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The Goliath Effect
Corporate Dominance and Mercantile Legends

FROM UPTON SINCLAIR'S GRISLY DESCRIPTION in *The Jungle* (1906:102) of how workers who fell in vats of fat emerged as Durham's Pure Leaf Lard to the recent belief that McDonald's uses worms in its burgers, one of the most prevalent folk ideas in 20th-century American life is suspicion of big business.[1] This heritage of political progressivism and muckraking journalism remains a cornerstone of American folklore.

Although these attitudes had their roots prior to 1900 (Simpson 1983), much 20th-century folklore can be understood by reference to American ambivalence toward bigness. I suggest that in their folklore Americans focus on the biggest or best-known corporations, and that these corporations will often be portrayed in a negative light as amoral or as distinctly malevolent. Specifically I propose a set of propositions collectively termed the *Goliath Effect,* arguing that a larger percentage of American legends than predicted by chance refer to the most dominant corporation or product in a particular market (e.g., more legends will deal with McDonald's or Coke than with Burger King or Pepsi than would be expected from their respective market share); that legends naming the largest corporations will be more widely disseminated than those referring to smaller corporations; and that legends may change target from a smaller corporation to a larger one. Similar effects are predicted for the most prestigious corporations or products in a market. Here, I attempt to demonstrate the plausibility of the Goliath Effect by analyzing several collections of data.

Folklore and Modernity

Because of the economic and social changes that have affected the United States, a set of legends and folk beliefs has become widely known that indirectly addresses these changes. Although some of these narratives have earlier roots, they are particularly characteristic of the post-World War II period. These stories reflect the conditions of modernity and raise the concerns of the age. They represent attempts by the public to deal with the massive social disloca-

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tions affecting them (Fine 1980; Warren 1972). Folklore cannot be divorced from the ideological perspectives of its tellers and audiences. Legends that folklorists have characterized as "urban" frequently feature businesses and corporations as central images and actors. I have chosen to describe this sub-class of urban belief tales as "mercantile legends."[2]

Mercantile legends typically posit a connection between a corporation and some harmful situation or event. Among the best known of these are the Kentucky Fried Rat (Fine 1980), the Mouse in the Coke Bottle (Fine 1979a; Domowitz 1979), and the Death Car (Dorson 1959:250; Brunvand 1981:20). Other mercantile legends include stories of worms in McDonald's hamburgers, spider eggs in Bubble Yum bubblegum, deadly exploding Pop Rocks candy, snakes in K Mart clothing, or Jockey shorts that cause sterility. These mercantile legends can be seen as mini-docudramas in which something dreadful happens to a naive victim: a person buys an inexpensive product but discovers it is horribly defective. Even the Death Car, whose defect cannot be attributed to the greed or negligence of the manufacturer, follows this pattern. Here the car is inexpensive as a result of the anonymous, unnoticed death perceived as characteristic of modern life. Although a few mercantile legends mention court settlements, in most the purchaser can do nothing to prevent similar occurrences.

I classify these legends into three types in terms of the source of the contamination: The Evil Corporation, the Deceptive Corporation, and the Careless Corporation.[3]

The Evil Corporation. These legends proclaim that the corporation is consciously evil, although the product itself is not condemned. The belief that the late Ray Kroc, the president of McDonald's, was a member of the Church of Satan is a widely known example. Similar stories claim that Uncle Ben's gives money to the Palestine Liberation Organization; Procter & Gamble is owned by the Unification Church ("Moonies"), a satanic cult, or a witches' coven; and Schick Razors aided the Nazis during World War II.

The Deceptive Corporation. The second set of stories claims that a company regularly adulterates its products. A recent example is the contention that McDonald's adds worms to their hamburgers (Domowitz 1980). Some contend that Chanel #5 gets its distinctive odor from *eau du chat* (Domowitz 1980). Related are accounts of the long-term effects of commonly used products. Consumers say that Bubble Yum bubblegum (Cooney 1977) and Kool-Aid (Domowitz 1980) are carcinogenic. Others speak of the debilitating effects of colas (Bell 1976) and microwave ovens (Brunvand 1981:62–65). Whether such stories are true in whole or in part is a question for epidemiologists. However, the ready acceptance of such grim conclusions is significant to folklorists. These stories reflect the public's implicit conclusion that the post-industrial state is dangerous, since greedy corporations do not care about the health of the general public. In the phrase of Robert Nisbet (1976), the public perceives "the Rust of Progress." Progress does not only bring better times; it has a dark underside that creates tragedy. Technology is a distinctly mixed blessing (Sherry 1984).

The Careless Corporation. A third set of stories depicts one-time product contamination. One popular example is the Department Store Snake (Cord 1969; Mullen 1970; Brunvand 1981:160–171). A woman goes shopping at a discount department store and is bitten by a venomous snake or insect while examining the merchandise. Accounts of the Mouse in the Coke Bottle and the Kentucky Fried Rat are also of this type. Typically the corporation is not blamed for being intentionally evil but is seen as lacking concern, being careless, and employing apathetic and indifferent workers. Although these disturbing events are reported as isolated, people see them as characteristic of American corporate life. The events are shocking but are not really surprising given the shoddiness of our age.

