

«April Fools History»

Story by Chris Larsen, April 5, 2009

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April Fools origins have been debated by high brow historians and journalists, as well as knuckleheads like me and Mike. The celebration has been variously credited to Constantine, Pope Isaac the 1st, Napoleon, and Joan of Arc. And though western historians hesitate to give more credit to those who invented gun powder, fire works, pizza and Lo Mein, it was in fact the Chinese who pulled the first recorded April Fools prank, a prank of such proportion that it's now widely believed to be the genesis of the world-wide tradition. The unsuspecting victim: The Dutch and their traders.

And so it was in the otherwise drab 1600s. The world was flat, the earth was the center of the universe, and justice was served up old-school. The Dutch, and most famously the Dutch East India Company, were profiting from newly discovered routes to the far east and tobacco crops along the Mediterranean coast. To put the Dutch East India Company's wealth and influence in perspective, at the height of the company's fortunes in the 1670s, their estimated earnings of \$480,000 Drachmas was the equivalent of the combined annual earnings of today's top 11 oil companies, or 8 times the earnings of Microsoft at their peak in 2004.

So, it was with more than a little swagger that the Dutch hopped from port to port for a period of over 95 years. The East India company called on ports in India, what is now Vietnam, the Philippines, New Zealand, Australia, China, and according to some historians even as far as Alaska. Interestingly, Singapore at the time was considered too small and too poor to merit a visit from the mighty Dutch. Another little known island – Japan – was considered off limits to the Dutch because Goosen VanDenBerg, son of the company's president and a ship captain himself, disappeared mysteriously there in 1631 after the Unick Rebellion.

The single most important port for the Dutch in China was Guang Ho in the south east. The Dutch ships visited there every month and owned a massive dock and storage facility in the harbor. Supposedly the Dutch even operated their own brothel near the port. The local residents called it Ne How Ma or "House of Tea." Through the mid 1600s the relationship between the Dutch and the leaders in Guang Ho flourished. Trade centered around tea, spices, jade, ivory, hemp and gold. The Chinese were happy with the relationship but historians note that the Chinese felt like the Dutch were rather boastful, overweight, and a bit near sighted.

So, in 1673, the leaders in Guang Ho agreed it would be fun to pull an elaborate prank on the unsuspecting Dutch. They knew that the ship Amelia, captained by Merton duRuyter, was due into port on or around April 1. Given the regularity of the Dutch fleet's schedule the leaders felt confident enough to make a big gamble on this date. Their plan was to trick the Dutch into thinking the city had been sacked or overtaken by disease; that is, they decided to evacuate the city on the days the Amelia was most likely to arrive.

According to remaining records and folklore, mayor JinToe Chan began disseminating the plan about a month prior to the April 1 arrival. China was at the time a largely agricultural society, so the idea was to have all residents leave town and stay with family or friends who lived at least 1 hr from the port city. Many residents traveled by goat cart since horses hadn't been introduced to SE China at this point..... What's not clear is how exactly Chan managed to get the city's 6,500 residents to comply. But they did.

And to add to the authenticity of the abandonment, Chan ordered 5 buildings close to the port to be intentionally burned. Seeing the burned buildings and no people, the thinking was that the Dutch would grow weary and move on to their next port of call in.

And that's essentially how it happened. The evacuation was completed on March 31 with a few soldiers left behind to burn the buildings and ensure no one slipped back into town. When the Amelia pulled into the harbor midday on April 1st, duRuyter ordered a quick search of the immediate vicinity for clues as to what was going on.

As it turned out, as a result of the burning of the houses a number of trees had caught fire, and one crepe myrtle was still burning when the Dutch arrived..... The Dutch took it as a warning sign and quickly returned to their ship.

Some historians cite this scene as the actual origin of the burning bush reference in the Old Testament. And, some suggest this particular part of the scene in the harbor was the reason it never occurred to the Dutch that the abandoned town might be a prank. In a 1997 article in the New York Times the whole burning crepe myrtle incident was challenged by columnist Barry Rundrin. Rundrin later admitted his challenge of the story was a hoax itself and apologized because no body got it or thought it was even funny.

Finding no evidence of inhabitants and one burning tree, deRuyter ordered the ship to pull out of the harbor to avoid an ambush or further exposure to disease or curse if that was the cause.

As the stunned Dutch pulled out of the harbor, the Chinese soldiers began firing fire works out over the harbor. Their intention was to welcome the Dutch back and indicate that it was all a joke. The Dutch though didn't get the joke as this was the first time any of them had seen fireworks. duRuyter wasn't amused and was reportedly yelled to his crew "We may brave human laws, but we cannot resist natural ones." And ordered them to strip to their skivvies and pray to god for salvation.

When the exhausted crew of the Amelia pulled into the northern harbor of Xinghou two days later they were greeted by crowds doubled over in laughter as word of the prank quickly spread up and down the coast.

To celebrate the occasion, the Dutch were always greeted with fireworks and small pranks when their ships arrived in China on April 1.