

Slave in a Box

The Strange
Career of
Aunt Jemima



M. M. MANRING

blackface - 1840s

University of Virginia Press
Charlottesville and London

3 From Minstrel Shows to the World's Fair: The Birth of Aunt Jemima

Luck is the residue of design.

—Branch Rickey

Try a hot cake.

—Mammy in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind*

In the autumn of 1889 Chris Rutt was a man with a problem. The former editorial writer for the *St. Joseph (Mo.) Gazette* had struck out on a new business venture in which he had no experience. In fact, no one could claim much experience at what Rutt was attempting to do: sell an amazing new self-rising pancake flour to the households of America. So far, everything had gone much better than one might expect. He and his partner Charles Underwood had acquired a bankrupt flour mill. Although neither of them had any experience in the culinary arts, or chemistry, or the infant industry of food processing—indeed, neither of them could even cook—they had by trial and error perfected their product. Now they were ready to market the self-rising flour, which was still known only by that unglamorous name. Nothing had come to Rutt yet as he walked the streets of St. Joe, but he was looking, according to the legend. He did not know it, but he was looking for Aunt Jemima.

Autumn of 1889 is as specific as anyone, even the authorized historian of the

Quaker Oats Company, can be in discussing the moment Chris Rutt met Aunt Jemima. No one seems to know the exact place, either, although St. Joseph was not a metropolis and probably had no more than three venues where minstrel shows were regularly staged. Rutt, mulling over his problem, walked into one of them, possibly Streckebain's Garden, Tootle's Opera House, or the Dime Eden Musee, or perhaps even the Grand Opera House, which carried minstrel shows less often. Once within, he encountered the blackface comedy team of Baker and Farrell. Again, this is only according to the legend, because newspaper advertisements do not confirm that Baker and Farrell were in town anytime in the fall of 1889, although an advertisement for an appearance by someone named Farrell in the spring at the Dime Eden Musee carried the simple tagline "You Know Him."¹

The performers ended with a cakewalk, the traditional big finish for minstrel shows in which a variety of dance steps was performed in a circle. The rhythmic, circular dance was performed by slaves during harvest festivals in the American South and had been widely adopted by white men in blackface who practiced the stagecraft of mimicking black dances for the amusement of other whites.² One of the performers—no one remembers whether it was Baker or Farrell—was not only in blackface but in drag. He was wearing a dress, an apron, and a bandanna around his head, pretending to be a black cook. And then they began to sing:

I went to church the other day,
Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!
To hear them white folks sing and pray,
Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!
They prayed so long I couldn't stay,
Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!
I knew the Lord would come that way,
Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!³

At that moment, Chris Rutt had found his trade name, and Aunt Jemima, as we know her today, had met her maker. Arthur Marquette's official company history of Quaker Oats, the source cited by nearly every account of Aunt Jemima's creation, describes the moment of serendipity simply: "Here was the image Rutt sought! Here was southern hospitality personified."⁴ The number

apparently was a huge hit with the audience as well as with Rutt; they supposedly whistled it in the streets in the following days that autumn, although none of the St. Joseph newspapers—not the *Gazette*, the *Daily News*, the *Catholic Tribune*, or the *Weekly Herald*—makes any mention of this performance or its effect. Despite the scant direct evidence that events unfolded this way, there is strong enough reason to believe the story, and no evidence of any alternative explanation. One thing about Aunt Jemima has always been clear: Her adoption as a popular trade name was at its inception a thing of chance. It was an unsuspecting visit to a minstrel show, a happy coincidence for a struggling businessman. Or was it?

Coincidence, Chance, and the Rise of the Self-rising Flour

A better question might be this: Do you believe in historical coincidences? If Chris Rutt had stepped in the path of a falling meteor on his way to the minstrel show, we could say a random event had occurred. When we look at a supposed coincidence such as Rutt's discovery of Aunt Jemima in context, considering its obvious links to other developments in the national culture, it looks less and less like a coincidence. Chris Rutt was not struck by a meteor; he instead tapped into major trends in the nation's popular culture and industry, and in doing so created Aunt Jemima pancake flour. It was not an unlikely coincidence that he did so, and it was no coincidence that it eventually worked.