All three groups of legends, when taken together, reflect the American mistrust of business. In a recent Gallup survey of Americans' confidence in their institutions (Gallup 1979), only 32% of the public reported having confidence in big business (less support than any other institution, including organized religion, the military, Congress, organized labor, or television). Bigness seems to trouble many Americans. This attitude is paradoxical in light of the American worldview, which emphasizes progress, newness, and size (see Dundes 1971; Dorson 1959). How can this apparent contradiction be resolved? We must recognize that emotional themes need not be responded to consistently. That is, people are ambivalent; although Americans revere size, technology, and innovation, these very traits also provoke fears (see Marx 1964; Harris 1981; Taviss 1972).

The Goliath Effect

Americans' fear of bigness is reflected in folk narrative in a pattern I term the *Goliath Effect.* A large proportion of American mercantile legends do not deal just with large corporations but, when they name a firm or product, name the one with the largest market share in that product area. The general public focuses its attention on this corporation or product, which galvanizes its fears and mistrust. If size per se did not have an effect, then the percentage of tales about any corporation or product would generally reflect its market share. This, however, is not the case. Because of its symbolic significance as the market leader, the largest (or, in some cases, the most prestigious) corporation or product is the target for more of these stories than expected.[4] I do not accept the unproven claim that these tales are usually tools of corporate espionage or conscious manipulations of public opinion by disgruntled consumers or employees (Rowan 1979; Klintberg 1981:156). Rather, these stories make sense because corporate leaders serve as the targets.[5]

I formally present the Goliath Effect through the following propositions:

P1. The largest corporation (or product) in terms of market share in a particular product area will be mentioned in more versions of a mercantile legend than would be expected by share of the market alone.

P2. The largest corporation (or product) in terms of market share in a particular product area will be mentioned in more individual mercantile legends than would be expected by share of the market alone.

A corollary of these propositions reflects changes in these legends over time:

C1. Mercantile legends will tend, over time, to switch the corporation (or product) named in them from a smaller corporation (or product) to a larger one.

I have stated these propositions as precisely and as formally as possible so that other researchers can gather evidence supporting or disputing them, knowing they are examining the same propositions. Each proposition is a probabilistic statement; not all mercantile legends follow these patterns.[6] I do claim that more legends than expected by chance will follow these patterns. Also, I only refer to those legends that cite a particular corporation or product; many refer to the industry as a whole. Finally, I recognize that the primary social-psychological force involved is not actual market share, but market share as *perceived* by the public. This means that a folklorist who wishes to test these propositions must specify which audience is being considered and the time frame for analysis. Targets for these legends may change as corporate dominance shifts. I do not claim to have proven these assertions. Rather, I hope to demonstrate their plausibility by subjecting my data to interpretations based on human social psychology.[7]

From the perspective of quantitative social science, the ideal means of examining these claims is to sample randomly a large collection of legends systematically collected from a large population. Unfortunately, since folklorists rarely collect texts systematically, such a collection does not exist. In attempting to assess the validity of the Goliath Effect, I have relied upon two data sources. First, during 1981–82 I requested 102 students in four classes at the University of Minnesota to complete a short questionnaire asking if they had heard of a set of mercantile legends and, if they had, which company was named. While this is not a random sample, I have no reason to believe that this group would be more likely to name large corporations than would a random sample of the population. Second, I reviewed major published accounts for examples of mercantile legend texts and searched systematically through the Indiana University Folklore Archives looking for items that mention corporation[8] names. Although this sample is neither complete nor unbiased, I find no reason to believe this bias would lead to a selection of texts that would unduly support the Goliath Effect.

The questionnaire distributed to students requested information about 12 mercantile legends. Of these, only six legends were known by at least 10% of the sample, the figure I used as the criterion for inclusion in the analysis. These were: (1) the mouse in the soft drink bottle; (2) the rat fried as chicken; (3) spider eggs in gum; (4) worms in hamburgers; (5) cat and dog food used in a pizza parlor; and (6) the car sold cheaply because someone died in it.[9] The results of this questionnaire lend support to my claim that the largest corporation will be named as the target of these legends. Coca-Cola, Kentucky Fried Chicken, Bubble Yum, McDonald's, and Pizza Hut are named most often for the first five legends (87.7% of all corporations named). The sixth legend is more complicated in that three students named the Corvette, possibly because it is a prestigious sports car. However, the Chevrolet line is also the largest-selling car line. If we add the three who named Corvette to the one who named Chevrolet Camaro, four of the ten Death Car citations involve Chevrolet. Another respondent cited the prestigious Cadillac. The evidence thus suggests that more widely known legends refer to the largest firms, supporting Proposition P1.

I requested information about 12 legends. Significantly, only the aforementioned six were known by even one-tenth of the sample. The dynamics of recall in response to a questionnaire should be generally similar to natural recall. That people think "Coke" when they think "soft drink" applies to narration as well as to answering questionnaires.

One feature makes these findings less clear-cut than desirable, despite the statistical support cited above. Many of the stories have received media attention, and so, one might argue, the mass media have appointed one company as the "official" target. This certainly applies in some measure to all but the pizza parlor stories and the Death Car. Yet, media selection of a particular corporation is not as damaging to Proposition P1 as might appear. After all, newspapers and magazines do not create these stories; they report the fact that many people believe and are spreading them with a particular corporation as the target. Although the media may have expanded the number of people who heard the story and may have homogenized popular memory, there is no evidence that any of these mercantile legends were reported before they were in wide oral circulation. These stories are libelous, and newspapers or television would not name the target unless a popular consensus had developed.[10] Folklorists who examine contemporary beliefs must remember that oral tradition and media diffusion play off one another (Attebery 1970).

