

Occupational Folklore: From Sundaes to Ceremonies

By Casey Bartman

“Malley’s Chocolates,” like the ice cream it served, was an old-fashioned diner and candy/chocolate shop that was frozen in time. For the several months I worked in the Malley’s Chocolates establishment in Bay Village, Ohio, the decorations never changed. With red ribbons cascading along the ceiling, white picket fences covering the walls and bright pink leather cushions with cracks and tears from years of use for seating, the décor and style of the diner looked like a diner stolen straight from the 1960’s. As such, the overwhelming majority of the customers my coworkers and I served were either elderly folk or very young children. The daily schedules of these specific groups of customers followed all but guaranteed low periods of business during the day, such as during the hours the children would be in school.

The free time these one-to-two-hour long periods provided us workers created an environment conducive to a large amount of workplace tomfoolery. In addition to this, the work was so simple that even when we were busy, we managed to find time to act mischievous. Drew, a coworker of mine that worked at this establishment for two years echoed this sentiment in an interview, stating: “The environment, the way it was designed so poorly, made it almost feel like we were forced to interact. We let each other talk about our lives in our spare time and we kind of all became a little family, thanks to how much time we had to ourselves” (Interview, April 11th, 2023). The job involved running the cash register up front in the candy area, preparing ice cream sundaes, cleaning dishes, and waiting on customers. Given the simplicity of the job, my coworkers and I found that the most difficult part of the workday was combatting our boredom. This essay serves as the documentation of these daily battles for entertainment and how our

efforts, in the form of occupational folklore, bonded us as coworkers, and eventually, close friends.

First, to further elaborate on the definition of this folklore, I want to emphasize how I am focusing on the more “informal” and “unofficial” aspect of folklore. In *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*, author Jan Brunvand provides a definition that encapsulates this more ambiguous side of folklore, stating: “Folklore comprises the unrecorded traditions of a people; it includes both the form and content of these traditions and their style or technique of communication from person to person. Folklore is the traditional, unofficial, non-institutional part of culture”(Brunvand). The quote is provided in a collection of definitions for folklore provided by the American Folklore Society. The examples of occupational folklore in this essay encompass this non-institutional part of culture that Brunvand is referring to. While the examples I provide did come to form while working at Malley’s Chocolates, the rules and official customs of the workplace itself had no direct influence on them. There were no “official initiation” ceremonies that we experienced, and as such, every example of the occupational folklore that I provide in this essay is purely non-institutional.

Arguably the most important type of workplace tomfoolery, the initiation ceremonies we held to introduce new coworkers to the workplace environment were a key factor in establishing a proper assimilation into the workplace structure. These ceremonies involved more than just simple acts of mischievousness to kill time, since the way the new coworkers responded to them immediately revealed crucial elements of their personality. In a way, these ceremonies served as “tests” to assess the humor and kindness of these new coworkers. For example, my first initiation

ceremony involved my first experience with the daily closing jobs. Every closing shift, the cleaning roles would be allocated on a “first come, first serve” basis. As one would guess, some of these roles involved much less work than others, and there was a silent agreement upon experienced coworkers that no one worker could hog the same cleaning job every closing shift to establish a fair distribution of roles. At the end of my first shift, my coworkers provided me with the first choice of the closing roles- a test to see if I had the right judgment to respect this silent rule.

While there was no right answer, there certainly was a wrong one: “Greenfloor.” Named after the hideous color on the ground of the sundae preparation station, this closing job was by far the easiest of the bunch, as it took on average half the amount of time to complete as the other roles. I wanted to make a good first impression on my coworkers and decided to take the “Dining area floors” role, showing how I did not wish to steal the easiest job from anyone else. A few days after this event, a coworker mentioned how this demonstration of respect immediately “got me on their good side.” What at first seemed like a simple act of courtesy was in fact a means for my coworkers to assess my work ethic and ability to understand the silent rules of the workplace. Over time, this nightly role assigning event transformed into a way for us coworkers to bond as friends. Simple acts of kindness, like choosing the most difficult job with your first choice, served as a way for us to connect as workers. On the flipside, the coworkers who did not pass the initial test were immediately labeled as antagonists. One particular coworker became infamous for scrambling to claim “Greenfloor” first every closing shift. As a result, we would joke with our coworkers when they would reveal the closing shift schedules for the following week,

