Where in the world did that saying come from?

We Americans, it is said, are separated from our British cousins by a common language, which of course is English. Meanings, pronunciations, dialect are so vastly different between Cleveland and Cornwall as to make it a foreign language to both populations who speak it.

The same, of course, might be said of the gulf between East Tennessee – which, if you live there, is TENNE-see – and a Boston Southie or a timber cutter in the Upper Peninsula of Michigan, which, of course, makes him a YOU-per.

And we are carrying on about this today because we need a break from our current common cause, the COVID, and what better way than to play for a few minutes with our common language and its fractured meanings . A bottle of Coke in New England is a soda; in Missouri that same bottle is a pop, pretty much as it is here. And one I found last summer: Those things that are breeding around us, particularly in Carmel, that we curse as "roundabouts." In Maine and Massachusetts, the same infernal things are called "rotaries."

Take "dagnabbit" for example. A sort of polite way of swearing, I suppose. The first recorded use of it to get around the offensive alternative was in Chicago and it was used in a story in the Chicago Tribune on the 21st of August in 1933.

And, yes, our Hoosier language is littered with our own foibles: Santa Claus travels the "tarvey" past the "cematree "and over the "crick" to get to our "chimley."

A grumpy old coot of a hundred years go named H.L. Mencken wrote four books on what he called "the American language," in which he took us inside carpentry shops and foundries and print shops to learn their lingo, and also to places we've never been.

And now somebody has gone right next door to Illinois, to Chicago, and come up with a list of words that were invented to define and describe what Carl Sandburg called the "city of big shoulders" and "hog butcher to the world." And for their purposes, the folks who sorted this out for Chicago Magazine, a word truly becomes a word when it moves from the streets and bars and factories and ends up on the printed page.

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A MOMENT

Ed Breen

Ever get accused of having a "pipe dream"? Probably. We all have. Proposing some absurd idea that either can't or won't happen. Chicago, in the Tribune, in 1890. And it wasn't a nice describer. The derivation came in the era of opium dens: the thoughts — hallucinations – of someone inhaling opium fumes through a pipe. Not offensive today, but probably as pejorative as calling someone a "pothead" today.

The list of Chicago contributions is lengthy. Ever have a dopp kit, a shaving kit, in your luggage? Sure, especially if you were in the military. The Charles Dopplet Co., a leather goods manufacturer at Wabash Avenue and Cermak Road in Chicago.

Ever get your old jalopy waxed? They called it "Simonized," right? Named for George Simon, who started making car polish in 1910 in his place at 2121 S. Michigan Avenue.

And if I describe someone to you as a "big Grabowski," you've got the picture, don't you? Tough, blue-collar, takes his lunch to work, not to be messed with.

We can thank Mike Ditka for that. That's how he described his 1985 Chicago Bears. Think about it: Dan Hampton, Steve McMichael, Tom Thayer, Keith Van Horne. Big Grabowskis.

Political decisions used to be made in smoke-filled rooms. Maybe some still are. It began as a description of a room at the Blackstone Hotel on Michigan Avenue in Chicago, the room from which Warren Harding emerged as the presidential candidate at the 1920 Republican National Conventions in Chicago. The room was so described by the Associated Press that day in all the newspapers.

Want to "yuck it up"? Thank Saul Bellow who used it in his 1960 novel, "Herzog," which was written in his apartment near the University of Chicago campus in Hyde Park on the South Side.

Finally, that most American of words, "jazz." It got an award as "the most important word of the 20th Century," from American Dialect Society.

And July 11, 1915, is its birthday. That was the first time it appeared in print in Chicago describing a new form of American music. But the word, like the music, probably came from elsewhere. There is evidence that it originated in California as a description of high energy in baseball and was carried to Chicago by a banjo player named Bert Kelly, who used it to describe the band he was starting in 1914.

It caught on.