

Stump II

Last time we began examining the life history of *stump*, a word that's been part of the English lexicon since the 1300s. It comes ultimately from a German term meaning “blunt, dull” and in its career as an English word has referred generally to the “part remaining after the main part has broken off or worn away.”

When this word reached the shores of the New World with English-speaking immigrants, it took on some lively new connotations, most notably *to be stumped*, or perplexed and brought to a halt. *Stump*, the North American verb, entered our vocabulary in the early 1800s, reflecting the exhausting job of clearing the densely forested frontier for agriculture. The trees could be felled, but their stumps would not surrender without being dug, pulled, or sometimes dynamited out of the ground.

What's more, the tree stumps that absolutely refused extraction were vexing obstacles in the field. Farmers wasted valuable time and effort guiding their mules, oxen and plows around these stubborn obstructions.

When we say *I'm stumped*, meaning “baffled, nonplussed,” we're linguistically recalling the era when stump removal was a perplexing and near impossible task, and having to work around them was thoroughly exasperating.

Next time: the stump speech.