Decoding Middletown's Easter bunny: A study in American iconography

THEODORE CAPLOW and MARGARET HOLMES WILLIAMSON

This study is part of our examination of the annual cycle of festivals in Middletown, a middle-sized midwestern city whose culture was exhaustively described by Robert and Helen Lynd in the 1920s and again in the 1930s (Lynd and Lynd 1929, 1937) and which is being restudied in the late 1970s by an interdisciplinary team from the University of Virginia,[1] with the purpose of describing as accurately as possible the social and cultural changes that have taken place in this specimen community during the past half century.

The inquiry into the symbolic significance of the Easter bunny reported here was stimulated in general by the observation that Easter has been increasingly salient within Middletown's festival cycle and is increasingly associated with a pattern of gift-giving, and more particularly by the comment of a colleague that 'The Easter bunny is, of course, a fertility symbol'. Because we did not see anything in the current trend of Middletown's culture that emphasizes fertility more than before, we undertook to decipher the symbol in the same way that an ethnographer confronted with a puzzling symbol in an African or New Guinea culture tries to decode it and to determine its relevance to other parts of the culture. This decoding procedure, which owes most to the influence of Lévi-Strauss (1966, 1970, 1974) but has been much amplified by the work of Turner (1967), Firth (1973), Needham (1973), Leach (1969, 1976), Douglas (1966, 1970, 1972), Sperber (1975), and others, has become a standard procedure in modern ethnography. Following it, we assume that the Easter bunny has a significance other than being 'a part of Easter' and that he communicates something otherwise uncommunicable about Easter and the festival cycle in particular, and the culture of Middletown in general.

There is nothing random about a prevalent symbol. We must assume that the Easter bunny is chosen and accepted because he has, or is supposed to have, qualities that exemplify the latent purposes of the festival he represents and that he is unique in having these qualities. We

Semiotica 32–3/4 (1980), 221–232. 0037–1998/80/0032–0221 $2.00
© Mouton Publishers, The Hague

Brought to you by | New York University Bobst Library Techn
Authenticated
Download Date | 6/1/15 2:04 PM

are trying to answer the question 'Why a *rabbit*?', not 'Why is there a symbol here?' We expect to find a set of parallel themes or repetitive patterns in Middletown's Easter celebration, and we further anticipate that these will be echoed in other aspects of the same culture. Nearly every cultural trait can have a symbolic aspect, but emblems[2] like the Easter bunny are exclusively symbolic, so that when they are widely accepted what they represent must be important to the culture.

The procedure we propose to follow further assumes that any cultural symbol takes meaning from its juxtaposition with other symbols and especially from its direct opposition to other symbols. We cannot hope to answer the question 'Why a rabbit?' unless we can find an important opposed symbol within the Easter pattern and an opposed festival within the annual cycle.

We are not, however, directly concerned with the origins of the emblem or for that matter with the origins of other symbols in Middletown's festival cycle, but rather with what the Easter bunny and related symbols mean to contemporary residents of Middletown who make use of them or refer to them at the appropriate season, just as the ethnographer dealing with symbols in an exotic society attempts to decipher the cultural meaning they have for his subjects now, apart from their real or mythical provenance.

We begin then by describing Middletown's festival cycle. An arbitrary but convenient starting point for the annual cycle is Halloween on the last day of October, followed by Thanksgiving, Christmas, New Year's, Valentine's Day, Washington's Birthday, Easter, Mother's Day, Memorial Day, Father's Day, and Independence Day.[3]

The first thing we notice about this calendar is its asymmetry. It occupies only eight months of the year.[4] The two most important festivals are rather closely spaced; depending on the movable date of Easter, they may be only three months apart, and three of the others fall between them. The next thing we notice is that some of them are compound and others are not. Christmas and Easter are each double festivals having separate secular and religious iconographies and separate religious and secular modes of celebration. Thanksgiving represents a mixture of religious and patriotic elements. But Halloween and Valentine's Day, though of Christian origin, are entirely secular in Middletown, as are Mother's Day and Father's Day. Memorial Day and Independence Day are entirely patriotic. A third point is that each festival in the calendar seems to be associated with a particular type of social solidarity. National solidarity is celebrated on Independence Day, Memorial Day, and Washington's Birthday; family solidarity on Thanksgiving, Mother's Day, Father's Day, and (with a special nuance) Valentine's Day; neighborhood soli-

Brought to you by | New York University Bobst Library Techni
Authenticated
Download Date | 6/1/15 2:04 PM

darity on Halloween and New Year's; and civic solidarity on Memorial Day. (We shall examine separately the solidarities celebrated at Christmas and Easter.) Each of the more important festivals has a large iconography[5] and these thin out as we go down the scale of importance toward Father's Day.