making statements such as “Oh you poor thing, you have ‘greenfloor girl’ working with you on your Friday shift, looks like you’ll be late to that family dinner.” This ceremony served as a way for every coworker to acknowledge the wishes of each other, as we all would organize these closing jobs together. As Lynne McNeill states in Chapter Four of her book “Folklore Rules: A Fun, Quick, and Useful Introduction to the Field of Academic Folklore Studies,” “Occupations create intense shared identities... and any time there’s a shared identity, there’s usually folklore to reflect and reinforce it” (McNeill, 67). These ceremonies we performed at Malley’s Chocolates played a crucial part in forming a sense of camaraderie amongst all of the workers, an identity and association to humor that we all shared.

These initiation ceremonies also served as a way for us to test the humor of our new coworkers. My favorite ceremony, one that I invented, involves going up to the new employee in the middle of an intense rush hour with a large tub of ice cream and asking them: “Could you please hold this for me?” The tone in which we would say this would imply that we would quickly return to them to receive the tub in just a few moments. Instead, we would walk away, never returning to take back the object we gave them. The coworkers who had been given this test before would time how long it took for the new employee to either put the object down or ask what to do with it. The experienced coworkers would feign ignorance and tell them to just follow the instructions and wait until the person who asked comes back to receive the object. Since the new trainees were attempting to follow instructions, they would usually hold onto the object for an extended period, until they figured out the joke. This activity always served as a fantastic ice breaker and gave the new employee something to laugh at to help relieve their stress

during the intense rush hour. These little ceremonies created a sense of camaraderie and considerably eased the tensions of the workplace. The first time I performed this ceremony, the intent of the ceremony was different. I was simply attempting to make a joke, and at first it did not relate to easing in the new coworkers. The first example of this ceremony was when I handed Drew an empty carton of milk. “I just remember you asking me to hold the milk and thinking ‘Oh okay, I’d love to help’”(Interview, April 11th, 2023), Drew stated. “Then I remember a minute passing, and then another, and I’d look down at my hand and think to myself ‘I’m holding a milk carton right now. Why am I holding a milk carton? Why am I *still* holding a milk carton?’ Then, I remember looking up at your face in the other room with your goofy pink hat and just breaking out in laughter” (Interview, April 11th, 2023).

Over time, each specific coworker would take this specific ceremony and adjust it to best display their own personality and humor. For example, one particular coworker always made sure to emphasize just how quickly they would be back to pick up the object to make the reveal of the joke at the end all the more potent. Another coworker named Owen, who had a very creative sense of humor, would switch around the objects they asked the new employee to hold. The objects varied from ones a coworker would realistically ask another to hold during rush hour, to completely nonsensical items. Owen realized that part of the fun was pushing the limits of the joke and seeing just how ridiculous the object they asked the employee to hold could become. These jokes became recognizable, and each version of the ceremony held their own distinct identity that would reveal just who was performing the test, just like they had their own signature style of joke. When you walked into the dishwashing room and saw the new employee

holding a heavy box of paperwork with a lost expression on their face, you immediately recognized that Owen was at fault.

