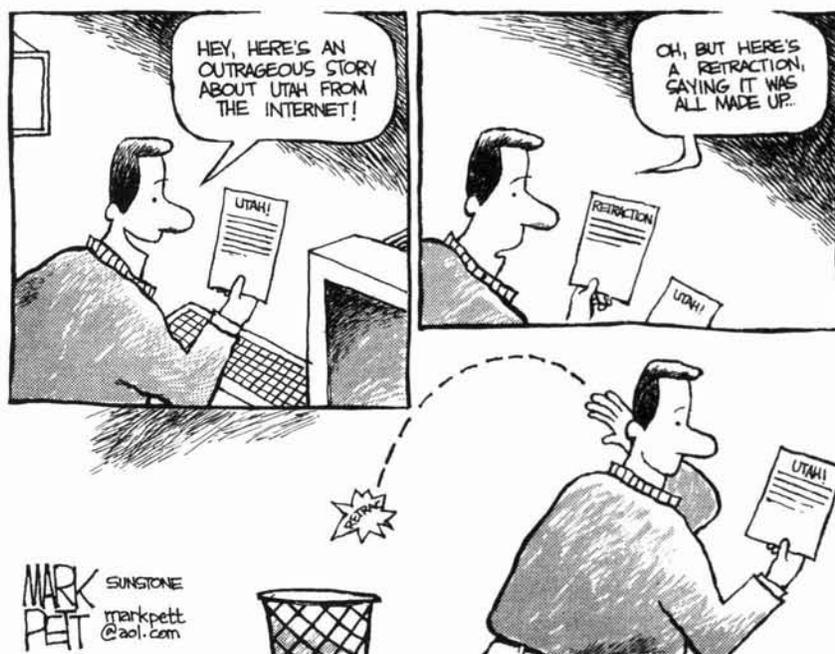


## CYBERSAINTS

ACCIDENTAL AUTHOR OF AN  
INTERNET LEGEND

*What does it mean when an intentional fictional satire is believed and spread as a factual event?*

*By Cherie Woodworth*



**I** NOW CONFESS to the world: The lesbian "Farmer in the Dell" did not happen. Possessed by an evil demon one morning in mid-March 1997, I wrote the story in the guise of a news release and sent it to my friends on e-mail (see side bar on next page). Within two hours, I had a half-dozen responses congratulating me on a well-aimed satire. And another half dozen posts bewailing the state of American society. "This is outrageous!" they cried. "How could such a thing happen?"

They had taken it for true.

*CHERIE WOODWORTH is a graduate student in history at Yale University currently living in Estonia. Anyone with further sightings of the Farmer in the Dell is encouraged to send a report to her at SunstoneUT@aol.com.*

Now, I will staunchly defend myself: I did not intend to deceive anybody. I signed my own name to the piece, and I posted it under my own e-mail address. Even those on the e-mail list who don't know me personally would surely realize that if I live in Connecticut, I could hardly have made a legitimate report about a school district in small-town Utah. Anybody who read to the last line surely would know that it couldn't be true. Right?

Within half a day, my official retraction had been posted to my e-mail list, fast on the heels of the original. Alas, the internet legend was already up and running. Mormon gossip spreads fast on the internet, and somebody (or several somebodies) believing in the veracity of the story had already sent it on to other news groups. Within days, I heard that

the piece was circulating in Hawaii. Then came reports that it had been discussed at a gay Mormon support group in San Francisco. Four weeks later, it appeared on a general (non-Mormon) internet list for the discussion on gay rights. Then it appeared on a list for education and schools and on a list in Australia. Six weeks after the original post, it was still alive and appeared in a legal-issues internet discussion group.

I know about each of these instances because somebody from my original e-mail group reported them to me—and also sent corrections to those lists where the "Farmer in the Dell" had resurfaced. But internet gossip flies on wings of lightning; you cannot call it back. "The Farmer" keeps spreading.

In April, it jumped out of cyber space. The editor of a Salt Lake biweekly culture and events newspaper, the *Event*, got a copy. He knew it was a spoof—and he wanted to print it. He tracked me down on e-mail, through a friend of a friend of a friend of a . . . (is the Mormon cyber world really that small?) and asked my permission.

What the heck, I thought. It can't make any difference now. Only please, I begged him, change the story from the Brigham City school district to something else. I don't want the poor souls of Brigham City (whom I had picked at random, or on maleficent inspiration) to get harassed about this. So the "Farmer in the Dell" was printed in the 24 April issue of the *Event*, coinciding with Ellen's coming-out on national television. The next morning, it ended up on radio.

