

GOPHER GUTS AND ARMY TRUCKS:  
THE MODERN EVOLUTION OF CHILDREN'S  
FOLK RHYMES  
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The objective of this paper is to show that while the basic forms of North American children's folk rhymes have remained the same throughout the century the content has been continually altering, revealing children's awareness of changing cultural and societal mores, and that therefore the rhymes represent a vital and living aspect of folklore.

This paper is an offshoot of fieldwork done from 1992 to 1994 in the United States and Canada during the preparation of a book, *Greasy Grimey Gopher Guts: The Subversive Folklore of Children*, co-written with T.K.F. Weisskopf and published by August House in 1995. The majority of informants were children between the ages of five and sixteen, though adult contributions were also solicited to show how the rhymes have altered over the years.<sup>1</sup>

The method of collecting involved giving informants such key phrases as "Great green gobs of greasy grimy gopher guts," which generally quickly triggered folk rhyme responses. Some rhymes were collected in schools or libraries, others were solicited over the Internet; the latter process let us reach otherwise unreachable informants in Alaska and Hawaii.

Certain rhymes, including "The Hearse Song," also known as "The Worms Crawl In, the Worms Crawl Out," and "Glory, Glory Hallelujah/Teacher Hit Me With a Ruler," were known by all informants and date to at least the beginning of this century. Variations have, of course, emerged over the generations as rhymes are heard, misheard or misremembered, then passed on to other children, who do their own mishearings and misrememberings. As the rhymes were collected, one not unexpected fact about these variations emerged. As is true of more formal teaching tales, the folk rhymes, in addition to being entertaining, help children deal with an increasingly volatile world. Therefore, the more modern the alteration to the rhyme, the more graphic the violent content of the rhyme becomes or the more vivid the sexual imagery.

Granted, such alterations are not necessarily a recent process, and a certain amount of national mindset does seem to come into play, a case in point being the World War II era children's rhyme based on the song, "Whistle While You Work," from the 1937 Disney movie,

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*Snow White*. In Britain and in at least one example we collected from an informant whose father was from Nova Scotia, the children's rhyme parody was usually the relatively tame:

Whistle while you work,  
Mussolini bought a shirt.  
Hitler wore it,  
Britain tore it.  
Whistle while you work.

In the United States, perhaps reflecting this nation's more outspoken nature, the rhyme became more violent and sexual. This example was cited by numerous informants from New York, Pennsylvania, Florida and Texas, follows:

Whistle while you work,  
Hitler is a jerk.  
Mussolini bit his weenie.  
Now it doesn't work.<sup>2</sup>

It might be noted that World War II references, though they persevered into the early 1980s, have almost totally faded from current children's rhymes. While the Cuban missile crisis of the early 1960s did spark a few rhymes, they were not long-lasting and do not seem to have been replaced by references from later wars. However, the 1960s, which was a time of so much unrest and radical societal changes, do appear to mark the beginning of the trend of accelerating violence and sexual content in children's rhymes: the first clue that children are, indeed, more aware of the world around them than parents might believe.

In the violence category, anti-teacher children's rhymes are the most common—not surprising when one considers how much of a modern child's life is spent in school, where he or she is forced to obey adult rules. There have been relatively violent anti-teacher rhymes since at least the beginning of the twentieth century, but a specific example of the more recent trend towards increased violence can be seen in one very popular anti-teacher folk rhyme, "Glory, Glory Hallelujah." Versions dating up to the late 1960s generally include only slapstick violence, such as "I bopped her on the bean/With a rotten

tangerine." Some of these more innocuous versions were collected from informants from Ohio and Massachusetts, who'd heard them in the 1950s, and from informants from Colorado, Maryland, and New York, who'd heard them in the early and mid-1960s.<sup>3</sup>

By the late 1960s and through to 1994, the imagery has been changed to the more explicitly violent, such as "I met her at the door with a loaded .44," collected in New York, Ohio, Massachusetts, Virginia and Connecticut. In 1994, a nine-year-old boy in New Hampshire contributed the equally graphic versions, "I met her in the attic/With a loaded automatic," and "I met her at the bank/With a U.S. Army tank."<sup>4</sup>

The gentle folksong, "On Top of Old Smokey," has also been turned into a violent anti-teacher song, portraying the teacher, possibly due to the influence of horror movies, as an undead monster who is difficult to kill. We collected several versions in 1994 from children ranging in age from seven to eleven; these versions include progressively more vicious means of killing a teacher. A prime example, which we collected in very similar versions from preteen girls in Connecticut and New Hampshire, a preteen boy in New York, and a preteen boy and girl in North Carolina, follows:

On top of the schoolhouse,  
All covered with blood,  
I shot my poor teacher  
With a forty-four slug.  
I went to her funeral,  
I went to her grave.  
Some people threw flowers,  
I threw a grenade.  
I opened her coffin.  
She wasn't quite dead.  
So I took a bazooka  
And blew off her head.<sup>5</sup>

The Jungians among us will delight to note that the teacher monster needs to be killed a ritual three times!