My second data source is an assortment of texts culled from a search of the Indiana University Folklore Archives, a review of the literature on "urban" legends, and mercantile legends I have collected during a decade of research. The majority of these stories name the largest corporation or product in the market area. The exact figure is uncertain given the difficulty of obtaining statistics on corporate market share at any given time; ideally one must consider the market share both at the time the story was first heard and when it was collected. Often such information is proprietary or otherwise unavailable. Despite these limitations, I am confident that a comparable analysis of other collections of texts will confirm my conclusion. I have compiled a table listing the major urban legends, the corporations about which these legends have been told, and whether the most frequent target for the story is the largest company in its area. A company with 25% market share should have 25% of the stories if the telling of such stories was a purely random phenomenon. These data support Proposition P2 in that the largest corporations appear to be mentioned in

Table 1. Mercantile Legends.

	Heard of Legend[a] Number	(%)	Named Specific Company	Corporations Named	% of Cases	% Who Named Leading Corporation	Estimated % Market Share
Mouse in soft drink bottle	52	(51)	48	Coca-Cola	46	96	24[b]
				RC	2		
Rat fried as chicken	60	(59)	58	Kentucky Fried Chicken	57	98	59[c]
				Banquet	1		
Spider eggs in gum	22	(22)	19	Bubble Yum	10	53	25[d]
				Bubblicious	3		
				Hubba Bubba	2		
				Others (4)	4		
Worms in hamburger	40	(39)	38	McDonald's	34	89	45[e]
				Wendy's	2		
				Burger Chef	1		
				White Castle	1		

Pizza parlor uses pet food	19	(19)	16	Pizza Hut	10	62	47[f]
				Shakey's	4		
				Sambo's	1		
				Big B's	1		
Car sold cheaply because someone died in it	19	(19)	10	Corvette	3		
				Ford	3		
				Cadillac	1		
				Others (3)	3		
				Total Chevrolet	4	40	17[g]

[a] 102 students are in the sample.
[b] Cited in "The CU Cola Challenge" (1984:67), "recent industry estimates."
[c] Cited in "Continued Expansion Planned . . ." (1983:88), 1981 data.
[d] Cited in "Bubble Yum . . ." (1980:10), 1979 data.
[e] Cited in Edwards (1983:79), 1982 data.
[f] Cited in "Overall, New Pan Pizza . . ." (1983:93), 1981 data.
[g] Cited in World Motor Vehicle Data, 1982 Edition (1982:336), 1981 data.

Table 2. Mercantile Legends and Their Targets.

Type	*Corporation*
Mouse in soft drink bottle[a]	Coca-Cola, Pepsi, 7-Up
Death from exploding candy[a]	Pop Rocks
Rat fried as chicken[a]	Kentucky Fried Chicken
Red Velvet Cake[b]	Waldorf Astoria
Alligator in restroom[b]	Waldorf Astoria
Cement car[b]	Cadillac
Death car[b]	Corvette, Buick, Cadillac, Thunderbird, Porsche, MG
Corrosive soft drink[a]	Coca-Cola
Undershorts cause sterility[a]	Jockey
Spider eggs in gum[a]	Bubble Yum
Company giving money to PLO[a]	Uncle Ben's
Finger in sausage	Wardinski
Worms in hamburgers[a]	McDonald's, Wendy's
Satanic cult[a]	McDonald's, Procter & Gamble, KISS
Carp in fish filet[a]	McDonald's
Rat found in french fry oil[a]	McDonald's
Compressed rat in hamburger[a]	McDonald's
Tooth in hamburger[a]	McDonald's
Horsemeat in hamburgers[a]	McDonald's
Employees drop hamburgers on floor[a]	McDonald's
Sawdust in hamburgers[a]	McDonald's
Cardboard in hamburgers[a]	McDonald's
Cat's eye in hamburger[a]	McDonald's
Moonies control company[a]	Procter & Gamble, Entenmann's Bakery
Witch coven controls company[a]	Procter & Gamble
Dog or cat food on pizza[a]	Pizza Hut, Shakey's, Charlie's
Department store snakes[a]	K Mart, others
Beer bottle label trade for sex	Olympia
Leper in cigarette factory	Chesterfield
Rat feces in hot dog	Weiner King
Cat odor in perfume[a]	Chanel #5
Drink mix causes cancer[a]	Kool-Aid
Worms in oatmeal[a]	Quaker Oats
Shoplifting error[a]	Marshall Field
Poisoned dress[b]	Marshall Field
Supporter of gun control[a]	Anheuser-Busch, Coors
Tobacco company owning marijuana fields	R. J. Reynolds
Worms in fish	H. Salt
Rat in fish	H. Salt
Garbage on pizza	Siano's Pizza
Company giving money to Nazis	Schick
Finger in Chinese food	China Inn (Lansing)
Worker found in pickle barrel	Aunt Jane's Pickles

Table 2. Continued.

Type	*Corporation*
Cockroaches in hamburgers	Burger King
Bug in peanut butter cup[a]	Reese's Peanut Butter Cup
Rat hair in hamburger	Kelly's
Mouse in canned food[a]	Libby's
Dog food in hamburgers	Sandy's
Gelatin becomes rubber[a]	Jell-O
Urinating on hamburger grill	Henry's, Perkins
Garbage in cookies	Keebler
Cat food in Mexican food[a]	Zapata's/Zantigo
Garbage in canned corn[a]	Green Giant
Aphrodisiac candy[a]	M & Ms
Predicting gender of unborn child[a]	Drano

[a] Refers to largest corporation or product—regional or national.
[b] Refers to most prestigious corporation or product—regional or national.
Note: Corporations are listed in approximate frequency of mention.

more legends than expected by chance. Although this is not a scientific survey, it does suggest that an empirical regularity is operating. Combining legends dealing with the largest corporation with those involving the most prestigious corporation (to be discussed below), one finds that more than two-thirds of the sample falls in one of these two categories.

