

Flabbergasted [ˈfla-bər-ˌgast(ed)]

By Dennis Payton Knight

Flabbergasted, according to Merriam Webster, is “to be overwhelmed with shock, surprise, or wonder: dumbfounded, as in ‘We were flabbergasted by the news that he had won the lottery.’” I would be too, because I didn’t buy a ticket.

I decided to dig deeper and learned “flabbergasted” first turned up in 1772, presumably after some unsung genius put flabber and aghast together to make one word. Flabber might be linked to “flabby,” suggesting somebody so astonished they shake like a jelly. It can’t be connected with “flapper,” in the sense of a person who fusses or panics, as that sense only emerged in the late nineteenth century. All that info is courtesy of a person who identifies as “Callithumpian.”

Another posting from Mitch claims it comes from the word, “glabberfast,” combining a variant of “glabrous”, meaning smooth to the point of speechlessness, and “fast,” for not having eaten. Together he claims that “flabbergasted” means you’re so hungry you’re speechless. I was flabbergasted at his nonsense. And if I am to be flabbergasted, I prefer it be from winning the lottery rather than missing lunch.

I expected something more, and, getting back to that first contributor, decided to check out “Callithumpian.” It’s an Americanism for a bunch of “boisterous roisterers” in a makeshift New Year’s parade with pots, tin horns, and cowbells. It derived from an 18th-century bunch of British “Gallithumians” making a rumpus on election days.

That led me to “boisterous roisterers.” Boisterous, I know, because it is what I would be if I won the lottery, but I’ve never met a “roisterer.” Dictionary.com says it is one who acts in a swaggering, boisterous, or uproarious manner, from the verb meaning to revel noisily or without restraint. By that, it seems “boisterous roisterers” must be a double something. Not a double negative, because both “boisterous” and “roisterous” are positively positive words, but like a double negative wherein one cancels the other out. I hope not, because I would like to celebrate winning the lottery with some boisterous roistering of my own.

According to Wikipedia, “to roister” also refers to a group of London hooligans noted for habitually swaggering drunk through the streets, assaulting passers-by and watchmen. Stephen Gosson, a local preacher, declaimed the behavior of the Damned Crew, a gang of roisterers as “menne without feare, or feeling, eyter of Hell or Heauen, delighting in that title.” They all came to their just comeuppance, drowning when their boat capsized in the River Thames.

Then I roistered to Ireland and found “Garryowen”, a boisterous drinking song of rich young roisterers in Limerick. Adapted by the British Army’s Royal Irish Regiment of Dragoons. Beethoven got hold of it, arranging and publishing the ditty with the title, “From Garyone My Happy Home.” It’s all true. I found the composition on YouTube and listened for myself.

There is a moral to this essay: If you must look something up, do it carefully, or you might get yourself flabbergasted.