But not all modern alterations of the rhymes are so negative-or so violent. While racist rhymes were very much a part of children's folk culture until the mid-1960s, we collected no racist rhymes from

anyone under the age of fifteen; this wasn't from a reluctance on the informants' part to repeat such rhymes but, in most cases, from a genuine lack of knowledge by the informants that older, racist versions existed of such now innocuous rhymes as "Eenie meenie minie mo/Catch a tiger by the toe." The ritualized rhyming combat by insult known among inner city children as "snaps" or "doubles" do contain some blatant ethnic slurs-but they are used only within that ethnic group and never by outsiders.

Continuing on the theme of social change, children who admitted to difficulty in memorizing school lessons were still able to flawlessly recite such intricate rhymes as "Miss Lucy had a steamboat," one of that very ancient category of rhyme in which each line *almost* ends in a dirty word, i.e.:

Miss Lucy had a steamboat, the steamboat had a bell,  
Miss Lucy went to heaven, the steamboat went to Hello,  
Operator, give me number nine...and so on.

This rhyme, with its reference to the steamboat and telephone, dates to the first quarter of this century. What makes it relevant in this context is the version collected by us in 1994 from two unrelated eight-year-old New York area informants, in which "Miss Lucy" became "Ms. Lucy." A small point, perhaps, but what made it notable was the matter-of-fact mention by the informants: they took the replacement of "miss" with "ms" for granted.<sup>6</sup>

Changing sexual mores are also clearly reflected in children's rhymes. Although parents may want to believe their youngsters are still innocent, or perhaps naive, when it comes to sexual knowledge, the rhymes we collected show that children are very much aware of--if not actually experienced in--the basics of this most fascinating human subject. These rhymes range from the relatively mild, such as the following, which was delivered in a matter-of-fact fashion:

One and one are two,  
Two and two are four  
If the bed collapses,  
Do it on the floor.<sup>7</sup>

all the way to the relatively explicit, such as the following:

Sex, sex, sex  
Is the law, law, law.  
When a guy gets a girl  
On the floor, floor, floor.  
He sticks his information  
In the girl's communication  
Which increases the population  
Of the younger generation.  
Would you like a little demonstration?

This rhyme was collected in similar versions from informants from New York City, New York State, New Hampshire and California. One eleven-year-old girl from Hastings, New York, confided in the author that she had been nine when an eleven-year-old boy forced her to listen to it. When asked how she dealt with this early form of sexual harassment, she replied with satisfaction, "I hit him!"<sup>8</sup>

Yet another reflection of changing sexual mores is revealed in the replacement by children of blatantly anti-gay rhymes, which often reflected adult sensibilities, with those lacking any openly hostile element.

An example of the earlier, more hostile (and fearful) type of rhyme follows:

We don't go out with the boys anymore,  
We don't intend to marry.  
We go with the girls in our block.  
Whee, I'm a fairy

This rhyme, which dates to 1952, was collected in Illinois from an informant who added the additional folkloric data, "On Thursday you couldn't wear yellow or green or you'd be saying you were a fairy." The use of "fairy" to describe a homosexual has been gradually slipping out of usage; why it should ever have been applied is a matter for speculation, although the fairy folk are traditionally supposed to be wildly sexual beings. That the wearing of a certain color should brand an individual as homosexual--a concept that was used to identify other

minority groups or "undesirables" in the past-says a great deal about homophobia in the United States.<sup>9</sup>

But no such hostile rhymes were collected from younger informants, who were more likely to relate more tolerant rhymes such as the following:

I love you, you love me  
Homosexuality.  
With a slap on the butt  
And a kiss from me to you.  
Don't you wish you were horny, too?

This rhyme, collected from a twelve-year-old boy in Wisconsin in 1994, has a parallel in one collected from an eleven-year-old girl in New Hampshire in the same year, in which the singer concludes:

You may think we're ordinary friends,  
But we're really Lesbians.