One remarkable feature of the festivals in Middletown's annual cycle is that they do not seem to be linked in any way with the system of stratification that looms so large in the community and that — as the Lynds discovered long ago — affects in multifarious ways how Middletown people earn a living, make a home, train the young, and use their leisure, as well as how they worship and how they vote (Lynd and Lynd 1937: 21–24). The festival cycle, by contrast, is the same for all strata of the population, and the symbols associated with the festivals seem to be the same for everybody, except among the minority who reject the religious symbolism of Christmas and Easter for doctrinal reasons (while in many cases enjoying the secular symbolism) and the much smaller minority who reject the symbolism of the patriotic festivals for political reasons.

Little search is required to locate the festival that stands in opposition to Easter: Christmas and Easter are paired in numerous ways in Middletown's annual cycle, aside from their original pairing in the Christian calendar. Each has a remarkable double iconography that permits non-Christians or nonbelievers to participate in the celebration without discomfort. Each of them has a culminant day, surrounded by a season that extends for weeks and permits all sorts of subsidiary celebrations — from Advent to Twelfth Night, from Mardi Gras to Ascension Day. Each entitles workers and students to a vacation, though the Easter vacation is not precisely calibrated with the festival. Each calls for the exchange of gifts in Middletown — although the development of Easter gift-giving is relatively recent and by no means on the same scale as Christmas — and also for the exchange of cards (with the Easter practice again more recent and on a smaller scale); each involves family reunions, nearly obligatory for the nuclear family and highly approved for the extended family; each involves a major celebratory family meal on the culminant day. Each celebration is marked by a vast amount of redundancy (the average resident of Middletown sees innumerable Santa Clauses and Easter bunnies before and during the festival) and the redundancy underlines the relative importance of these occasions to the culture. These are all characteristics which the two festivals share only with each other and with no other festivals.

The double iconographies of the two festivals are particularly interesting because, although in constant juxtaposition, the religious iconography

Brought to you by | New York University Bobst Library Techni
Authenticated
Download Date | 6/1/15 2:04 PM

and the secular iconography of each festival are kept rigorously separate. It would be blasphemous to show the risen Christ in juxtaposition with the Easter bunny and in the same way it would be grossly improper to put Santa Claus and the Christ child in the same picture. In all the thousands of variants of representations involving these figures that are displayed in Middletown at the appropriate seasons, those intolerable combinations are successfully and totally avoided. It would be equally jarring to present Santa Claus and the Easter bunny together, and that too is never done; indeed, any intermingling of the two iconographies is virtually unthinkable. The oppositions we have discovered between, on the one hand, the central figures of the religious and of the secular iconographies in these two festivals and, on the other hand, between the two secular figures, cannot be something entirely fabricated by analysis, since they are so carefully honored by all the participants.

Proceeding on the assumption that we have correctly identified Christmas as the festival opposite to Easter, we shall assume that the emblem opposed to the Easter bunny is Santa Claus. Let us take a closer look at these two central, secular figures. Santa Claus is an old man, often said to have a wife, in charge of elves (meaning children?), who comes into the house late on Christmas Eve to bring wrapped personalized presents for children (asleep in bed) whose good behavior, particularly towards their parents, merits such gifts. (Formerly he was expected to leave switches for bad children.) Often the gifts have been requested by letters written by the children. Santa comes through the snow from the frozen Arctic wastes. He may find a snack awaiting him.

The Easter bunny is male by gender but never has a wife or indeed any family. He comes early on Easter morning to hide eggs supposed to be laid by himself — double anomaly — in the yard or garden among grass and flowers, to be discovered later in the day by children. The conduct of the children has no effect on the Easter bunny's behavior. The eggs are for whoever finds them — i.e., not directed to specific people. The Easter bunny has no fixed abode. He never sends or receives letters or communicates with anyone; indeed, like a real rabbit, he has no speech.

