

Three On a Match



The ‘Three on a match’ superstition has been around a long time. I certainly grew up with it—I saw it referred to in movies; I heard people refer to it in passing. It seemed pretty cut and dry as to how it started, and it made sense, so I never questioned it any further. But...



The idea was that it started during the World War, although which one, we’ll see, is questionable. It refers to the logical war-time observation that the third guy getting his cigarette lit by the same match was the one that the sniper would get. Like this...three guys in a trench, foxhole, field, take a smoke break. One guy lights a match and light his cigarette (the sniper sees the flash); he light’s the second guys cigarette (the sniper is sighting in); he lights the third guy’s cigarette (and the sniper fires). Thus, we get the resulting sense of bad luck surrounding three people lighting up on the same match.

Makes sense to me! Of course, my war-time experiences only encompass a couple of very poorly done cordon bleus and and resulting words with said waitresses in German restaurants, so...

But, upon researching the phrase, I found that the origins are anything but clear, and the consensus of opinion among ‘experts’ was surprising, to say the least. Some sources gave the origin as World War I; some sources gave it as World War II; some weren’t certain which war was involved; and some pointed back to the Bette Davis, Joan Blondell, and Ann Dvorak film in 1932, *Three on A Match*.

The ‘experts’, however, debunked all those possibilities and instead came up with an explanation that is right up our collecting alley! For example: “There was in fact no such superstition during the First World War. The superstition was invented about a decade later by the Swedish match tycoon Ivar Kreuger in an attempt to get people to use more matches.” [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Three_on_a_Match_%28superstition%29]

Isn’t *that* interesting?! Ivar Kreuger was the Swedish match mogul who attempted a worldwide match monopoly in the 1920s-early 1930s, and he did a pretty good job of it, too. Then, his financial house of cards collapsed in the early 1930s and he committed suicide in 1932.

Unfortunately, none of the sources I was able to find gave any kind of solid evidence for the Kreuger theory...and...I don’t understand how promoting the idea of lighting three cigarettes on one match promotes the idea of using *more* matches. Unless, of course, Kreuger wasn’t promoting that idea at all, but rather the *superstition*. That would get people to use more matches. Hmmmmm, interesting!