



## Words and Their Stories: Feel The Pinch

I'm Susan Clark with the Special English program WORDS AND THEIR STORIES.

In the nineteen thirties, a song, "Brother, Can You Spare a Dime?," was very popular in the United States. It was the time of the big Depression. The song had meaning for many people who had lost their jobs.

A dime is a piece of money whose value is one-tenth of a dollar. Today, a dime does not buy much. But it was different in the nineteen thirties. A dime sometimes meant the difference between eating and starving.

The American economy today is much better. Yet, many workers are concerned about losing their jobs as companies re-organize.

Americans have special ways of talking about economic troubles. People in businesses may say they **feel the pinch**. Or they may say they are **up against it**. Or, if things are really bad, they may say they have to **throw in the towel**.

A pinch is painful pressure. To feel the pinch is to suffer painful pressure involving money.

The expression, **feel the pinch**, has been used since the sixteenth century. The famous English writer William Shakespeare wrote something very close to this in his great play "King Lear."

King Lear says he would accept necessity's sharp pinch. He means he would have to do without many of the things he always had.

Much later, the Times of London newspaper used the expression about bad economic times during the eighteen sixties. It said, "so much money having been spent ... All classes felt the pinch."

Worse than feeling the pinch is being **up against it**. The saying means to be in a lot of trouble.

Word expert James Rogers says the word "it" in the saying can mean any and all difficulties. He says the saying became popular in the United States and Canada

in the late nineteenth century. Writer George Ade used it in a book called "Artie." He wrote, "I saw I was up against it."

Sometimes a business that is up against it will have to **throw in the towel**. This means to accept defeat or surrender.

Throwing in the towel may mean that a company will have to declare bankruptcy. The company will have to take legal steps to let people know it has no money to pay its debts.

Word expert Charles Funk says an eighteen seventy-four publication called the Slang Dictionary explains throwing in the towel. It says the words probably came from the sport of boxing, or prizefighting. The book says the saying began because a competitor's face was cleaned with a cloth towel or other material. When a boxer's towel was thrown, it meant he was admitting defeat.

Most businesses do not throw in the towel. They just re-organize so they can compete better.

(MUSIC)

This WORDS AND THEIR STORIES was written by Jeri Watson. I'm Susan Clark.