, and the planting season had not yet begun thus slaves were given time off. It was a good time for gathering and fellowship, and slaves took advantage with a huge communal meal, one in which their humble dish of peas and rice became the central course. Because slavery was a cruel existence, one of the “wishes” slaves made in each new year was for freedom, and those “Hoppin’ John” came to symbolize that “lucky” desire. Because slaves also cooked for the plantation, they also began to serve the dish to the owner families, and the tradition began to find its way into white southern households as well.

The second black-eyed pea story was born from the Civil War, and it became the dominant tale of black-eyed peas and luck in the 1880s and 1890s. Why it did so, some historians suggest, was, like so many other such actions in the South, to try to wash away the stain of slavery and to dispense with any tradition that may have had roots in Africa. The legend attached to this tradition extends back to United States General William T. Sherman’s infamous “March to the Sea” across the Confederacy. According to this version, Sherman’s troops destroyed everything in their path—crops, rails, buildings, everything associated with any farm and plantation they came across—and thus black-eyed peas were the only food left. Those peas kept southerners from starving, so they became a symbol of “good luck.” Thus, what better time to need good luck than the beginning of a new year, and so a tradition was born.

Whatever the origins of black-eyed peas as good luck on New Year’s Day, it is a tradition as entrenched as college bowl games and parades on New Year’s Day. So, bring that pot to a boil, add the seasonings you desire, throw some rice in if you wish, and if you want to get real fancy have some cornbread and collard greens along with your peas. And may all you have great luck in 2023!

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