

# “OVER A BARREL”



By Karyn L. Seace, Esquire



In this issue, I will look at the expression “over a barrel.” We Pennsylvanians can take credit for this one! This expression was first recorded in 1869, in a cartoon from the Pennsylvania newspaper *The Clearfield Progress*.

Prior to cardiopulmonary resuscitation being widely used in the United States, the custom for attempting to revive a drowning victim was: to place the body face down, over a barrel, and roll it back and forth in an effort to empty the lungs of water. Thus the expression came to mean “in a dire predicament.” The fate of the unconscious drowned person was entirely dependent on the actions of those around him.

The expression still survives today, although thankfully the practice of cardiopulmonary resuscitation has become the standard. It was not until 1956 that the United States recognized mouth-to-mouth. However, it is interesting to note that the first documented mention of mouth-to-mouth came

in 1740! The Paris Academy of Sciences suggested mouth-to-mouth resuscitation as a specific remedy for drowning! In 1767 The Society for the Recovery of Drowned Persons (the “Society”) was organized. It was a group of wealthy and socially conscious residents who together formed a step-by-step set of rules to follow in the event that a person may have drowned. In 1773, William Hawes, an English physician and a founding member of the Society, began publicizing the technique of artificial respiration to resuscitate people who looked as though they may have drowned. For a short time, he paid a monetary incentive, out of his own money, to any fellow citizen bringing him a person who had been salvaged from the water within a short time of total immersion using the Society’s technique.

So next time you hear the expression over a barrel, you’ll know exactly from where it came.