The secular iconography of Christmas includes, besides Santa Claus himself, a rich inventory of other iconographic material: the Christmas tree, the holly wreath, mistletoe, and the poinsettia; snow and reindeer; hearths, chimneys, and stockings; the yule log; eggnogs and hot toddies; ribbons and bows; tinsel and stars; roast turkey and roast goose; carols and caroling; the major color combination of red and green, and the minor color combination of red and white. None of these elements has much to do with the birth of Christ, the stories and legends surrounding that event, or the religious ceremonies that commemorate it. The emblems

Brought to you by | New York University Bobst Library Techn
Authenticated
Download Date | 6/1/15 2:04 PM

of the religious festival — the manger with its surrounding animals, the star of Bethlehem, the shepherds and their flocks, the three kings — form an iconographic cluster of their own that meshes with the secular cluster without losing its separate identity.

Santa Claus has no connection whatever with the birth of Christ and none is imputed to him by story or symbol. The secular iconography of Christmas is supposed to contain vestiges of pagan — perhaps Druid — winter festivals, but the evidence is vague and the line of cultural descent obscure. Clearly, the modern custom of decorating the Christmas tree originated in Germany and Santa Claus evolved out of St. Nicholas of Cusa with the help of Clement Wood and other fabulizers, but the strength and coherence of the iconographic cluster is not to be found in the origins of its separate items. The pattern itself is unmistakably modern and indeed is still evolving and still drawing in new symbolic material.

Unlike the Easter bunny, Santa Claus is unequivocally male, adult, and moral. We know his complexion, his voice, and his habits — even his reindeer have names. The gifts he distributes are explicitly given for conduct conformable to the norms imposed by parents and teachers, for washing behind the ears, going to bed on time, refraining from riot, and learning the alphabet. In the only analytical paper about Santa Claus we have been able to find — intended as a scholarly parody — Warren Hagstrom (1966: 248–251) asserted that 'In fact, Santa's rewards are generally not contingent upon good behavior; parents who assert otherwise are bluffing'. But that observation is probably beside the point, since the vast majority of children do consent to be socialized in return for the gifts bestowed by their parents and other societal agents.

Durkheim went beyond the evidence, we suggest, in locating the sources of all divinity in group life. God Almighty is not demonstrably a human invention, but little red-cheeked, pot-bellied household gods like Santa Claus are; and their air of comic triviality derives from the evident fact that they do not represent anything more profound than society and do not impose any higher obligations than the routine enactment of social roles.

Which brings us back to the Easter bunny. Like Santa Claus, he is a mock god, not a real one, in that all the actions imputed to him are performed by nonbelieving adults for the benefit of believing children, who are expected to lose their belief in him in the course of normal socialization. Most Middletown children seem to learn who really hides the Easter eggs a year or two before they understand who fills their Christmas stockings. Indeed, the children themselves often color the eggs before they are hidden. Unlike Santa Claus, that good citizen, the Easter bunny has almost no personal identity and his mock worship includes

Brought to you by | New York University Bobst Library Technic
Authenticated
Download Date | 6/1/15 2:04 PM

only the single, annual rite. Yet somehow he looms very large at Easter, if only because the second-ranking festival of the cycle contains more mysteries on both its religious and secular sides. Santa Claus can be touched in the toy department of a big store or in the person of Uncle Charlie wearing his costume; the Easter bunny is barely glimpsed as he disappears around the corner of the hedge. The secular Easter celebrates growth and renewal, flowers and fine weather, young creatures growing — in short, the forces of nature.

To understand the double opposition of Christmas–Easter and religious–secular iconography in the festival cycle of Middletown, we must look more closely at the content of each pattern, starting with the secular side of Christmas, which is — by a wide margin — the most important and most protracted festival in the Middletown calendar. The statistics that describe it are impressive. More than a million Christmas cards are exchanged annually among the 80,000 residents of Middletown. Retail sales in the Christmas season, excluding food, constitute a disproportionate share — 28 percent in 1977 — of the year's total sales because of the purchase of Christmas gifts.[6] Every continuously active face-to-face group seems to participate in some type of Christmas celebration. The predominant activities are gift-giving, including the complicated ritual of exchanging Christmas cards, and a round of feasts that culminate in the most important feast, the family Christmas dinner, the menu for which is almost unchanged from house to house.[7] Gifts equal relationships, and Christmas gifts are given according to a very subtle and refined set of rules reflecting the finest gradations in face-to-face relationships. Different kinds of things are given according to the sex of the giver, the sex of the recipient, whether they are closely or distantly related, or friends or business acquaintances, whether younger or older, whether equal or unequal in status, and so forth, and also on the basis of the tastes and interests of the recipient. Each time anyone makes a gift choice at Christmas all the formal and informal aspects of the relationship have to be reconsidered and the gift reinforces and describes the relationship.