Corporate Dominance

Some companies so dominate their product areas that their names are almost generic (Bell 1976). We refer to Xerox machines rather than copiers, Jell-O rather than flavored gelatin, Kleenex rather than facial tissues, or Oreos rather than sugar cream sandwiched between two chocolate wafers. People use these names even when they refer to other brands because these corporate names symbolize the products. In legends and rumors dealing with these products ("Xerox machines cause cancer") we use the corporate name without necessarily claiming that the corporation named is the only corporation involved. When informants talk about "Jell-O" hardening into rubber and being indigestible, the target of the story may not be General Foods. However, the mention of such corporate names reflects psychological dominance. If asked directly which corporation was involved, informants typically confirmed that it was the corporate leader even though the source for the account might have used the product reference generically.

Although their names are not synonymous with their products, some corporations are perceived as so dominant that they are the logical targets of such stories. This is particularly evident in regard to Procter & Gamble, one of the largest American consumer products corporations. Procter & Gamble was the target of rumors that it is controlled by Satanists, a witches' coven, or by the Unification Church. A survey by *Advertising Age* (1982:1) demonstrated that 79% of the public could not name any specific product of Procter & Gamble. Yet, the psychological dominance of the corporation as a whole made such beliefs credible for more than half the sample. Such rumors need not be grounded in knowledge, but only in general emotions about the corporation.

The effect of dominance is particularly evident in fast foods. People recognize that "Kentucky Fried Chicken" or "Colonel Sanders" is a corporate trademark, but they use it to refer to those establishments that sell take-out fried chicken. Many Americans cannot name a second fried chicken firm. In my collection of 115 versions of the Kentucky Fried Rat story (Fine 1980), not one informant named any other fried chicken chain, while 65 specifically named Kentucky Fried Chicken as the establishment where the rat was sold.

Similarly, many Americans see McDonald's as the quintessential fast food establishment. When Americans think of fast food, McDonald's is the company that comes to mind. As befits a corporate giant, many stories are told about its activities. Among those I have collected are the beliefs that founder Ray Kroc is a member of the Church of Satan and that McDonald's hamburgers are made from worms, rat hairs, sawdust, horsemeat, or even cardboard. Other stories claim that employees spit on the hamburgers or drop them on the floor. A tooth, a compressed rat, and a cat's eye have reportedly been found in McDonald's hamburgers. Their fish filets are supposedly made from carp, and rats are reported in the french fry oil. This large collection of stories is striking in contrast to the paucity of tales about Burger King, the second largest hamburger chain. I have collected only one mercantile legend about Burger King—that there are cockroaches in its hamburgers. Although the precise number of texts is not important, most stories that name a fast food hamburger restaurant name McDonald's. The corporate dominance of McDonald's preempts legends about other establishments.

The effect of economic dominance can be observed in the "natural history" of the claim that McDonald's uses worms in their hamburgers. According to an investigative account in the *Wall Street Journal,* "McDonald's believes that the worm rumor originated in Chattanooga, Tennessee, sometime last summer in connection with Wendy's. By November it was hurting business at more than 20% of McDonald's outlets, mostly in the Southeast, forcing the company to mount a counterattack that it tried to confine to the affected territory" (Montgomery 1979). Both Domowitz and I have found the story reported about Wendy's although most accounts named McDonald's (Domowitz 1980). Why should the worms crawl from Wendy's to McDonald's? At the time, Wendy's was the fastest growing hamburger chain in the United States and was particularly concentrated in the Southeast. Wendy's advertising emphasized that its hamburgers were "hot and juicy." Emphasizing the "juiciness" (and, hence, that squooshy wetness) provided an aesthetic context in which the belief that they used worms was more credible. However, in accordance with Corollary C1, this belief was unstable because Wendy's is only the third largest franchiser. It is thus not the company one typically thinks of for fast food hamburgers. In time, the target became McDonald's. The original account may have dealt with worms in Wendy's hamburgers, but the listener may not have registered the detail that the hamburgers were from Wendy's. When the story was recalled later, the details would be reconstructed. The dominant corporation (McDonald's) would be named both because it is the largest and, thus, the most likely to have been involved. More significantly, because it is the dominant corporation, it is a symbolic representation that could "reasonably" be placed in this story slot. The change from Wendy's to McDonald's conforms to the process of how people recode information.

Regional Dominance

Some corporations are dominant only within a region and not nationally. Legends about such companies are spread within their economic territory; outside that region, either the story is not spread, or it is spread with the name of the leading corporation of *that* region.

Regional breweries are a case in point. Although the market structure of beer sales has become increasingly national during the past decade, some local breweries have regional marketing strategies and inspire community loyalty. In one story, a male was said to be able to get "a piece of ass" if an Olympia beer bottle label had a special code on its back (Preston 1973). These stories were originally known in Washington state where Olympia beer was very popular. When Olympia was marketed in Colorado, the story followed.

