

## GRANDMA CLANCY'S COOTHERMAN BOX

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As a child I was often fascinated by a small wooden box in which my grandmother kept her costume jewelry. She referred to it as her **Cootherman** box. It was not until recently that I decided to investigate the possible origin and meaning behind the word **cootherman** in an effort to understand its significance in relation to that mysterious box of jewelry.

My grandmother is no longer living so I was unable to ask her personally of its meaning or where she first heard the word. Instead I went first to The Oxford English Dictionary where I found a word very similar in sound: **couterment**, which was defined as "an aphetic form of the word **accouterment**." This seemed a probable solution to the mystery since the definition of **accouterment** (also **accoutrement**), according to Webster's Third New International Dictionary, is "any article of equipment or dress when used merely as an accessory." Since jewelry is considered an accessory, and her box contained jewelry, it seemed logical to assume that grandmother's word **cootherman** had evolved from the French word **accoutrement** and the subsequent English aphetic form **couterment**. If the English usage was an imitation of the French, that would also explain grandmother's silent t at the end of her word since in the French pronunciation the final t in **accoutrement** is silent.

At this point the origin of the word **cootherman** seemed clear, but an important question still remained: why did the second syllable of her word employ the **th** sound (as in **thorn**) as opposed to the aspirant **t** sound which is found in both the French and English versions of the word? The answer became apparent after consulting The Oxford English Dialect Dictionary. I found the word **couter**, a verb meaning "to gather together; collect." Again, the assumption according to the dialect dictionary is that the word is probably derived from the French, in this case the verb **accouterer**, which means "to dress up." It went on to say that the word **couter** (also spelled **coother** and **coulter**) is in general dialectic use in Scotland, Ireland, and England. Since my grandmother was born and raised in Ireland, it now seemed logical to assume that she was actually using a pronunciation that was common to her nationality and not merely a pronunciation of her own invention.

A question still remained however: where did the word **cootherman** itself come from? I was able to find the words **couter** and **couterment**, but no dictionary, including The Dictionary of Regional American English, contained **what** appeared to be a combination of the two. It seems possible, then, that **what** has happened is indeed

just that: somewhere along the line the words were combined. Since the verb **couter** means "to gather or collect," and the noun **couterment** meant accessories (i.e., jewelry), it seems quite logical that a word which embodies both meanings would evolve, especially since both words were so similar in sound.

Since I was unable to locate either **cootherman** or **cootherman box** in The Oxford English Dialect Dictionary I can only conclude that my grandmother's term is thus a product of the folk etymological process, peculiar to her own family and or locality in Ireland, and therefore not in wide enough usage to have been included in the dialect dictionary.

Perhaps a definitive answer to the mystery of the **cootherman box** will come about when I finally visit County Cavan in Ireland. It was there that my grandmother must certainly have learned the word.

#### **A DICTIONARY OF IRISH PLACE-NAMES**

*This rather specialized onomastic study by Adrian Room contains brief etymologies of about 2500 place names in Ireland (including Northern Ireland), from ABBEY ('the monastery') to YOUGHAL ('yew wood'). I've always wondered at the curious name of a church in East Durham, New York, "Our Lady of Knock", - and this book informs me that KNOCK comes from the Gaelic an Choc meaning 'the hill'. (Actually, there are nearly 50 Irish place names beginning with knock, from KNOCK-ACAPPEL to KNOCKTOPHER, but no KNOCKONWOOD.) Published by Appletree Press in 1987 and distributed by G.K. Hall, it is available in hardcover for \$21.95.*