All intimate relationships — even illicit relationships — among adults in Middletown have to be confirmed by the exchange of gifts at Christmas. But the center of the stage is reserved for the essentially nonreciprocal gifts given by parents and other adult relatives to children. Some nominal reciprocity by the children is expected, but their return gifts are not supposed to be of substantial value. The role of children in the gift-giving ceremony is essentially passive, and their passivity is dramatized in a number of conventional ways; for example, when they hang up empty stockings and when they are tucked into bed with special care on Christmas Eve.

Brought to you by | New York University Bobst Library Techni
Authenticated
Download Date | 6/1/15 2:04 PM

Since peer groups, work groups, friendships, and voluntary associations are often as important for individuals in Middletown as their family relationships, it is not surprising that the solidarity of every face-to-face social group is celebrated at Christmas, with some reaching out to larger unorganized groups as well. It is here that we suddenly glimpse the importance of the almost invisible connections between the secular and religious iconography of Christmas. The principal connecting elements are gift-giving without reciprocity (the wise men in the religious iconography, Santa Claus in the secular) and diffuse good will (universal in the religious complex, toward role partners in the secular complex). The altruistic and universalistic themes of the religious complex permeate and exalt the rather practical rituals of solidarity that make up the secular festival. It is notable, however, that the universalistic emphasis (the phrase 'Peace on earth, good will toward men' is uttered almost as redundantly as 'Merry Christmas') applies only to large human categories and not at all to large-scale organizations. In Middletown, Christmas celebrates only the solidarity of small-scale groups; it is not an occasion for demonstrating patriotism, political fidelity, school spirit, or company loyalty. Its only relation to nature, apart from the ever-startling contrast between the subtropical, sunlit desert setting of the religious story and the dark northern winter through which Santa Claus and his reindeer ride, is the presence of the tree.

'Christmas didn't seem real down there', Middletown people say after they have returned from a stay in Florida or in Southern California. In Middletown's region, the Christmas festival marks with fair accuracy the onset of an indoor season when everyone's dependence upon social networks for shelter, warmth, protection, and food is dramatically evident. The Christmas tree itself is brought inside. Meanwhile, nothing happens outside; the trees are leafless, the gardens are dormant, many of the birds have migrated, and few wild things are seen. Like people, domesticated animals depend on the social network for survival. Easter, the opposing festival, suitably marks both the end of winter and the relaxation of social dependence, as children and adults reemerge into the open air and the activities of nature are renewed.[8]

The secular aspects of Easter are less elaborate than those of Christmas. For example, the menu of the Easter feast is not precisely specified: fried chicken, boiled ham, and roast lamb are acceptable dishes, but turkeys are unseasonal. Easter gifts, although increasingly important, are much less emphasized and the gifts themselves are less diverse: the real and chocolate eggs, the chocolate rabbits, candy of all kinds, small pet animals, and clothing. The Easter basket, rather than the wrapped gift, is the prevailing form; and it may be given to anyone regardless of age, sex, social status, or

Brought to you by | New York University Bobst Library Techni
Authenticated
Download Date | 6/1/15 2:04 PM

relationship to the donor. Solidarity is expressed, but the specifics of the relationship between giver and recipient, so important a part of choosing gifts for Christmas, are here blurred or ignored.

