

## Spitting

Expectorating, otherwise known as spitting, is the act of forcibly expelling spittle, quids, seeds, pits, or the like from your mouth. Today, spitting is normally considered rude and socially unacceptable. It wasn't always so.

The German sociologist, Norbert Elias, in his two-volume *The Civilizing Process*,<sup>i</sup> records prohibitions against spitting from the Middle Ages to 1910. In the Middle Ages, for example, spitting at meals was permitted provided it was under the table and not on or across it—a habit apparently common among ill-mannered hunters at the time. In the 18th century, etiquette guides directed that, “You should not abstain from spitting, and it is very ill mannered to swallow what should be spat.” The guides went on, though, to discourage spitting “when you are with well-born people” and not “in church, in the houses of the great, and in all places where cleanliness reigns.”

Putting the social aspects aside, public health concerns over tuberculosis in the 1880s was the coup de grâce for public spitting. New York City issued an ordinance prohibiting it in 1896.<sup>ii</sup> Public health dangers, especially when it came to tuberculosis and influenza, were taken seriously and word spread quickly. By 1916, 195 of 213 American cities with populations over 25,000 had laws against public spitting on the books.<sup>iii</sup>

We would be remiss at this point to not mention the venerable cuspidor, otherwise known as a spittoon. Cuspidors were used in the 1800's to give people a place to spit, especially those that chewed tobacco. With the exception of the U.S. Supreme Court, spittoons have virtually vanished. Nowadays, the nine Justices are provided with pewter drinking cups and personal spittoons. They use their spittoons as wastebaskets. Justice John Marshall Harlan, who served until 1911, is considered the last tobacco-chewing Justice to actually spit into his wastebasket.

Supreme Court Justices aside, baseball players are infamous spitters. Almost since the beginning of baseball, players have chewed tobacco, using the tobacco juice to settle the infield dust, soften their gloves, and make spitballs. It's said that some players spit so much they showed up as a scattered-shower on the weather radar. These days, though, it's more likely you'll see a player spitting sunflower seed hulls on the dugout floor, this because the players know and understand the dangers of tobacco.

Last, but not least, spitting has finally taken its rightful place as a competitive sport alongside ice hockey, table tennis, and javelin throwing. Every year, the International Cherry Pit Spitting Contest is held in Eau Claire, Michigan. Brian “Young Gun” Krause holds the coveted world distance record of 93 feet 6 ½ inches. And for those who don’t like cherries, Lee Wheelis, spit a watermelon seed 68 feet 9 1/8 inches during the Thump Spitting Competition in Luling, Texas. That’s a world record, too.

In deference to spitters everywhere, here are a few dos and don’ts to keep in mind.

#### Spitting Dos and Don’ts

- Think before you spit.
- Don’t spit where people walk. It just lies there for others to step in.
- Don’t spit on people. (It’s an awful insult.)
- Don’t spit into the wind.<sup>iv</sup>

CONSIDER THIS: Major-league (1934-1945) baseball player Stanley George “Frenchy” Bordagaray, upon being suspended for spitting at an umpire, commented that the punishment “was more than I expectorated.”

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<sup>i</sup> Elias, N., *The history of manners (The civilizing process, Vol. 1)*; Pantheon, 1982.

<sup>ii</sup> Teller, M.E., *The tuberculosis movement: A public health campaign in the progressive era*; Greenwood Press, 1988.

<sup>iii</sup> National Association for the Study and Prevention of Tuberculosis (NASPT). *A tuberculosis directory, containing a list of institutions, associations, and other agencies dealing with tuberculosis in the United States and Canada. Compiled for NASPT by Philip P. Jacobs. New York: NASPT, 1916:303-52.*

<sup>iv</sup> Croce, Jim, from *You Don’t Mess Around With Jim*.