Many of these initiation ceremonies faded in and out of popularity, and in my interview with Drew, I asked about the initiation ceremonies that existed long before I started working at this establishment. Drew then went on to share his personal favorite ceremony, stating “We would take a shot of the food coloring syrup we put in our sodas. It would taste awful. I remember (laughs) standing with one coworker, Hayden, and pressing the syrup nozzle and watching a dead fly fall out of it into the cup. It was just some yellow syrup and a dead fly floating around. We agreed to stop that ceremony from that point onwards, but man, it was fun. I’ll never forget the look on Hayden’s face” (Interview, April 11th, 2023). Drew mentioned that he is thankful for the time he spent at Malley’s, not because of the workplace itself, but because of “the memories we made out of the dumb situations. We found fun in an annoying environment, you know? We were just laughing, even though we shouldn’t have. Sometimes during closing hours, we’d have dance parties. Back then, the only music the diner played was old 60’s classics and children’s Disney music, and we couldn’t change it. All we could control was the volume, so we’d turn it as loud as it could go and have fun with it. We’d all be sweaty from the long day in our uncomfortable uniforms and it was awful, but we were laughing and it was great” (Interview, April 11th, 2023).

While I personally never experienced this type of dance party during my work hours there, it was clear the influence of these old traditions carried over to the more experienced coworkers. Coworkers like Drew would always make sure to make the most fun out of the most

annoying and stressful experiences on the job, and these acts of tomfoolery helped ease the tension of the work day for everyone. When I asked Drew for an example of how this goofy culture transformed over time, he stated: “It just felt natural, you know? We dared each other all the time and it always started from the most random sources of inspiration, but we were always just trying to have fun. I remember daring an old coworker named Jake that when serving the next customer, he had to ask them for their ID and make up an excuse. So this gentleman walks up and asks for a scoop of butter pecan, and Jake says ‘Sir the butter pecan is actually twenty-one and up, so I’m going to need to see some ID.’ For some reason, the customer just goes along with it and Jake stood there awkwardly and had to say ‘Oh. I’m sorry, it was a dare.’ Man, the silence after he said that was so horrible. It was so funny, and we always just wanted to chase that feeling of joy after each dare. It made us feel more connected, like we were sharing this little moment in Malley’s history” (Interview, April 11th, 2023).

The majority of our moments of occupational folklore came as a result of the artistic expression we held during the lull of business before rush hours. The best example of this personal expression through workplace folklore comes from the sundaes we would make. To the average bored teenager, the extra ice cream and collection of miscellaneous toppings we were provided with served as the canvas for us to create art. With too much time on our hands and too many tiny decorative pieces of candy in front of us, every single day we would kill time by making our own unique sundaes. The sundaes we would prepare from the menu to the customers served as our first sources of inspiration. Every day, we would prepare hundreds of the most popular sundaes, with the most popular of these sundaes titled the “Malley’s Clown.” This

sundae consisted of a single scoop of ice cream, two candy cartoon eyes, a jellybean for a nose, an ice cream cone for a clown hat topped with a dollop of whip cream and sprinkles to replicate a clown's wig. We would take these candy ingredients and create warped versions of these organized sundaes on the menu. For example, when we were tired, a coworker might make a "Malley's Clown" sundae for themselves to eat with leftover ingredients and dye the white cartoon eyes with a red syrup to replicate their own worn out, bloodshot eyes. However, the true humor came from when we would deviate from the organized sundaes to make uniquely terrifying combinations of ice cream. Some of the sundaes that our most humorous coworkers would make were so hideous and genuinely upsetting to look at that we felt compelled to document and record them. If we were asked to throw out a sample of ingredients by our managers, we made sure to use them like we were creating failed science experiments. We would take hundreds of expired candy eyes and place them on a single scoop of ice cream to create something reminiscent of a monster from a horror movie.

It was impossible to watch someone create their own disaster of a sundae and not laugh with them. These sundae making sessions served as perfect bonding sessions and allowed ourselves to express our humor in a very specific way. Over time, you would watch the new coworkers allow themselves to have fun with their creations and start to express their humor with every new addition. One coworker found they had a skill for creating crude imitations of real life animals with their sundaes, and every day we would surround them and watch them create a new creature. An example of one of these sundaes is provided below, this one titled the "Malley's Ant."