Perhaps the best examples of the regionalization of mercantile folklore are the stories about department store snakes (Domowitz 1980; Cord 1969; Mullen 1970; Brunvand 1981:160–171):

> A girl went into Hill's at Columbus [Indiana] to try on coats. While she was trying one on she felt something prick her arm. She just thought it was a pin prick and didn't bother about it. Later that night she got very sick and when they called the doctor he said it acted like a poisonous bite from a snake or something. They got the store manager and went back into the store and found the coat and in the lining of that coat in the sleeve there was a whole nest of baby snakes. The coat had come from the Far East, I think Hong Kong, and the snakes had gotten into the coat while it sat on the dock waiting for shipment. The girl was awful sick but she recovered. They said since they were only baby snakes they weren't poisonous enough to kill her. If it had been a grown snake she would have died. [Reported by Margaret O. McDonald, Fall 1974; from IU Archives]

While Hill's is a major store in Columbus, Indiana, legends from other areas of the country cite different local or regional stores. I collected similar accounts in Massachusetts which name Zayre, the largest discount department store chain in that region; in Minnesota many consumers name Target, which is similar to Zayre. Although K Mart is the largest chain of discount department stores in national sales, in areas where regional or local stores are dominant, these stores may be targets. Of course, because of the size and dominance of K Mart, it is also a frequent target.

More problematic in terms of the Goliath Effect are mercantile legends that refer to local establishments. Most mercantile legends name national or regional chains, but some narrators name local businesses. For example, while most of the stories about dog food used as a pizza topping cite such major franchisers as Pizza Hut and, to a lesser extent, Shakey's, some blame local pizzarias such as "Charlie's Pizza." Since the targets of mercantile legends are selected because of their perceived appropriateness, it is not surprising that local establishments are the targets for some of these stories. This is especially true when a local establishment is perceived as having the characteristics of the national chains. The same outrages that happen in national chains can happen in local stores, although for psychological reasons they are seen as less likely. Of course, if a narrator is describing the event to someone from elsewhere, he or she may change the target either deliberately or unconsciously so that the audience will appreciate its significance. In order for a story to make sense, both teller and audience must share a "universe of discourse" (Berger and Luckmann 1966) about its major features. The central images and symbols must be meaningful to the audience. Because of their national scope, dominant corporations are appropriate in these legends whereas local concerns are not, except when neighbors are conversing.

Novelty and Innovation

Over time the public comes to take innovation for granted. Changes in product design or in technology present a psychological challenge ("future shock") to consumers, who may respond with narratives emphasizing the dangers of a new design or a poorly understood technology. One group of mercantile legends that reflects this fear of novelty and technical innovation concerns the dangers of microwave ovens. I have collected accounts of wet infants, kittens, and puppies that exploded when placed in a microwave oven to dry off. Another microwave story describes a restaurant worker who, to save time, removes the oven door. The system works well for a few weeks, but then he experiences digestive difficulty. When his abdomen is x-rayed, the doctors discover that his stomach has been cooked. These legends reflect a public perception of danger concerned with the misuse of new technology. In them a manufacturer is not named, perhaps because the sale of microwave ovens is not perceived to be dominated by a single brand. Although there is mistrust of this new technology, the market is not such that any one brand is thought to represent the industry.

In other technological innovations, the brand is an important part of the story; Bubble Yum was the first "soft" bubble gum marketed, and this innovation proved immensely popular among children. Bubble Yum quickly became the best selling brand of bubble gum (Cooney 1977:1). Shortly after Bubble Yum appeared, rumors spread among the gum's young consumers that it caused cancer or that it contained spider eggs or spider legs:

> Last weekend at the Harvard Market I asked the clerk (a friend of mine) if Bubble Yum was any good. He said I'd love it because it has spider legs in it. Apparently some little kids in either New York or Chicago started telling people that the reason Bubble Yum was so soft was because the gum has spider legs in it. It spread around all over the country apparently because as I was chewing a piece of Bubble Yum talking to the clerk, someone came in and asked for some Spider Leg Gum. [Collected by Gary Alan Fine, from female respondent, age 20, University of Minnesota, April 1977]

People needed to explain why this new gum, so different from traditional gums, felt and tasted as it did. Even after similarly soft rival gums, such as Bubblicious or Hubba Bubba, appeared, the story "stuck" with Bubble Yum.

Another example of a technological innovation stimulating mercantile legends involves Pop Rocks candy (Fine 1979b). Pop Rocks, manufactured by General Foods, are small sugar pellets treated with carbon dioxide so that they tingle or, in the words of their preadolescent consumers, "explode" when put on one's tongue. The action of this unusual candy is inexplicable to its consumers, and in an "effort after meaning" (Allport and Postman 1947), stories spread about the power. One preadolescent told a friend, "This must have been made with some kind of acid." Related to these folk beliefs was a set of stories that identified Pop Rocks as the cause of a child's death. A young girl reported the following version of this legend:

> Janice: I heard from my brother there's this little boy way up north. He uh . . .
> GAF: North Minnesota?
> Janice: Yeah, way up . . . up north Minnesota. He um . . . I don't know if it's rumor or what, but uh . . . he had to have surgery 'cause um his stomach burst open because he ate . . . ate too many Pop Rocks, and then he swallowed them and they started popping in his stomach. [Collected by Gary Alan Fine, from female respondent, age 10, Minneapolis suburb, June 1977]

Some children claim that drinking soda pop while eating Pop Rocks makes the popping hazardous. Children do not understand the mechanics of Pop Rocks, and, as in many mysteries, they create explanations to account for the candy's effect and simultaneously to warn about the danger. The dynamics of such legends are parallel to those about modern technology in tribal societies.