We are now in a position to see that the Easter bunny and Santa Claus stand for emphasis on the kinds of social relationship found in their respective contexts. Santa Claus is a paternal — even a grandpaternal — figure — old, experienced, prosperous, married — and he nurtures children. He comes in from outdoors to leave his presents, in keeping with the Christmas theme of protection from the elements. Note the common Christmas card pictures of people indoors cozily watching snowfall outdoors, or people wrapped in warm clothes skating or riding in a sleigh, or children in bed waiting for Santa. Even the presents are wrapped up. The Easter bunny, by contrast, has no name, no social relationships, and no home; he belongs exclusively to the outdoors. Even his sex is confused by his distribution of eggs. Moreover, the Easter bunny takes eggs produced and normally kept indoors and hides them outside in nature to be hunted for. Christmas is a festival in which each social relationship is emphasized and clarified, while at Easter all social relationships are blurred, just as in the religious iconography of Easter death is canceled by resurrection and adults are reborn by baptism — i.e., the natural states of life and death are confounded (Warner 1961: 369–370). Once again, the religious and secular complexes are seen to be distinct but wonderfully mitered together. And once again, the religious complex confers a sense of worth and a hint of transcendent meaning upon the secular festival and its vulgar celebration of fine weather and new clothes.

The two contrasting attitudes toward children are present also in the religious iconographies of these festivals. At Christmas, of course, we have a dependent baby Jesus wrapped in swaddling clothes and laid in a manger, guarded not only by his two human parents but also by everything else: angels, animals, shepherds, and the visiting kings, who bring presents. Many of the nativity stories are about the preservation of the child and incidentally of the marriage of his parents — how the angel comes and tells Joseph to accept Mary's pregnancy and about the flight into Egypt. The necessity of preserving the family is stressed again and again in the gospel story; and, as we noted before, redundancy signifies importance. At Easter, of course, we have a kind of inversion, in that Jesus dies but returns to life. Throughout the Easter story he acts independently, not nurtured by his human parents or by God the Father. Moreover, the religious aspect of Easter shows exactly the same confusion of categories as the secular aspect mentioned above — life is not ended by death; the identities of father and son are mingled; the disciples are both disloyal and trusted.

Brought to you by | New York University Bobst Library Techni
Authenticated
Download Date | 6/1/15 2:04 PM

Religious and secular motifs echo each other on a high level of abstraction, and repeat some of the same messages. At Christmas we emphasize the dependence of children, but at Easter the same children are urged to go forth and seek new experiences unaided. This is the fundamental unresolvable contradiction which Easter and Christmas in their opposing ways try to resolve — that children must be independent after a long period of almost total dependence. This is a contradiction present in all societies. From the adult viewpoint, encouraging the dependence and insisting on the independence are both necessary tasks of socialization, but the contradiction must somehow be accommodated.[9] One way is to split it in two, and to emphasize each part in a context which is, quite properly, the opposite of the context that emphasizes the other part. Thus the sovereign necessities for raising the next generation can be practiced ritually and their importance reaffirmed at regular intervals.

We glimpse here also the great dichotomy between nature and society that seems to pervade the myths and rituals of preliterate societies all over the world (Lévi-Strauss 1970). Can it be that the highly modernized people of Middletown are somehow engaged by the same mythic preoccupations?

We started out to assess the claim that the Easter bunny is a fertility symbol to celebrants of the contemporary Easter festival in Middletown. Whether the Easter bunny can be traced back to particular fertility rituals in pagan cults or in early forms of Christianity is a question that belongs to the study of its provenance and that can be left aside in elucidating the current significance of the emblem. It is commonplace for an emblem to enter an iconography with one set of connotations and to acquire a quite different set of meanings with the passage of time, although it must be admitted that some vestige of the original meaning can usually be detected. In point of fact, references to the Easter bunny were comparatively rare in Middletown before the 1930s.[10]

It should also be noted in passing that the term 'fertility symbol' carries connotations of insistent and orgiastic sexuality that may be misleading in the case of the Easter bunny. These connotations are partly traceable to the literate reader's vague familiarity with the Eleusinian mysteries, the cult of Mithras, Hindu ritual prostitution, and other festival observances that celebrate reproduction in a libidinal mode; partly also, to the easy confusion of fecundity and sexuality. In the folklore of Middletown's region, rabbits are renowned for fecundity and for speed of copulation, but these characteristics do not make rabbits very suitable for symbolizing human sexuality and they are unsuitable for several other reasons: rabbits have little sexual dimorphism, males and females being difficult to tell apart; the human observer cannot readily identify sexual arousal in rabbits; and the rabbit's legendary speed of copulation is a sexually