During the Thursday morning commute, Tom Barberi, host of KALL talk radio, retold the piece, making it a subject of his morning rant and broadcasting it from Ogden to Utah Valley. He, too, took it for a real news report. At least three members of my original e-mail group heard the broadcast, and one rushed to the phone to set the record straight. It's not real! It never happened! And then the messenger of truth got on the internet pronto and posted me: You've got to call the radio station and tell them it's a fake! The long and the short of it is, I did talk to Tom Barberi from Connecticut, on the air, and bore testimony that the piece was a satire.

Thus, anybody who heard it falsely broadcast as truth also heard the truth restored; that is, they did if they stayed tuned that long. . . .

In June, the story is still making the rounds. Just last week, I got news that it had been going around Jet Propulsion Labs in

Pasadena, this time clearly labeled as a spoof (thank goodness). But a gay newspaper in San Francisco recently ran an account of the tale as straight news.

The piece seems most effective when taken as true, at least up to the last paragraph. Judging from the feedback (fragmentary and accidental) I've received, people may read it and be amused when they know from the beginning that it is a joke. But when they believe it to be true, they are outraged and impelled to pass it on.

A STRANGE PHENOMENON  
*When play and reality are indistinguishable.*

JAN Brunvand, folklorist at the University of Utah and creator of the concept of urban legends, writes that it is not possible to deliberately create an urban legend. An urban legend is a story believed to be true (or at least plausible) and spread primarily by oral retelling. Urban legends arise from social concerns and stresses which lie under the surface. The retold stories may have easily identifiable morals, or

their points may be more obscure. The telling questions are, Why is a story retold?, Why do even skeptical listeners feel that it is—or maybe just might be—true? and What does the honing and re-shaping of the story in the repeated tellings tell us about our values, fears, and stresses?

As the lesbian "Farmer in the Dell" began to spread out of control, I asked myself these questions. I do not think the story qualifies as an urban legend; to do so, it would have to go beyond e-mail, where the story can be sent across the country to dozens or hun-

## FUROR ERUPTS IN BRIGHAM CITY SCHOOLS

*This is the text of the unintended hoax that has been circulated widely by credulous internet users. Does its continual forwarding constitute folklore? And what does the incident tell us about ourselves?*

A.P. (BRIGHAM CITY, UTAH)—The Brigham City School Board met in an emergency session yesterday with the city council to consider allegations that the school district's youngest charges were being inculcated with a pro-gay ideology and same-sex marriage.

The issue arose after scores of parents complained that children in the kindergarten class at Brigham Elementary were being led in a game which mimicked same-sex marriages. At issue was the game "The Farmer in the Dell."

Renee Mott, the accused kindergarten teacher, explained: "The class is way over-balanced with girls. I mean, we have lots more girls than boys. Sometimes it just happens that way, it's just chance. So when we play 'Farmer in the Dell,' sometimes I let a girl go first, so that everybody gets a turn."

The problem arises with the next line of the children's song: "the farmer takes a wife." The girl-farmer would often choose another little girl to join her in

the circle as the "farmer's wife."

"This is just setting a bad example to our young and impressionable children," said Jared Day, whose child is in the class. "If you don't stand up for family values, this country is going to go right down the toilet."

"It's upsetting the natural order of things," concurred Lisa Perkins, "and it's upsetting me, too." "It's like dragging those innocent children down into a ditch. It's an outrage that we can't protect our own children from that sort of filth," said her husband, Wayne Perkins.

"I know these things may happen in other places," said Janabell Millett. "But this is Brigham City. We can't let that kind of pollution into our town. And into the kindergarten, no less!"

The extent of the furor over this issue can be gauged by the number of town citizens who have got involved—far more than just the parents of students in the kindergarten class. At the extraordinary joint session of

the School Board and the city council, over 200 parents and others showed up to voice concerns, and petitions were submitted with hundreds of names.

"Somebody told us about this in Relief Society last Sunday," said Filene Dunnbody, referring to the Mormon women's weekly church meeting. "We started the petition right then and there. We just knew we had to take action; we were all so mad about those poor little children. After we got everyone in Relief Society to sign, we took it over to the men's quorums and they were glad to sign on too. Even some of the youth signed."

It was rumored that Mormon churches in neighboring towns were gearing up to bus in hundreds more parents to the next School Board meeting, should the issue not find an immediate resolution.

Parents in Brigham City have organized an action committee, and have stated that they will sue the school board and the kindergarten teacher personally for psychic damage to their children. They have asked a BYU Law School professor to represent them in the case, and have already drafted a law for the State legislature which would ban all play acting of same-sex marriage in the public schools.

