

Michael Judge in his recent book, The Dance of Time, has this to say about February:

“Although mighty Orion still commands the southern sky, Leo who now springs in from the north, threatens his reign; below Leo’s haunches, gentle Virgo peeps above the eastern horizon. Directly overhead stand Castor and Pollux, the Gemini twins. These sons of beautiful Leda, whom Zeus ravaged in the form of a swan, were thought by the ancients to stand guard over mortal adventurers during this cold and dangerous time of the year. Greek sailors looked up to them for protection as they fought the choppy waves, and Roman cavalymen often finished oaths by swearing, ‘by Gemini,’ which American sailors later turned into ‘by Jimminy.’”

On Ocracoke, a variation of this expression, “Dey Jimminy Criminy” [pronounced ‘Jeeminy Croiminy’] has survived the centuries, and even the recent onslaught of television and tourists.

While “Jimminy” (sometimes spelled “gemony,” “geeminy,” “jimini,” or “jiminy”) apparently comes from Gemini, “criminy,” according to Random House (“The Mavens’ Word of the Day” at www.randomhouse.com) is “one of those mild, old-fashioned euphemisms for ‘Christ,’ like crikey, cracky, cripes.....,” etc.

Random House adds that “criminy” (sometimes spelled “crimini” or “criminy”) is listed in the Oxford English Dictionary as “a vulgar exclamation of astonishment: now somewhat archaic.”

Criminy seems to have been in use since at least 1700. At some point the combined expression, “Jiminy Criminy,” became a euphemism for “Jesus Christ,” that forbidden expression of astonishment, anger, or frustration proscribed by the third commandment.

I imagine you might still hear the phrase “Jimminy Criminy” in a few small towns in America, but probably only on Ocracoke will you hear it spoken frequently, melodramatically, and with that distinctive island brogue, as in “Dey Jeeminy Croiminy, younguns, this February it’s the coldest it’s ever been!”

On your next visit to the island, listen for this and other expressions and words that help define our unique island community.
