

"URBAN LEGENDS"

OR

"NO THERE ARE NOT ANY GIANT
CATFISH AT THE BOTTOM OF
KENTUCKY LAKE"

DELIVERED

BY

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This paper stems from my weekly appearance at Chapel House, where I give a capsule report on the week's happenings in Hopkinsville from my perspective as News Director at WHOP.

It is an informal get-together with residents volunteering comments on events or providing perspective by attaching a more familiar name or place to a particular event.

It was during one of these informal events that Chapel House activities Director Patsy Tooley volunteered the following story, which was represented as the truth, as told to her by a fellow member of her bridge club, and having happened to someone known to a friend of the bridge club member.

It seems there was a rather timid woman from Hopkinsville or Clarksville or somewhere in this area, who accompanied her husband on an overnight business trip to Chicago.

It was her first trip to the big city, and she had no ambitious plans other than a possible night out with her husband after the first day's meetings, and otherwise confining her activities to the hotel during the two day business trip.

The woman was exceptionally timid, but by mid-morning of the first day, she had become sufficiently bored in the hotel room to venture to the lobby and coffee shop for a light lunch and the purchase of some souvenirs for the folks back home.

She proceeded down the hall to the elevator, only to be confronted by three large black males when the car door opened, and though they were well-dressed, they presented a formidable and threatening presence to the woman.

Even though she was frightened, being the type woman she was and fearing she might insult the men, she got into the car, and immediately faced the front, only to hear a deep voice intone, "down".

She immediately responded by falling to the floor of the elevator, where she remained until the elevator reached the lobby, where the men assisted her to her feet, and apologized profusely after explaining that the command had been made in the form of a request to direct the elevator in the direction they wished for it to progress.

The lady regained her composure sufficiently to go to the gift shop, where she purchased some items to present to friends on her return home.

To her surprise, when she went to pay for the items, the clerk only said, "That's been taken care of."

The woman was taken aback, telling the clerk that this was her first trip to Chicago, that she knew no one there, and had no relatives there.

The clerk persisted in saying that everything had "been taken care of", and the woman finally accepted that, took the items and proceeded to the coffee shop for brunch, after which the same thing occurred at the cash register.

Again, she protested to the cashier that she had never been to Chicago before, that she had no relatives in Chicago, and she knew no one in the "Windy City"; however, the clerk remained steadfast, and the woman retreated to her room, where she remained until her husband returned from his business meeting when she recounted the day's activities.

Preoccupied with his own affairs, the husband discounted it as a case of "mistaken identity", with no harm done, and the two spent an uneventful evening out in Chicago.

The next day, the woman stayed in the hotel room to prevent another such happening, and only left when she and her husband checked out after the second day's meeting to catch an evening flight back to Nashville.

It was his turn to be surprised when the clerk assured him that the hotel bill "had been taken care of".

That surprise turned to mild anger when the clerk declined to name the anonymous benefactor, and outrage when the manager was summoned, and he, too, refused to disclose the identity of the person underwriting the hotel bill.

The manager ultimately disclosed the details, but only after the businessman threatened to summon police.

He confirmed that one of the men in the elevator car was the actor Sidney Poitier, who had had the biggest laugh of his life when the lady hit the floor when they asked her to push the "down" button in the elevator.

Well, Patsy represented it as a story almost too good to be true, but one told as the "gospel", and that's the way, I too, prefaced it before I passed it along as I made my "rounds" at the police station, fire department, and court house, where a certain amount of idle conversation occurs in the course of my news gathering.

I found myself embellishing the story as I told it, which I later learned is common in such cases and for such stories, which are known as "urban legends", and, with very few exceptions, cannot be proven to have any basis in fact, though they are invariably told as the truth, having happened to a "friend of a friend", or someone vaguely related to an acquaintance.

My theory is that all of us like a good story, regardless of the source, and too much investigation might confirm what we may suspect, that is, that the story is "too good to be true".

