



The Post-Standard

June 6, 2006 stirs superstitions

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The Associated Press

BUFFALO, N.Y. (AP) — The Antichrist was a no-show 100 years ago. No reason to worry this 06/06/06 will be any different, say some who look into that sort of thing.

There are plenty of Internet sites having fun with Tuesday's date, which, if you lose the 0s, is 666, "the number of the beast," the work of the devil himself, according to some interpretations of the Bible.

Actually, says a University at Buffalo anthropologist, the whole thing is a big misunderstanding.

The beast referred to more than once in the Book of Revelation is not Satan, but Rome and Roman emperors, said Phillips Stevens Jr., an expert on the origins and meaning of cults and superstitions. The number 666, referred to as the number of the beast, is not the mark of Satan but is probably a coded reference to the tyrannical emperor Nero, he said.

Why then have highways been renumbered from 666? Why did President Ronald Reagan have the address of his California home changed to 668? A Buffalo hospital dropped the number from its address altogether.

"Old beliefs die hard," Stevens said.

Even those who believe rationally that the number does not forebode evil may have a hard time feeling it, Stevens said, for the same reason a perfectly rational person might flinch at a black cat in his path or a Friday the 13th on the calendar.

"A lot of people who are superstitious will admit that their superstitions are kind of irrational," he said, "But 'better safe than sorry,' that sort of thing."

"Nothing has happened, nothing is going to happen," said Barry Karr, executive director of the Amherst-based Committee for the Scientific Investigation of Claims of the Paranormal, looking ahead to Tuesday.

"We're not worried about it at all, I'm going ahead with my plans," he said, noting the date has stirred anxiety in the past, in 1906, 1966 etc.

"It's really what people bring to it," said Benjamin Radford, managing editor of Skeptical Inquirer magazine. "It has no more relevance than 665 or 667."

Beyond the superstitious, conspiracy theorists have jumped on the number, Stevens said.

"They believe the sinister number 666 is encoded in our nation's banking system, in our medical

and governmental records, and in our very identity, in personal documents and in UPC bar codes — this latter is evidence of the fulfillment of Revelation prophecy," he said.

Much of the public skittishness is driven by the media, experts said, noting the adoption of the number by pop culture figures like Ozzy Osborne, a practice that continues. The band Slayer is launching its Unholy Alliance tour Tuesday, MTV.com reported. Also Tuesday, Hollywood is releasing a remake of the 1976 horror film, "The Omen," the story of the birth of the Antichrist.

No word on whether tickets will be, as Stevens suggests, \$6.66.

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