

Doing the washing, hanging clothes on the line, watching the breeze snap the sheets and towels, sensing the fresh air smell seeping into the bedclothes with every audible gust of wind—this is a job that is not at all onerous. It is pure pleasure. And, besides, it is work that needs little thought as an accompaniment. Instead, my mind can jump from one thing to another, sometimes stirring worry, other times recalling pleasures, but mostly, just wandering from one inconsequential thought to another. Sometimes, this is referred to as “gathering wool.” And, remembering that old saying, thoughts soon begin jumping to more outdated phrases, things we used to hear that have disappeared from popular culture, and also sayings that had a meaning that was, at one time, rather literal. “Gathering wool” is one of them. I have not looked at its etymology, but other reading has indicated that the saying was used because old women who had no other jobs gathered wool from fences for a pittance. Also, I have read that schoolchildren were sometimes sent out to pick up the wool that sheep had left on the fences. Now, though, we think of woolgathering as idle thought.

We still hear that things have gone “haywire” when something has taken a turn for the worse. Usually, we say that something is haywire when it is dilapidated. It should probably be “gone twine” these days, since there is a whole lot more baler twine than haywire. But, the phrase probably originally meant that something was chaotic, like a coil of hay wire used to bind bundles of hay in the early days of baling.

“Chewing the rag” is another saying seldom heard these days. It means arguing, but I looked up the origin of this phrase, because it seems to have no connection with a disagreement. And what I found was not the way the saying was used in our area. In most places, apparently, “chewing the rag” was the same as “chewing the fat,” just conversation, or, as we still sometimes say, “visiting.” But, here, “chewing the rag” had a darker meaning, often referring to an ongoing disagreement between two individuals.

These common sayings come and go, and it sometimes is amusing to try an old one out on a younger person. It is just as easy to see a confused expression on a teen’s face when hearing about having a telephone on a “party line” as it is when they give us the latest 2024 slang.