In both cases, neither informant was particularly shocked or embarrassed by singing the rhyme, nor was there any sense that the rhymes were meant to be malicious. Indeed, the only person shocked was the Wisconsin boy's mother!<sup>10</sup>

But perhaps the most telling modern elements appear in hostile rhymes about the television character, Barney. Some of these rhymes have definitely been inspired by adults--often by parents who cannot bear another glimpse or mention of that too-cute purple dinosaur--and may be merely excuses for a release of violent emotion. The adult rhymes tend to parody the "happy family" concept right from the first line, i.e. "I hate you, you hate me," children take the rhymes on to true violence:

I hate you, you hate me,  
Let's get together and kill Barney  
With a nine millimeter and shoot him in the head  
Aren't you glad that Barney's dead?

or:

I hate you, you hate me.  
Together we can kill Barney.  
With a knife in the stomach and a bullet in the head  
Aren't you glad that Barney's dead?

There is a seemingly endless series of similar versions in which Barney meets a violent end.<sup>11</sup>

But some anti-Barney rhymes reflect a deep social awareness. One prime example, collected from eleven- and twelve-year-old girls in New Hampshire, follows:

I love you, you love me.  
Barney has got H.I.V.  
Barney jumped on Baby Bop one time.  
That's called rape and that's a crime.

At first, this rhyme sounds like a parental nightmare. But when the girls were asked if they knew what it meant, they said that they knew H.I.V. had to do with AIDS and that rape was a bad thing. Other children who recited similar rhymes showed an awareness that forced sex was indeed a crime and that unprotected sex could lead either to pregnancy or AIDS.<sup>12</sup>

Clearly children's folk rhymes do reflect the changing mood of the country. They give us a warning in their increasingly graphic depictions of violence, but they also show a healthy awareness of sexual morality. Children are using them, quite unconsciously, as teaching tools.

In short, children are saying in their rhymes things of worth both to folklorists and to society in general. And it's up to both folklorists and parents to listen to what children have to say.

## NOTES

1. *Greasy, Grimey Gopher Guts*, by Josepha Sherman and T.K.F. Weisskopf, Little Rock: August House, 1995.

2. The first, more innocuous version was collected from Peter, who learned it from his Nova Scotian father, who learned it during World War II. The second, more violent version, was collected from Tappan, Florida, and Sue,

Brooklyn, New York, 1960s, Jeanne, Pitmann, New Jersey, and Darryl 1970s, and Austin, Fort Worth, Texas, 1981.

3. The informants who knew only the "tangerine" version include Susan, Boardman, Ohio, and Alan, Boston, Massachusetts, 1950s, Cindy, Denver, Colorado, Claire, Silver Spring, Maryland, Ellie, Queens, New York, and Valerie, Modina, New York, ca. 1960s.

4. The earliest examples we collected of the "met her at the door" version come from adult informants Elissa, Syracuse, New York and Jim, Bedford, New York, who dated them to the late 1960s. Later versions were collected in 1994 from such informants as Deborah, Honolulu, Hawaii (who dated her version to the late 1980s), and nine-year-old Brendan, Colebrook, New Hampshire.

5. This horror story in rhyme was collected in 1994 from informants Katzi, nine, Colebrook, New Hampshire, David, seven and his cousin Jennifer, ten, Celo, North Carolina, and Gregory, eleven, Bohemia, New York.

6. The "Ms." version was collected in 1994 from Jessica, age eight, who learned it at camp in New York State, and Michael, age eight, Mamaroneck, New York. Other versions were contributed by Lindalee, Manitowoc, Wisconsin, ca. 1959-60, Tina, Bronx, New York, late 1950s, Deborah, U.S. Army base, West Germany, 1960s, and Caroline, Huntsville, Alabama, 1970s.

7. Contributed by Sharon, thirteen, Boston area, Massachusetts, 1994.

8. Informants included Lisa, elementary school Bronx, New York, 1960s, "D.B.," eleven, California, ca. 1972, a sixth-grade girl "who wished to remain anonymous," New Hampshire, 1992, Sue, Brooklyn, New York, 1980s, and Colleen, age eleven, Hastings, New York, 1994. Colleen, who hit the boy who told her the rhyme, prefaced her recitation with a warning that this rhyme was "really, really bad"

9. Collected from Caryl Rockford, Illinois, ca. 1952. A similar version was collected from Sue, Brooklyn, New York, ca. 1967-75.