Anyway, I heard the story on a Friday, and it was maybe the following Wednesday when it dawned on me that I had heard something similar several years ago during a National Public Radio interview on the "Morning Edition" newscast from a folklorist, whom I vaguely remembered taught somewhere out West.

I went to the library, and with the able assistance of Stacey Nickell was able to ultimately identify the interviewee as John Harold Brunvand, a professor of English

at the University of Utah, who has authored three collections of folklore, with the majority focusing on "urban legends".

In addition to the books, Brunvand was also the subject of the "CONVERSATION" column on the last page of the September 22, 1988 edition of "U.S. News and World Report" which roughly coincides with the radio interview with the man I am now certain was Brunvand.

Coincidentally, Brunvand's first example of an "urban legend" concerns Reggie Jackson and three woman who do not keep up with sports who are from the Midwest and are on their first trip to New York.

They are on an elevator in the "Big Apple" when a large black male with a big dog on a leash gets on.

The door closes, and he says firmly, "Sit!"

He's talking to the dog, but they all think he is talking to them, and they hit the floor.

In some versions, he says, "Sit, Lady", and it turns out the dog's name is "Lady".

The story ends up with an embarrassed Jackson either paying for their dinner or their hotel bill.

Lately, according to Brunvand, the same story is being told about the popular singer Lionel Richie, only in Las Vegas instead of New York.

"Urban legends" tend to be like jokes, though they often lack a "punch line", but are generally recognizable as stemming from the same general setting, such as Sidney Poitier or Reggie Jackson in an elevator.

It's said that there are seven basic jokes, and all others originated from them, and I once spent a considerable amount of time while in the army attempting to convince a fellow Second Lieutenant that two jokes I told were really the same.

One involved a rural Iowa man who was at the end of his rope during the depths of the Great Depression of the 1930's.

He hiked into town, determined to get a job, or put an end to his life.

He stopped at the feed store and pleaded for a job, with the owner finally saying there was a farmer east of town known to have some cash, but using the Depression as an excuse not to pay his bills.

The feed store owner told the man that he would give him a permanent job if he could get farmer Jones to bring his account up to date.

The man...we'll call him Smith...hiked out to the farmer's home and knocked on the door.

The farmer's wife answered, telling Smith that Jones was at home, but in the hog barn.

Smith proceeded there to find Farmer Jones engaged in sexual activity with a hog, with the farmer encouraging him to grab a sow and join in.

Smith wasn't particularly enthused with the idea, but thought he'd better make an attempt to participate, rather than offend Jones and lessen his chances of collecting the bills, and getting a job.

He caught a sow and took it into a stall, but found the prospect of carrying it any further rather repugnant.

Noticing Smith's reluctance, Farmer Jones investigated, asking what the problem was.

Smith said he just couldn't get "excited" about it, to which Jones replied, "Well, no wonder. You picked the ugliest sow in the barn!"

The other joke, which I maintain is the same as the first, concerns a womanless mining camp of the American West of the 1880's.

A newcomer immediately notices the lack of females when he arrives at the camp, and checking into the hotel, inquires of the clerk about the availability and nature of sexual outlets.

The hotel clerk pointed out a pen full of hogs at the end of the camp's main...and only...street, and said the men directed their sexual attention at the pigs.

The newcomer was repelled by such a thought, and went ahead upstairs to enjoy his first bath in a considerable amount of time.

However, after a full meal and several drinks at the hotel bar early that evening, the newcomer began to have second thoughts about the swine.

After even more drinks, he steeled himself and marched to the pig pen, catching a female and deciding to take it back to his room for some privacy.

To his surprise, his trek back to the hotel was met with great agitation by onlookers, with several getting on their horses and leaving town, others fleeing for the safety of their homes or tents, and still others seeking cover wherever available.

Much confused, the newcomer stopped at the hotel desk to confirm that his conduct was in keeping with the norms of the camp.

He said to the clerk, "You did say that the pigs were used for sex, didn't you?", and the clerk replied, "Sure.... but you've got Black Bart's girl!".

I included these ^{NOT} only for your comparison and opinion, but also as a parallel, for animals are often the stuff of "urban legends", including sex and animals.