We made sure to take a photo of every unique sundae we made to record each memory. Although none of us work together anymore, we still try to keep in contact with each other by sharing these videos and pictures to reminisce. The more memorable sundaes were given names, almost as a sign of respect for the sheer amount of joy it produced for all of us when it was created. Once again, we would take the names from the sundaes on the menu and adjust them for the purpose of the joke.

This tradition of ours eventually transformed into something that would involve the customers as well. Certain customers, including the friends and families of our coworkers, dined at Malley's Chocolates often enough to develop their own signature orders. These customers

would repeatedly ask for the same dish from the menu with a specific adjustment or two. This happened so frequently that we began to refer to these dishes by new names to account for the familiarity we had with the customer. For example, one customer would frequently order a sundae titled the “Pink Elephant” and would ask for us to replace the pink peppermint gum ice cream with the green mint chocolate chip ice cream. We started to refer to this new sundae as the “Green Elephant,” and when we told them this new name, they started to only refer to their order by it. There were plenty of these “secret menu” sundaes that we had, and these unique orders served as a way for us to establish a humorous repertoire with the customers.

While these ceremonies brought us together, it is also important to note that not every coworker participated in them. As a result, there is a large collection of the employees at Malley’s Chocolates who never fit this humorous culture. This humor we shared and expressed through our goofy customs bonded us together, and by contrast, those who did not participate in it were left out. However, it is still important to address these other coworkers as members of the Malley’s Chocolate culture and occupational folklore. They may not have participated in the more specific side of the culture that I experienced, but it would be inaccurate to say they were not a part of the Malley’s Chocolates coworker culture at all. The elements of this occupational folklore that I have shared are important, but they do not tell the entire story. The beauty of folklore is how dynamic it is, and while the folklore I experienced did not involve these other coworkers, it would be false to claim they were not a part of Malley’s Chocolates folklore at all. They do have a story in this folklore, they just were not in my specific stories that I mentioned in this essay. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie makes a similar argument in her TED Talk “The danger

of a single story,” where she explains how she has met several people who have refused to incorporate several aspects of her culture’s context, which “flatten(s) my experience and overlooks the many other stories that formed me... They make the one story become the only story” (Adichie). She labels this lack of acknowledgement of one’s full culture as “A single story” (Adichie). It is wrong to claim that the Malley’s Chocolates occupational folklore only involved the elements I mentioned in this essay: I would be falsely claiming a single story, to quote Adichie.

This is not to say that we did not like these other coworkers, we just did not see them as members of our more *specific* coworker culture. When the members of this inner circle, what I refer to as this specific subculture, spend time together reminiscing, we often say something along the lines of “Remember when Jake.... Remember when Owen...” etc. Over time, we noticed we realized we never had any particularly fond memories with those who chose not to participate in our workplace tomfoolery. We would say “Remember Anna?” to which someone would respond “Yeah.” and that would be the end of that discussion. We all loved Anna, but because she would always ignore our monstrous sundae making sessions or little initiation ceremonies with the new employees, we noticed that we did not make any specific memories with her. This is not to say that she never participated in her own sundae making sessions, I am just stating why there are elements of the occupational folklore at Malley’s Chocolates that I have not included in this essay. I am sure Anna had her own sundae making moments of tomfoolery, but I cannot claim that I was a part of them, and as a result, I cannot claim those moments as parts of my specific occupational folklore at Malley’s Chocolates. With this

realization in mind, one thing is clear. The ceremonies and moments of occupational folklore we performed at Malley's Chocolates did not just help form a sense of camaraderie amongst us, it defined who we were as coworkers in relation to each other.

Works Cited

Adichie, Chimamanda Ngozi. "The danger of a single story." TEDGlobal, 2009.

Brunvand, Jan. *The Study of American Folklore: An Introduction*, 2nd edition. New York: W.W. Norton, 1978.

McNeill, Lynne S. *Folklore Rules: A Fun, Quick, and Useful Introduction to the Field of Academic Folklore Studies*. Utah State University Press, 2013.

Drew. Interview with the author. April 11th, 2023. Digital recording over the phone. Columbus: Ohio, USA.