Brought to you by | New York University Bobst Library Techni
Authenticated
Download Date | 6/1/15 2:04 PM

negative trait when transferred to humans. 'Rabbit' is rarely used in Middletown as an epithet against human males and carries little sexual significance compared to boar, bull, dog, tomcat, goat, cock, stud, or donkey, to take the most obvious examples. 'Bunny' is used to symbolize women as playthings, as in the mock-sexual image of the *Playboy* bunny, but that is sexuality with an asexual twist, and matches the Easter bunny in an odd way by carrying a gender designation which does not imply the performance of an appropriate sexual role, and an age designation that is intentionally incongruous. The *Playboy* bunny mimics childhood behavior while displaying her anatomical maturity, while the Easter bunny presents himself as an implausible parent (of eggs) while remaining a child, capable of being grouped with the other animal children — chicks, ducklings, lambs, and occasionally piglets and calves — that form the iconographic cluster of the secular Easter. All of them are immature, edible, anonymous; they are 'cute' but not really personified.

How do we account for the primacy the rabbit has assumed in Middletown among these traditional emblems of Easter? Presumably a preference for one icon over another depends upon the purpose to be served. If the Easter bunny is used to represent the confusion and blurring of social roles in the presence of nature — and of death — he is admirably suited for the job. Of all the candidates mentioned above, the rabbit is the only animal whose gender is not evident with maturity, who is both edible and a pet, who may be either domesticated or wild, and whose maturity is not very evident. Rabbits, to our way of thinking, are consistently ambiguous — they fit into too many categories. The Easter bunny ensures his ambiguity by delivering eggs, which are never produced by males or by placental mammals. And only the rabbit is untouchable. Lambs, chicks, ducklings, and for that matter pigs and cows can be readily handled, but even tame rabbits resist close contact with humans. In a sense, the Easter bunny may be a substitute for the excessively sacred lamb, the Agnus Dei of Christian theology, who cannot be made into a toy or a chocolate image without some sense of profanation. The innocent, lovable, and highly edible lamb, associated in the religious festival with sacrifice and holy communion, is replaced in the secular festival by the ambiguously innocent, remotely lovable, and exotically edible rabbit. Just as the Easter bunny is ambiguously male and ambiguously adult,[11] so ambiguity extends to his character. His innocence, like that of Peter Rabbit, is mingled with guilt and there is even a hint of malice in his hiding of the eggs.

The Easter bunny is no moralist. He does not discriminate in his treatment of good children and bad children as Santa Claus does. His gifts are unconditional and more or less undirected. Indeed, the more we

Brought to you by | New York University Bobst Library Techn
Authenticated
Download Date | 6/1/15 2:04 PM

explore the list of his ambiguous attributes, the more inescapable the comparison with Santa Claus becomes. Above all, the Easter bunny is the total opposite of Santa Claus, and it is in this opposition that we may find the key to the symbolic meaning of both.

Notes

1. Caplow is the principal investigator of the Middletown III project, National Science Foundation Grant No. 75-13580. Williamson is its consulting anthropologist.
2. An emblem is a type of symbol that represents a complex but bounded social or cultural phenomenon by means of an easily recognized picture or design which has no morphological relationship to the thing represented. This definition is adapted from Efron (1972: 96). See also Firth (1973) and Leach (1976), who have supplied variant usages.
3. Omitted from this list are four official holidays — Columbus Day, Veteran's Day, Lincoln's Birthday, and Labor Day — that are not widely celebrated in Middletown and have no associated iconography. Middletown's population seems to be unenthusiastic about Lincoln's birthday, but not Southern enough to celebrate Lee-Jackson Day or Confederate Memorial Day, and there are not enough Catholics or Irish-Americans to make Mardi Gras and St. Patrick's Day community holidays. We are indebted to Professor Whitney Young for aid in verifying this list.
4. The sacred Christian year that underlies the secular cycle of festivals is slightly shorter at each end — it runs from Advent to Pentecost. For an altogether admirable account of it, see Warner (1961: Ch. 9).
5. Many of the emblems in these iconographies have an archaic character which enables them to connect the present with the past, but that also creates an evident tension between the modernized setting in which the celebration occurs and the premodern setting from which the emblems are drawn. Although the emblems are often archaic, they are not traditional in any precise sense. New elements are introduced quite freely as the pattern of the festival evolves — the Easter bunny himself is a conspicuous example.
6. Based on data provided by Dr. Joseph Brown, Bureau of Business Research, Ball State University.
7. This has remained fairly constant in Middletown since the 1880s, whence surviving Christmas dinner menus are indistinguishable from modern ones.
8. 'Easter, the word itself, reveals its origin and meaning. It is an eastern word, and means something from the East. The sun has returned from its northern resort to shine again from the East bringing warmth and revival in his rays. The winter is past and soon the flowers will appear on earth ....' (*'Middletown' Star*, March 28, 1937)
9. Cf. Erikson (1976: 83–84): 'Whenever people devote a good deal of emotional energy to celebrating a certain virtue, say, or honoring a certain ideal, they are sure to give thought to its counterpart. ... In this view, every human culture can be visualized, if only in part, as a kind of theater in which certain contrary tendencies are played out.'
10. Based on our study of editorial and advertising content in the leading Middletown newspaper during the festival cycles of 1907, 1917, 1927, 1937, 1947, 1957, 1967, and 1977.
11. Sometimes the ambiguity of the Easter bunny's age and gender is made explicit. Thus, from the description of a club dance in Middletown on Easter Saturday, 1947, 'Before a gold satin backdrop were two huge rabbits dressed as a boy and girl standing on either