One such "urban legend" often told by hospital emergency room personnel, but always about someone else's hospital, or someone else's shift, concerns a homosexual guy who has had a

friend insert a greased plastic tube to insert a mouse or other small animal into his rectum, since he has heard that this is the ultimate thrill.

It may be a gerbil or a small lizard, whose tail breaks off when they try to extract it themselves. Sometimes the gay guy simply comes in for help in removing a stuck object, which then proves to be a mouse skeleton. Cages for pet gerbils and the like often have small plastic tubes in them as runways for the animals, so this is what suggested trying the act in the first place.

Other urban legends with animals as victims include the case of the woman who had been drying her pet poodle by opening the oven door and keeping it on low heat.

Her son gives her a microwave oven, and she uses it just the way she's supposed to....She puts the dog inside, sets a brief time on the timer, pushes the button...and the dog explodes.

Many "urban legends" involve animals, with creatures often victimized, but sometimes they turn the tables on their tormenters, as in the case of the bachelor farmers who lived in the extreme southeastern tip of Nebraska, where that state joins Kansas and Missouri.

One of the men goes to Missouri...where large fireworks are legal...and purchases some M-1000's, which are almost as powerful as a stick of dynamite.

The other bachelor farmer had just purchased a brand new Toyota pickup truck with a fiberglass shell to cover the bed, and the men ventured into the hills near their farms for a little 4th of July mischief.

They had trapped several rabbits from woodpiles in the area, and while drinking heavily, they would tape the M-1000's to the rabbits and watch the "fence bunnies" blow up as they scampered away.

However, they hadn't planned on one of the rabbits seeking refuge under the pickup truck after being released.

The ensuing explosion and fire completely destroyed the pickup and shell, starting a woods and brush fire that was only contained after the farmers borrowed a tractor and disc and cut a firebreak.

One of the other versions places the incident in Australia, while another involves a stick of dynamite affixed to a chickenhawk, who lands on top of the [REDACTED] farmhouse owned by the perpetrator and blows the roof off.

The stories could be based on a 1902 Jack London short story, titled "Moon Face", in which the narrator contrives to murder a man who catches trout by tossing dynamite into a deep pool. The narrator gives the poacher a highly trained retriever that returns the stick of dynamite when it is thrown.

The coroner's jury verdict was "death by accident while engaged in illegal fishing."

My personal favorite concerns the macho deer slayer, who, after gunning down Bambi, or one of Bambi's descendents, dismounts his sniper's nest, being careful not to scuff his L.L. Bean Shoe-Pacs, or disturb the crease in his hunting pants.

He takes his Weatherby rifle and places it on the considerable rack of antlers that he visualizes over his mantle, pulls out his Nikon camera, and steps back to take a snapshot he intends to circulate at work.

And-lo and behold...what happens, but the deer, who had only been stunned, leaps up and flees, carrying with him the \$600 deer rifle.

A similar story is told of tourists in Australia who strike a kangaroo with their rented Land Rover.

Again, for picture-taking purposes, one of them dresses the kangaroo with his bush jacket, only to see the animal flee into the brush with his jacket containing his passport and traveler's checks.

Though not necessarily in the animal revenge category, a dog plays a key role in an "urban legend" which has made the rounds.

A lady orders a plant of some size, which is duly delivered, but when she places it in the kitchen, she finds a snake wrapped around the lower part of the plant.

Her screaming brings her husband on the run, though he was in the shower. In the excitement, the snake slithers out of the pot in which the plant was imbedded, and crawls under the sink.

The man, who had hurriedly thrown a towel around himself when responding to his wife's screams, gets down on his hands and knees to investigate, opening the doors below the sink to see if he can spot the serpent. The towel slips off, leaving the man stark naked on the kitchen floor, though he is unconcerned with that since his attention is focused on finding the snake, nor does he notice the approach of the family dog, who is somewhat puzzled by his master's posture, and wishes to reassure him or let him know of his presence by applying his nose...naturally.... to the man's rear end. The man starts, jerking upward, and knocking himself unconscious on the drain pipe under the sink. The wife, whose attention has been diverted, turns around to find her husband sprawled on the kitchen floor.