The rumors and beliefs about what causes cancer or sterility (Bubble Yum, jockey shorts, radio waves) are dramatic examples of fearing material change or technological innovation. Likewise, consumers gain comfort from the "fact" that "natural" products such as orange juice (Vitamin C), carrots (Vitamin A), or apricot pits (laetrile) can prevent or cure cancer. What technology causes, nature can cure. Although not all Americans accept these beliefs, many sense that technology is a major cause of disease and that harmony with nature contributes to the cure. As is evident in several of these examples, the technical leader—the company that first produced this class of products—is blamed for the damage. In their rush for profit the pioneers have not checked their research carefully enough, and, because of this "folk motivation," the public infers devastating side effects. There seems to be an implicit worldview that there is nothing new *and* good under the sun—change is the devil's handiwork. This belief may be the functional equivalent to claims made in modern Mexican treasure tales that sudden wealth is a sign of some nefarious activity (Foster 1964:42–43).

Those stories that do deal with the positive effects of technology typically suggest that the new technology has been suppressed or overpriced because of corporate greed. Some point to the new cancer-fighting drugs, others to new fuels or automobile motors. This theme is also found in rumors prior to the introduction of products which suggest that they will be grander, more powerful, or less expensive than they are, implying that the best products have been kept from the public.

Prestige Legends

Size is not the only factor influencing mercantile legends. A second characteristic of corporations that seems to affect the content of such legends is prestige. Specifically I propose the following two propositions:

P3. The most prestigious corporation in a particular product area will be mentioned in more versions of a mercantile legend than less prestigious corporations.

P4. The most prestigious corporation in a particular product area will be mentioned in more mercantile legends than less prestigious corporations.

A corollary of these propositions notes that a change in target is possible:

C2. Mercantile legends will tend over time to switch the corporation named in them from a less prestigious corporation to a more prestigious corporation.

Aside from the problems with testing folkloric propositions generally, there is a special problem in operationalizing prestige. There is no objective measure of prestige, and there have been no systematic surveys indicating which companies or products the public sees as the most prestigious. For this reason my analysis will be impressionistic. In Table 2, six of the mercantile legends deal with companies and products that are not the largest but probably the most prestigious (Cadillac, Corvette, two about the Waldorf Astoria Hotel, and two stories about Marshall Field).[11] In those markets in which the largest corporation or best-selling product is not widely known, the most prestigious corporation may become the target. Furthermore, the content of some of these legends is such that the stories make sense only with the "best" product or corporation, as in the series of British stories about Rolls-Royce automobiles (Sanderson 1969:246–247).

Among the best-known American examples of legends that attach themselves to prestigious corporations are two legends about the Waldorf Astoria. Although today the Waldorf has slipped from its position as the preeminent New York hotel, the name "Waldorf Astoria" is still synonymous with luxury hotels, fine service, class, and wealth. The first legend is about the Red Velvet Cake recipe the Waldorf is supposed to have sold to customers for an outrageous price—several hundred dollars. According to some accounts (Brunvand 1978:111) the recipe is simply an ordinary cake with red food coloring added. The Waldorf swears that there is no truth to the story—they have never sold Red Velvet Cake nor do they charge for recipes from their kitchen—but the story has remained vigorous. The second story is a variant of the legend about albino alligators found in the New York City sewer system (Coleman 1979). One version has the alligator crawling through the plumbing and biting a woman's buttocks in the Waldorf's ladies' room. These stories, so far as I am aware, have not been attached to other hotels. The Waldorf, the symbol of luxury hotels, claims a permanent place in American folklore.

Another legend, published in the 1950s, involves the exclusive Chicago department store Marshall Field. The story, considerably abridged (for the full text see Carter 1953:5), concerns a woman who had received a beautiful inlaid compact from a friend. This compact was reported to be an original creation. One day while this woman was shopping in Marshall Field, she noticed an expensive compact that looked just like hers; when she compared the two, she found they were identical. As she was leaving the store, she was approached by a store detective who accused her of stealing the compact, which Field believed to be an original with them. When the store detectives called her friend, they were told that a rival store (Peacock's) carried the same compact, and this was confirmed. The store officials were terribly embarrassed and offered the woman anything she wanted in the store. The woman admitted that she really wished for a grand piano but knew that was out of the question. When the woman arrived home, she found men delivering a grand piano.

In this mercantile legend, the store does attempt to atone, perhaps because it is perceived as having enough class to admit it was wrong. However, this conclusion needs to be tempered by a second legend, The Poisoned Dress. A young woman purchased an evening gown from Marshall Field. One evening while out dancing, the woman felt faint, collapsed, and died. Upon investigation Field discovered that the dress had originally been purchased by a black woman as her wedding gown. When she died before the wedding, her family decided to bury her in the dress. Before burial they removed the dress because they felt that it was too expensive to clothe a corpse. The dress was returned to Field, which resold it. The company reportedly "paid . . . to keep the entire incident quiet" (Hochsinger 1945:33).[12] In the first legend the store officials seem genuinely concerned about their reputation and about the woman they accused; in the second, no concern is shown. Whether prestigious corporations are treated "better" in mercantile legends than companies that are merely large is an empirical question, requiring systematic research.