10. Both rhymes were collected in 1994. The gay male version was collected from Josh, age eleven, Wisconsin, while the Lesbian version was collected from Katherine, age eleven, New Hampshire. A similar version of the latter was contributed by Caroline, Huntsville, Alabama.

11. Some of the many informants, all of whom contributed their anti-Barney rhymes in 1994, include Alexis, eleven, Bronx, New York, Decarlo, Myekia, and Brenda, eleven, North Little Rock, Arkansas, and Joanna, eight Montreal, Canada.

12. The informants all preferred to remain anonymous.

## E-CONTRIBUTIONS

The following came to me as an e-mail discussion among Andy Arleo, Julia C. Bishop, and Marc Armitage. With their permission, I have edited the materials down for publication. [Editor]

There was an article in the *International Herald Tribune*, ca. 1-15 November 1998, on children's playtime. A large-scale study carried out in America, involving thousands of informants filling out detailed diaries of their daily activities, has concluded that children have far less time to engage in informal play like tag. (Arleo)

*The Express*, 4 November 1998, reports that scientists have found that depriving children of playtime during the school day and not allowing them to mix with their friends can cause emotional problems. The article draws attention to the increase of cases of Attention Deficit Hyperactivity Disorder in Britain and on a massive increase in prescriptions for the drug Ritalin used to treat the condition. Various causes for the condition have been suggested, and new research is blaming lack of playtime which is being cut back to find time to cope with the demands of the National Curriculum. Professor Jaak Panksepp, Ohio neuroscientist, is quoted as lamenting recourse to drug treatment when children so treated are "probably children that are simply wanting to play in the wrong places."

The article also refers to the work of Tony Pellegrini and an international team examining play in schools that regards the "epidemic" of disorder in the US as a gross mis-diagnosis. More lessons and less play does not increase the academic performance of children. An experiment with primary school children in Georgia in which they were deprived of playtime led to their becoming more inattentive and more active, although this applied to boys more than girls.

Dorothy Einon, a London child psychologist, is also quoted as seeing a direct correlation between a lack of opportunities for children to let off steam and the increase in ADHD. (Bishop)

As a part of a series on time, ABC World News Tonight (USA) broadcast a short report on children's free time on 12 January 1999. Some quotations follow:

"The University of Michigan study found that 25% of an average child's day is considered free time, after eating, sleeping and going to

school. That's down 40% since 1981, and even so-called leisure time has become more hectic."

"Too many families see playtime as wasted time."

"Unstructured play helps spark a child's imagination and through play children learn how to make up their own rules, resolve conflicts, and be independent thinkers."

According to the report, play is under pressure due to concerns about safety and also to "achievement-oriented parents." Children's schedules are full of *organized* sports, music and dance lessons, etc. One of the children interviewed said, "I don't have enough time to be a kid." (Arleo)

I think it is very likely that the amount of time available for children to play has been reduced in the last 25 years, although frankly I doubt if it is by as much as claimed in this research--it all adds up, though.

If you are taken to school by car instead of walking with your friends, then there's a lot of play time gone; time allocated to freely-chosen play at school (playtime/recess, lunchtime) has been reduced by as much as half in England and Wales since 1971; and a growing number of children in the UK go straight from school to a care-scheme or homework club

At weekends and holidays, we also have the growth of homework clubs and "summer schools" combined with an increase in family use of commercial leisure facilities--out comes the car again. And what effect might the reduction of family size have, I wonder, not just on siblings but on a lack of same-age play-mates?

In these respects, I think the summary that Andy [Arleo] gave is quite correct. Concerns of safety may be a (small) contributory factor to this, but to be honest this has nearly always been there. The "object" child may have some value, too. But I think that this misses the central point: these are changes to children's play caused by an increase in direct and indirect adult involvement in that play and what (adults see as) leisure time.

If play is intrinsic and is carried out by children who have no control over the desire to do it, this must be because it is a natural and intrinsic process that does not need adults to be involved with it. If adults impinge on this natural process too much (even by just reducing the time available to do it), it interferes with a natural process

Our bodies must know this: how else could we explain the fact that adults consistently fail to notice their children at play and have not the faintest idea of play--even though they did it too! I think the answer is because adults uninterest in play is also intrinsic--it is a mechanism to allow children to do what they do naturally--we interfere with this at our peril (Armitage)

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