When kindergarten teacher

Renee Mott testified to the combined school board and town council that the situation had come about entirely innocently, her explanation was met with pronounced skepticism.

"I just wanted all the children to have a turn," she concluded, visibly shaken.

"I don't care how 'innocent' this thing started," responded LeClare Molfatt, speaking for the combined council. "If not all the students get a turn, that's just too bad. There are more important issues at stake here."

"The farmer has to be a boy," concurred Mayor Tom Merrill. "A boy gets picked first. That's the way we always played the game, and that's the way it should be played. You might as well get used to it."

The extraordinary joint session of parents and school board dismissed after reaching a tentative solution. Regardless of class sex ratios, boys would be picked first. However, in the interest of fairness, the position of "the Cheese" would be reserved for a girl. At the end of the game, the children sing "the Cheese stands alone, the cheese stands alone. Hi ho the dairy-O, the cheese stands alone."

"That should be enough to make anyone happy," concluded school board president Jack Peterson.

C. K. Woodworth,  
A.P. remote correspondent

dreds of potential readers by a few, quick, key strokes and always in the same textual form. In my opinion, to be an urban legend, it would have to be retold orally in face-to-face encounters and in the teller's own words.

The broadcast on KALL radio almost qualifies as such (since the radio host did retell the story rather than read the original, and he did believe it to be true), but I do not know if any listeners picked up the story and then retold it. Of course, such propagation would be extremely difficult, if not impossible, to trace (unlike e-mail, which is difficult enough).

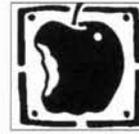
Why did the story spread? I can only guess. First and most important, it not only came in the guise of a factual news report (and for the verisimilitude of the satire, I tried to closely imitate the rhetoric of real news stories), but it also fit within a plausible context. Several events in the Mountain West in recent years had concerned gay rights, schools had already been a hot issue, and the Church had become involved in the Hawaii gay-marriage case. As one discussant at the Mormon gay support group in San Francisco said, people were waiting for something to happen in Utah.

I have also noticed in recent trips to Utah a heightened concern among mainstream Mormons that even young children identify themselves with gendered behavior. Girls should be girls, and boys should be boys, even from their pre-school years, lest they become confused and be open to the homosexual recruitment that is rumored to target adolescents and young adults.

Finally, the "Farmer" piece reflected some of my own frustration with the place of women in Mormon society. Many women like me hear the message that they are to have a special role but are not convinced that it is a role they necessarily want. Being the Cheese in the story is not the pinnacle of fulfillment for everyone.

In any case, the spread of the story took me completely by surprise. I wrote it without forethought. But when I re-examined the piece, I saw in it things I had not realized. In creating the fictitious parents, school board members, and mayor, placing them in an invented situation, and putting words in their mouths, I was playing with reality. But these two elements—play and reality—were lost in the transmission, and the real story never seemed to catch up with the false one.

As they say in *Plan 10 from Outer Space*: "Just because it didn't happen doesn't mean it isn't true." ☒




---

PHOTOGRAPH:  
ELLIS ISLAND, 1949

We came off the ship  
from lands with shifting names,  
our borders undefined and mixed  
in the thick syrup of Slavic sounds.  
Our clothes turned awkward and coarse.  
The worst were the trousers,  
always too low over the rough shoes  
or too wide at the ankles,  
and the women in dark woolen skirts.  
We were foreigners,  
sharp odors of food on our breath,  
with our strong teeth  
and sullen, hopeful stares,  
full of stories sticking in our throats.  
We broke open like thinly strapped suitcases,  
all our secrets obvious  
in the dark splinters of our faces—  
like the faded keepsakes  
protruding from our bags.  
How could anything enter  
through the doors of our difference?  
Sleeves flapping in endless lines,  
we waited in front of crates and old valises,  
monuments to the patience  
of those without choice,  
poked in our nakedness  
and probed for strange infections  
in the dense layers of our flesh.  
We stood like dwindling puppets  
dragged across the sea,  
our tongues dry and cut  
with the silent traces of soft speech,  
unable to state what we knew.  
How we longed to live in a present  
filled with familiar words  
in a land we had read about in books,  
losing our singularity  
in the spilled pockets of our coats.  
If someone had snapped  
a picture of us then,  
what would it have shown?  
Shoulders rigid, heads inclined,  
mouths shut and curving tightly  
at the lips—and the eyes,  
the darkened slivers of the eyes.

—ASKOLD SKALSKY