In several tales about luxury products unavailable to the public, there is ambivalence between a desire for the product and a fear of obtaining it. This is evident in those stories about the Death Car, a legend whose target changes as perceptions of prestige change. A classy contemporary sports car is sold for a ridiculously low cost because someone died in it, and the stench of the dead body will not vanish. For example:

Did you hear about the brand new Thunderbird which was selling for $200? Someone had died in it, and the body was not found for several weeks, and the smell was so bad and couldn't be removed that it was sold for only $200. [Collected by Gary Alan Fine, September 1979, from male radio broadcaster from Thunder Bay, Ontario, who first heard the story in high school during the early 1960s]

People experience psychological tension, envy for those who can own the car and an unconscious recognition that wealth does not prolong life. The smell is perhaps not only of death but of filthy lucre. The prestigious sports car symbolizes wealth; the legend suggests that the only way working class people can obtain such a product is if it is defective—in other words, if it *stinks.*

A similar theme is evident in the legend of the Solid Cement Cadillac. Like the Corvette or Thunderbird, the Cadillac is not the best-selling automobile, but it has an aura of prestige. Narrators and audiences find it appropriate that a Cadillac owner[13] is the amoral adulterer; the proper retribution is for the irate truckdriver husband to fill the car with cement (Sanderson 1980; Brunvand 1978; Toelken 1961). The inclusion of the Cadillac and the Truck reflects Olrik's Law of Contrast (1909), exemplified here as the contrast between "the seducer and the cuckold, the man at leisure and the man at work, the moneyed man and the weekly wage-earner, the private motorist with the expensive car and the transport driver employed trucking cement" (Sanderson 1980:381). Of course, the legend text warns against too great a reliance on these oppositions. After all, the husband destroys his own Cadillac; the man with his wife was but a worker—a car salesman. Although there is evidence that a DeSoto was actually filled with cement in Denver (Attebery 1970), the legend was collected prior to this event, and the DeSoto may have been filled with cement as a result of the legend. Still, the fact that a DeSoto was the actual target of the cement-dumper (although not for revenge) reminds us that the recalled target may shift from a relatively less prestigious product to a more prestigious one. The account would not make "sense" with a DeSoto.

Understanding the Goliath Effect

Having examined some of the forms the Goliath Effect takes, I ask what causes this folkloric regularity. First, memory is structured in ways that contribute to this effect. People do not recall events or stories verbatim; rather, stories or events are reconstructed:

Suppose an individual to be confronted by a complex situation. . . . We saw that in this case an individual does not normally take such a situation detail by detail and meticulously build up

> the whole. In all ordinary instances he has an overmastering tendency simply to get a general impression of the whole; and, on the basis of this, he constructs the probable detail. Very little of his construction is literally observed and often . . . a lot of it is distorted or wrong so far as the actual facts are concerned. But it is the sort of construction which serves to justify his general impression. [Bartlett 1932:206]

Dégh and Vázsonyi (1975) concur with Bartlett's conclusion that the teller's attitude affects what is recalled. Further, as Dégh and Vázsonyi (1976:107–109) point out, legend-telling is not the smooth narration that characterizes other tales; legends are communicated in conversation. The details are often constructed in the course of talk.

Mercantile legends are altered to conform to community standards of appropriateness. Individuals forget the details of stories, particularly as there may be long periods of time during which they do not narrate them. When a recitation is given, the story must be reconstructed, often with the naming of a large or prestigious corporation. This helps explain why such legends can change to name these companies and why the stories are remarkably stable once the corporate name is introduced. Even if one forgets that it was Kentucky Fried Chicken that served a rat, that detail will be reconstructed.

For some individuals the name of the corporation or product may be a central part of the "story kernel" (Kalčik 1975). A story may be encoded, say, as a story about Kentucky Fried Chicken and rats. Alternatively, it may be encoded as a story about rats served as fried chicken which, when retold, will name the fried chicken establishment that first comes to mind in conversation. This makes a good story in performance, and situates the narration—in this case, it is usually Kentucky Fried Chicken. The inclusion of the corporate leader makes sense in that these legends typically expose the transgressions of businesses. The leader in that market segment epitomizes the dangers of corporate ownership and control.

The popularity of mercantile legends suggests that the public is sensitive to the nuances of corporate capitalism. The legends reveal attitudes within modern capitalism that cannot be easily and directly expressed. These stories not only inform us about the dynamics of memory but also about the perception of the economic order. Most of these narratives are identical thematically: there is danger from corporations and danger in mass-produced and mass-distributed products. In some legends the corporation itself is guilty for producing a shoddy product; in others an employee is to blame for a specific episode; in still others the connection between motivation and product is indirect but harm results nonetheless. In few stories can the corporate entity be considered heroic (as in the legend of the corporation that provides a community with medical technology), and even here the stories revolve around the enormous size, power, control, and wealth of the corporation. In American mercantile legends there is a strong undercurrent of fear and suspicion of size and power (Sherry 1984).

The social-psychological rationale of these attitudes seems based on the separation of the public from the means of production and distribution (Fine

1980). Corporations are perceived as caring primarily about profits and only secondarily about the needs of consumers. The trust individuals place in their neighbors (and in businesses owned by neighbors) is not extended to large corporations in which consumers have little confidence. Marx was correct in claiming that separating people from the means of production under capitalism will result in alienation; this alienation provides a psychological climate in which bogey legends can flourish.