Thinking he may have had a heart attack, or, worse yet, been bitten by the snake, the woman dials 9-1-1, and summons an ambulance. By the time the crew arrives, the man regains his senses and explains the situation to his wife, but agrees to go to the hospital to have the bump on his head examined.

Among "urban legends" in which the pet plays the role of hero is the one known as the "The Choking Doberman", which is also the title of one of Brunvand's earlier works.

A woman comes home from a shopping trip to find her Doberman Pinscher lying in the floor, gagging. She tries to clear his throat, but being unsuccessful, she rushes the dog to the vet, who says he will have to operate after he, too, is unsuccessful in clearing the animal's airway.

He tells the woman to go home and await word on the outcome of the surgery.

She obeys, only to hear the phone ringing when she arrives home.

It's the vet, highly agitated, who says, "Listen carefully. I want you to hang up the phone when I tell you to. Then turn around and run straight out the door. Go next door and wait for the police. I've called your neighbors and they're on the way. Don't say a word. Don't hesitate. Just get out of there now!"

The lady is impressed and goes next door, where the police arrive in moments to explain that the doctor found that the cause of the blockage of the dog's throat was two human fingers, freshly severed, with the presumption that their former owner is still in the woman's home.

Anyway, sure enough, when the police investigate, they find a man cowering in a closet, clutching his hand in an attempt to stop the flow of blood from the hand that is missing two digits.

In the racial version of ^{WWT} urban legend, the fingers are described as having belonged to a black man.

Such helpful animal stories may stem from the Welsh legend of "Llewellyn and Gellert," in which the faithful hunting hound Gellert is found bloodied and gasping in the hall of Prince Llewellyn's home. The dog is presumed to have killed the baby it was left to guard, whose overturned crib is seen through the open doorway. The dog is slain, but the baby is found unharmed; and the hidden intruder that Gellert has defended the infant from, a huge wolf, is found inside the house, dead from the dog's defensive efforts.

The story is told on both sides of the Atlantic, with the North American version known as "The Trapper and his Dog" with an appropriate frontier motif.

Animals aren't the only victims of urban legends, as evidenced by one known as "The Skiing Accident".

It begins with a wine-tasting party involving a group of skiers on a mountain top.

After a while, one of the women receives a call from Mother Nature. Since there were no restrooms atop the mountain, she decided to ski across the snow and into the trees.

She had pulled down her suit and everything was going nicely when she began slipping backward, down the mountain.

There is nothing in the downhill manual under skiing backward, pants down. So the woman improvised. She threw out her arms in hopes of breaking the momentum of her descent.

She also broke her arm on a tree.

The ski patrol rushed the embarrassed skier to an ambulance and on to a hospital.

Outside the emergency room, waiting for her arm to be placed in a cast, the woman encountered a man with a broken leg.

"How did you break it?", the woman asked.

"You wouldn't believe it," he said. "I was riding a lift up the hill when I saw this woman with no pants on skiing down the hill backward. I laughed so hard, I fell right off the lift".

"By the way," he asked, "How did you break your arm?"

"I...Uh...just fell down", the woman stammered.

The story has many forms, with the location varying from Sugarbush, Vermont to Vail and Aspen, Colorado, with one particularly appealing version involving a stewardess from Atlanta, who breaks her arm during the backwards, pants-down descent of the hill in Aspen, and when she goes to a doctor in Atlanta to have the cast removed finds that he has recently broken his leg, falling off a ski-lift after seeing

a woman skiing backward and pantsless in Aspen about a month before!

Urban legends abound concerning college experiences, with two of the most common ones concerning the professor climbing through the transom into the classroom and administering a "pop" quiz, and the student who crams for an exam for a solid 24 hours, and then has his "Blue Book" returned to him to find 8 pages filled with nothing but his name.

However, one of the more imaginative involves a lazy, but creative, student who finds himself in a test with two blue books, two pencils and a major question he can't answer.

