

Editor's Note

“A

penny for your thoughts”—that comment you make to someone whose ideas you'd like to hear—has been around a long time. This expression was in use as long ago as 1546, when it appeared in a book of proverbs published in England by playwright John Heywood.

Another common English saying about a penny is: “A penny saved is a penny earned.” Benjamin Franklin, American writer and statesman, published this proverb in his *Poor Richard's Almanac* during the 1700s. Today people still use this saying to argue the benefits of being thrifty.

Yet another old saying is: “See a penny, pick it up, and all day long you'll have good luck!” As eager as most people are to have good luck, not everyone will stoop to pick up a penny. Some people think they will only have good luck if the penny is facing “heads up” (that is, the side of the coin with a head on it is showing). Others won't bother to bend down to pick up a coin of so little value no matter which side is facing up. And some people quote a second part of the rhyme that says: “See a penny, let it lay, and you'll have bad luck all the day.” So a superstitious person might pick up a penny not for good luck but to avoid any bad.

People not only pick up pennies; they also toss them away—usually into a fountain or a small pool of water. Children are taught that if they make wishes when they toss pennies in the water, their wishes will come true. This idea probably came from the belief prevalent in ancient Europe that a spirit lived at the bottom of every well or fountain and that these spirits would cause misfortune for those who failed to pay them tribute, which was usually done by tossing coins in fountains and wells.

In another practice involving coins, people “flip a coin” or use a “coin toss” to decide between two items or actions. For example, a child might flip a coin to decide whether to have chocolate ice cream or vanilla. The child might assign the “heads” side of the coin to chocolate and the “tails” side of the coin to vanilla. Then the child would toss the coin in the air, catch it with one hand and slap that hand onto the back of the other. When the child removed the top hand, the face of the coin showing would determine the flavor selected. Sometimes people flip a coin to be fair, leaving a decision to the random landing of the coin instead of to human dictate. For example, two brothers facing a task neither of them wants to do might flip a coin to decide who will do it.

Pennies for luck, pennies for wishes—these are secondary, of course, to the use of coins in the U.S. monetary system. Several coins, besides pennies, are in circulation in the United States. You'll learn about those coins in this issue's feature article.

And I hope that article will inspire some thoughts you'll share with your students.

—MK