Recognizing the psychological motivations behind these legends, we must also recognize their ultimate political impotence. They do not provide for the solidification of class consciousness but only express a fleeting disrespect, which many informants claim not "really" to believe. Although some of these stories may have caused corporate headaches for short periods—McDonald's announced their sales were off by 33% when people said their hamburgers were laced with worms—they have little lasting effect on corporate profits. Even though corporate executives claim to live in fear of such stories, I am not aware of any case in which a popular product was destroyed by a rumor or a legend (see *Advertising Age* 1982)—even Tylenol has regained most of its market share. These folk narratives are temporary outpourings of frustration but ultimately only strengthen the right of corporations to exist since, in time, the legends are deemed unfair.

To accept this role of mercantile legends, one need not accept the validity of a Marxist critique of society, particularly not a Marxist view of ameliorating social ills. However, one must accept that the "folk" (in this case the post-industrial public) are capable of conceiving folklore content in economic terms that reflect the structure of mass capitalist society, feeling constrained, at least subconsciously, by their own lack of control. The resultant sense of constraint and frustration explain this pattern of mercantile legends that is so prevalent under American capitalism.

Notes

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[1] Simpson (1983) demonstrates that some examples of mercantile folklore were known in pre-Victorian Britain and were included by Dickens in *The Pickwick Papers*. Dickens (through Sam Weller) cites the man ground into sausage meat and the piemaker who used seasoned catmeat instead of veal. Simpson notes: "Whereas we would now regard the products of a local pieman, cooked on his premises, as superior to those from a factory, Sam distrusts them because he contrasts them with genuinely homemade pies individually prepared by some woman personally known to the eater of the pies" (1983:463–464). The theme of greedy businessman versus trustworthy housewife has roots older than the development of large food corporations.

[2] For the purposes of this analysis, I shall sidestep the debate over the best generic term for these folk traditions—urban legends, modern legends, belief legends, etc. I use the term "mercantile legends," which captures the economic and corporate implications of this body of material. I use "mercantile" as an adjectival description, rather than to proclaim a new genre. In addition, I shall not distinguish among the precise genres into which each of the examples I use should properly fall—legend, rumor, or memorate.

[3] I will not discuss a fourth class of legends which pictures corporations more positively; those legends claim that a particular corporation will supply expensive medical technology to a community if the community collects a large number of product labels, boxtops, tea bag tags, etc. Thus, technology is exchanged for product sales. There has not been, as yet, any systematic study of these legends, and, until we have a corpus of texts, it is difficult to ascertain their symbolic meaning or to know whether some companies are seen as "good" in the folk imagination. Such stories paint corporations in a paternalistic light, suggesting that they have immense power to do good or ill.

[4] Some evidence cautions us against saying the effect is universal. Brunvand (1981:130–132) presents an account of the Solid Cement Cadillac collected in Norway in which the Cadillac is replaced by a Volkswagen. He suggests that the switch from the Cadillac to the VW reflects the differences in lifestyles between the nations. This story is not about the car per se, but the make is symbolic. Apparently there are some accounts in the United States that also mention a VW (Dégh, personal communication 1983). Ward (1976) notes that equivalents to the Kentucky Fried Rat stories are told in Germany about small Yugoslav restaurants (see also Klintberg 1981). These American mercantile legends are transformations of some of the xenophobic legends of the past.

[5] The aesthetic characteristics of a good story influence its popularity (Oring 1975). A story will only be told and retold if it makes sense and is seen as interesting and noteworthy. The fact that Ray Kroc, the late president of McDonald's, had a foreign name which, perhaps because of the /k/ phonemes or its homophonic character, sounds "evil," makes the connection with Satanism more believable. It would be more difficult to believe that Ray Appleseed was a member of the same devil cult. The nature of the corporation and the content of the story are relevant to the analysis. Still, stories can be shaped on any subject matter, and while this story might not have been spread, others could have taken its place.

[6] Obviously not every corporation is now a victim of these legends. Yet, the range of possible mercantile legends is enormous; new legends are regularly being created and contemporary ones discovered. My argument is not that most dominant corporations will be targets, but that most targets will be dominant corporations. Individual legends deserve analysis by themselves as well. This analysis does not replace—but only supplements—research on particular legends. I ignore the nuances of detail of these tales in this treatment; such details may explain why some tales are matched with some products.

[7] The concern with bigness does not exhaust the claims of social psychology; corporations may be feared for other reasons, a topic for further research.

[8] For ease of reference, I will use "corporation" to refer to "corporations and products."

[9] The six legends that did not meet the 10% criterion of recognition were: (1) the snake or insect found in department store; (2) beer company supports gun control; (3) cat odor in perfume; (4) company that gives money to the PLO; (5) hotel that sells the Red Velvet Cake recipe; and (6) finger in Chinese food. The sixth was specifically included because this mercantile legend is almost always told in reference to a local establishment. Only one student claimed to have heard that legend and didn't report what establishment it was told about. I attempted to include a representative sample of mercantile legends, not only those that attached themselves to the corporate leader. However, the others were less widely known, which gives indirect support to the Goliath Effect hypothesis.

[10] The political use of mercantile legends and similar material that Klintberg (1981:159) notes in Europe does not seem to be common in the United States.

[11] This is obviously a subjective figure, since prestige is a matter of judgment and statistics on relative corporate market share change over time and are hard to measure.

[12] This legend appears to be a precursor of The Department Store Snake, in that a customer is killed by a piece of clothing. It also shares with The Death Car the motif of a transfer of "death" from a person to a commodity.

[13] In Britain the car is usually the prestigious Jaguar (Sanderson 1980:381).

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