Here's how he handles it. In one of the blue books, he writes a letter to his mother, saying he has just completed an exam for a teacher who is a nice guy but has high standards, and he is waiting for a friend to complete his exam.

He turns the blue book containing the letter in to the professor, and sprints to his dorm, looks up the answer in his text, copies it into the second blue book, which he puts in an envelope and mails to his mother in Boston.

When he receives a call from the professor asking about the letter in the blue book he submitted after the exam, he explains that he must have inadvertently switched the two books, meaning his test answers must be on the way to Boston.

He tells the professor he will phone his mother and have her mail the unopened letter to her, back to the professor.

The professor agrees, and several days later receives a sealed envelope with a Boston postmark, which contains a second sealed envelope, postmarked at the college station post office the day of the exam, and containing the blue book, with the correct answer.

Another college "urban legend" involving exams concerns the crotchety professor, who says the final exam will last two hours and not a second longer. Anyone caught writing past that will fail.

Sure enough, when the time expired, one earnest student continued to write.

He was discussing the proposed penalty with the professor at the front of the room while the remaining test takers in the large auditorium filed by and deposited their blue books in an ever-increasing pile.

The test-taker was attempting to talk the professor out of failing him, when the educator invoked his considerable reputation for irascibility, asking, "Do you know who I am?"

The student says, "Yes", but further responds, "But do you know who I am?"

When the professor responds in the negative, the student takes his blue book, places it in the middle of the pile of other exams and sprints out the door.

Brunvand, who is described as having stumbled onto a cottage industry in the "urban legend", seems to have become the caretaker...and also ruling authority...of such tales.

He says that in order for a story to be called an "urban legend", it has to crop up in different places and get localized to fit the setting.

There's no rule of thumb that five appearances in different parts of the country qualify it as a legend, and he usually waits awhile until he puts something in the "legend" category, because sometimes it turns out to be true.

Such was the case of the pregnant woman who was detained by a security guard in the sporting goods department of a department store.

He thought she was attempting to shoplift a basketball.

It turns out that the story was indeed true.

Many tales involved takeout or foreign food, such as fingers found in a Chinese restaurant's chop suey or worms in fast-food hamburgers.

You may have heard, as I did, the "worms" rumor about Wendy's offerings shortly after they opened here several years ago.

Brunvand says that people who circulate such rumors may feel guilty about eating fast food rather than home cooking or are expressing fear of alien food.

Brunvand says that urban legends fill a need people have to tell each other stories, and to know the latest that is going on.

Even if they were once rooted in a real event, they have long since been cut free from it and acquired a life of their own.

Brunvand considers these the folklore of the educated, white middle class.

By the way, because of a lack of comprehensive scholarship available locally on "urban legends", this paper is based almost entirely on "The Mexican Pet: More "New" Urban Legends and Some Old Favorites."

I'll close with the title piece.

As told, the story revolves around a lady who lives in Southern California who goes on a shopping trip to Tiajuana and is met by a group of stray dogs, who apparently survive by appealing to the generosity of gringo tourists.

One of the animals....resembling a chihuahua...catches the attention of the lady "turista", who decides that she will adopt it after it follows her the better part of her day in Mexico.

Realizing that she cannot take the dog across the border without a quarantine period, and not wishing to trifle with that, the lady hides the small pet inside her summer sweater and proceeds back to her home in Costa Mesa, where she bathes and feeds the animal before retiring with the new pet curled up on the pillow next to her.

The next morning she awakens to find the pet with a mucous-like discharge around its eyes, and she takes it to the veterinarian for a check-up, saying she will check on it later in the day.

She arrives home from work to find the phone ringing, with the vet on the other end when she answers.

He asks, "Where did you get this animal?"

She responds, "From a pet shop in Los Angeles", to which he counters, "Tell me the truth".

After some hesitation, she recounts the tale, and after a lengthy pause, the vet says, "Well, I've got two things to tell you. Number one: It's not a dog....it's a large sewer rat. And Number two:...He's dying"...."of bubonic plague!