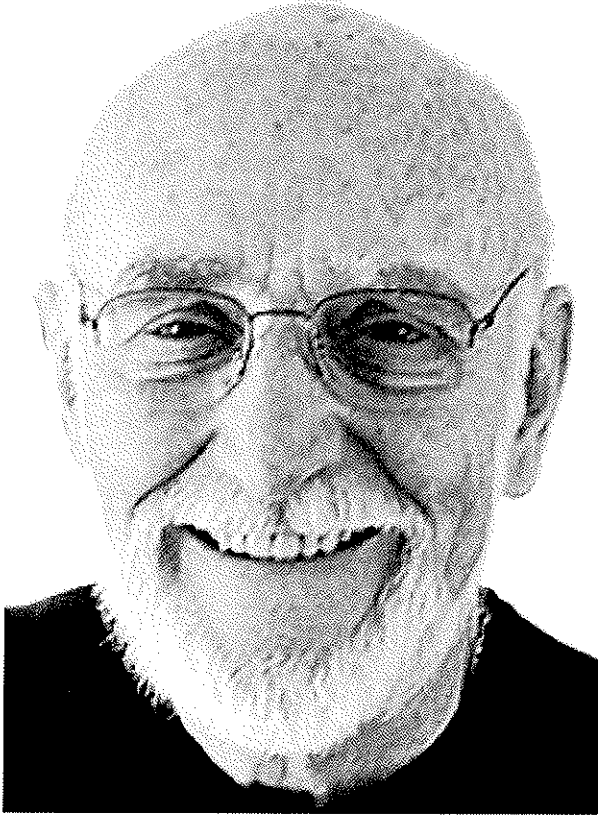


## Bill Hall: I like to hold the old lady



Tribune/Barry Kough

Bill Hall

English is a moving target. Like all languages, it never stops changing. Words drop in. Words drop out. The longer you live, the more words you need to retire from your speaking or writing because they are unknown to newer portions of the population.

For instance, we went to a fast food shop the other day and the clerk asked me if I wanted chopped onions in my chicken salad.

"Hold the onions," I said.

The clerk looked at me with a hint of alarm in her young eyes. She thought I actually meant she should hold the onions in her hand or in her armpits or something.

I quickly realized that what we had there was a failure to communicate. She was working in a restaurant but she had never heard the old hash house (a restaurant) slang "hold the onions." She didn't know that meant leave out the onions.

Traditionally, in the restaurants where I once worked, when a customer says he doesn't want gravy on his potatoes, doesn't want tomatoes on his hamburger or doesn't want chocolate on his vanilla ice cream, you shout the order through the cook's window, telling him to dish up potatoes or a hamburger or ice cream and "hold" the gravy or the tomatoes or the chocolate.

I did it 10,000 times and every cook - every customer - knew what it meant. The phrase was not meant to be taken literally. I would never have asked anyone to hold gravy literally. You can't hold gravy. It won't stay put.

And I wouldn't have called in a vanilla ice cream order to the kitchen saying, "Hold the chocolate" because it would be morally wrong to eat vanilla ice cream without chocolate and I would not assist someone in such erroneous behavior.

When I realized what was happening in that restaurant the other day, I said to the young clerk, "You've never heard that expression for leaving the onions out of a salad, have you?"

She just looked at me like I was speaking another language. And to her, I was.

However, she kept the onions out of my salad, though she was glancing at me out of her peripheral vision lest I had any more weird ideas.

Even the most common and useful terms in a language can wear out or be replaced by something catchier in the restaurants of the land. On the other hand, some old words and expressions are ignorantly or stubbornly used deep into a new time by people like thee and me who don't realize they have some rusty words in their vocabulary.

For instance, my wife and I were recently visiting in a large liberal city, one of those cities like Seattle or San Francisco where the hippy styles still persist among a few gray relics of the peace and love movement.

We went into a drug store for some aspirin. "Where is your aspirin?" I asked a 50ish woman dressed in the funky remnants of that once-rebellious and creative wardrobe of the flower children.

"It's down that aisle" she said, "right there next to where your old lady is standing."

Old lady?

I knew what that meant, but her description of my wife struck me as doubly odd. For one thing, it could be misunderstood by someone who had forgotten that "your old lady"

meant your partner, your main squeeze, married to you or not. It was a kindly designation like "your buddy," no insult intended.

By coincidence, that very same day was my old lady's 73rd birthday. And it can be risky for a stranger to call a person an old lady on a day like that.

But we took no offense, getting a kick out of a person still so deep in a version of English from that earlier time that she did not realize yesterday's term of endearment can be today's senior citizen slight.

Later that same day in that same neighborhood pocket of geriatric flower children, we ran into an artist who makes lawn ornaments and is still using the expressions of his younger years.

"This one is way cool," he said. "And oh, look at this. This is way cool."

I think he said "way cool" 400 times. As far as I was concerned, he said "way cool" way too many times. And if he had said it one more time, I might have screamed.

But I said nothing. I didn't want to upset my old lady.

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