Brought to you by | New York University Bobst Library Techni
Authenticated
Download Date | 6/1/15 2:04 PM

side of a large Easter basket tied with a bow on the handle. Between the windows at the other side of the ballroom were other rabbit figures also dressed in the costumes of little boys and girls.' (*'Middletown' Star*, April 6, 1947)

References

Douglas, Mary (1966). *Purity and Danger*. London: Routledge & Kegan Paul.
—(1970). *Natural Symbols*. London: Barrie & Rockliff.
—(1972). Deciphering a meal. *Daedalus* 101, 61–79.
Efron, David (1972 [1941]). *Gesture, Race and Culture*. Revised edition in *Approaches to Semiotics*, Thomas A. Sebeok (ed.). The Hague: Mouton.
Erikson, Kai (1976). *Everything in its Path*. New York: Simon & Schuster.
Firth, Raymond (1973). *Symbols: Public and Private*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
Hagstrom, Warren O. (1966). What is the meaning of Santa Claus. *The American Sociologist* 1, 5.
Leach, Edmund (1969). *Genesis as Myth*. London: Jonathan Cape.
—(1976). *Culture and Communication*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Lévi-Strauss, Claude (1966). *The Savage Mind*. London: Weidenfeld & Nicholson.
—(1970). *The Raw and the Cooked*, trans. of *Le cru & le cuit* by John and Doreen Weightman. London: Jonathan Cape.
—(1974). *From Honey to Ashes*, trans. of *Du miel aux cendres* by John and Doreen Weightman. New York: Harper & Row.
Lynd, Robert and Lynd, Helen (1929). *Middletown: A Study in American Culture*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
—(1937). *Middletown in Transition: A Study in Cultural Conflicts*. New York: Harcourt Brace.
Needham, Rodney (ed.) (1973). *Right and Left*. Chicago: Chicago University Press.
—(1979). *Symbolic Classification*. Santa Monica, Calif.: Goodyear Publishing Co.
Sperber, Dan (1975). *Rethinking Symbolism*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
Turner, Victor (1967). *The Forest of Symbols*. Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press.
Warner, William Lloyd (1961). *The Family of God: A Symbolic Study of Christian Life in America*. New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press.

Theodore Caplow (b. 1920) is Commonwealth Professor of Sociology at the University of Virginia. His principal research interests are social change and rituals of urban communities. His publications include *The Urban Ambience* (1961, with S. Stryker and S. E. Wallace), *Principles of Organization* (1964), *Two Against One: Coalitions in Triads* (1968), *Old Men Drunk and Sober* (1972, with H. M. Bahr), and *Toward Social Hope* (1975).

Margaret Holmes Williamson (b. 1946) is an Assistant Professor of Anthropology and Sociology at Mary Washington College. Her principal research interests are ethnography of the Sepik River area, indigenous North American societies at the point of European contact, sex roles, and American culture. Her publications include 'Who does what to the Sago? A Kwoma variation of Sepik River sex roles' (1979), 'Cicatrisation of women among the Kwoma' (1979), 'Powhatan Hair' (1979), '"Omaha" terminology and unilateral marriage on the Sepik' (1980), and *Kwoma Women: Sex Roles in a Sepik Society* (forthcoming).

Brought to you by | New York University Bobst Library Techn
Authenticated
Download Date | 6/1/15 2:04 PM