

April Fools' Day: Measuring Time and Dates

By D.H. Coop

The early Romans had an eight-day week. The German tribes used a five-day week and recorded the passage of time by night, not day. Thus, the term *fortnight* for 14 nights is a holdover from the older times. Later, the Romans began using the seven-day week, and as their empire spread, so did the seven-day-week calendar.

Seven was a number that the early civilizations had a natural leaning toward. Seven even today seems to be the optimum number that one can memorize easily. Examples are the seven-digit phone numbers, the Seven Hills of Rome and the Seven Wonders of the World.

When the Roman Church adopted the Julian calendar, the year ended and started on March 25 around the vernal equinox, which falls on March 20–21, and the Feast of Annunciation signaled the beginning of the new year. This all seems to have changed with the shift to the Gregorian calendar and the new year starting on the first of January. The story goes that some refused or did not hear of the change of the new date and continued to celebrate the old date. These traditionalists were made fun of, and the first of April became the day for fools.

Many different cultures also had a day of fools—Purim in the Jewish culture and Holi in the Hindu. The Romans had Hilaria—the cheerful ones—to celebrate Cybele, the mother of the gods. In France, the day is known as *Poisson d'Avril*, or “April Fish,” which is a time when individuals play pranks on the young, or “fools.”

Joke's on Them!

The practical jokes made their way into popular culture when a Professor Joseph Boskin decided to set the history of the day straight in an interview with a reporter for the AP News Network. The reporter wrote an article on the origins of the day as told by the professor that started in ancient Rome with Emperor Constantine and the jester Kugel, who told Emperor Constantine he could govern as well as the Emperor. He was given one day to govern. Emperor Kugel then ordered the day to be celebrated every year. The story was reported by Fred Bayles for the AP news and sent over the airways only to discover they were the victims of a prank!

In some cultures, the prank must be done before noon. However, it is best to check all stories told on April first!

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