

Words and Their Stories: Grapevine



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Now, the VOA Special English program WORDS AND THEIR STORIES.

Some of the most exciting information comes by way of **the grapevine**.

That is so because reports received through the grapevine are supposed to be secret. The information is all **hush hush**. It is whispered into your ear with the understanding that you will not pass it on to others.

You feel honored and excited. You are one of the special few to get this information. You cannot wait. You must quickly find other ears to pour the information into. And so, the information - secret as it is - begins to spread. Nobody knows how far.

The expression **by the grapevine** is more than one hundred years old.

The American inventor, Samuel F. Morse, is largely responsible for the birth of the expression. Among others, he experimented with the idea of telegraphy - sending messages over a wire by electricity. When Morse finally completed his telegraphic instrument, he went before Congress to show that it worked. He sent a message over a wire from Washington to Baltimore. The message was: "What hath God wrought?" This was on May twenty-fourth, eighteen forty-four.

Quickly, companies began to build telegraph lines from one place to another. Men everywhere seemed to be putting up poles with strings of wire for carrying telegraphic messages. The workmanship was poor. And the wires were not put up straight.

Some of the results looked strange. People said they looked like a grapevine. A large number of the telegraph lines were going in all directions, as crooked as the vines that grapes grow on. So was born the expression, **by the grapevine**.

Some writers believe that the phrase would soon have disappeared were it not for the American Civil War.

Soon after the war began in eighteen sixty-one, military commanders started to send battlefield reports by telegraph. People began hearing the phrase by the grapevine to describe false as well as true reports from the battlefield. It was like a game. Was it true? Who says so?

Now, as in those far-off Civil War days, getting information by the grapevine remains something of a game. A friend brings you a bit of strange news. "No," you say, "it just can't be true! Who told you?" Comes the answer, **"I got it by the grapevine."**

You really cannot know how much – if any – of the information that comes to you by the grapevine is true or false. Still, in the words of an old American saying, the person who keeps pulling the grapevine shakes down at least a few grapes.

(MUSIC)

You have been listening to the VOA Special English program WORDS AND THEIR STORIES. I'm Christopher Cruise.