Rutt and Underwood made their bid in the food-processing industry at the same time many other entrepreneurs were building similar businesses, thanks to advances in technology and transportation. National brands of all kinds of foods—crackers, soda pop, breakfast cereal—were made possible by the increasing urbanization of America toward the end of the nineteenth century, the growth of railroads into a system capable of moving both people and products from city to city, and the application of industrial practices not only to the production but the packaging of food, which in turn made feasible the transport of a variety of foodstuffs via rail to distant cities. We understand urbanization and railroads as familiar factors in the great changes experienced by Americans in the second half of the nineteenth century, but less celebrated are the industrial perfection of packaging and the possibilities that it offered. The development of the first practical mass-produced paper bags was spurred, like so many other things, by the Civil War, as northern mill operators sought a replacement

for cotton sacks. In 1870 the mechanical process to stamp out today's familiar bag was patented, and the relationship between consumers and products began to change forever. Purchasers had been taking their own containers to grocers in order to carry products home and thus were constrained from buying more of an item than they had planned, on impulse; the arrival of cheap, mass-produced paper bags allowed buyers to carry home as much as they wanted of what they saw in the store. A simple paper bag eliminated longtime barriers to consumption and increased sales. One economist, writing in 1889, claimed that "nothing has had a greater influence in making possible the rapidity with which certain branches of the retail business are conducted as compared with 10 years ago . . . than the cheap and rapid production of paper bags."⁵

Paper bags, as an evolutionary ancestor of today's colorful, sophisticated, and often annoying packages, were an easily overlooked step toward a mass retail market for food, and they also were transitional in nature. Wholesalers of mass-produced food products eventually would have to overcome the system paper bags created, that of grocers buying in bulk and distributing differing amounts in retail according to the purchaser's desire. The relationship that existed before the paper bag—between local grocer and local purchaser—remained unchanged by improvements in package production. The mass market for name brands that were produced, packaged, priced, and sealed at a factory, transported by rail, and sold still unopened required further advances in the packaging process, specifically, the humble paper box. The perfection of a process by which factories could produce paper boxes was, as Thomas Hine has noted, the moment at which "packaging became a mass-market phenomenon." Although many early mass-produced products, including Aunt Jemima flour, were sold in paper bags, that is not how they typically arrived at local stores. Paper bags were too vulnerable to rupture, spillage, and vermin to travel long distances, so mass-produced food often required two layers of packaging: a paper box for transit and a paper bag for point of sale. In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, box making was a craft, and the finished product was reserved for luxury goods such as jewelry and candy. In 1879 a Baltimore producer of bags altered a printing press to cut and shape paper. Cardboard—fluted paper between two sheets of thicker paper—had been invented five years earlier and seemed to be awaiting a reliable box-making process. Within a decade of the invention of box-making machines, the pioneers of the mass production of food, most notably Quaker Oats and the National Biscuit Company, were not only

shipping in boxes but emphasizing to customers the sanitary benefits of doing so. The biscuit company eventually started putting the product itself in small, individual boxes meant for display at the point of sale after manufacturers discovered another benefit of cardboard: It was strong enough to allow brand names and symbols to be printed directly on it.⁶ The ability to create a totally packaged product—sealed, branded, and only opened after it had arrived at the consumer's home—closed the circle of bulk retailing and changed the relationship between the product's owners and eventual purchasers by eliminating the middleman. Packages sold products, meaning greater efficiency and pricing reliability for entrepreneurs who adopted these innovations, and improved efficiency and power over price translated into greater potential for profit, assuming one had developed a product consumers recognized and wanted to buy in mass quantities.

This was the business world in which Chris Rutt and Charles Underwood attempted to make their mark in 1889 when they purchased a bankrupt flour mill in St. Joseph. That Missouri town is known mostly for its brief reign as the starting point for the Pony Express, but it also was an important milling center in the 1880s. By 1888, however, the amount of flour St. Joseph's mills produced far exceeded demand. When a mill fell into bankruptcy that year, Rutt, still writing editorials for the *St. Joseph Gazette*, and Underwood, a millworker, decided to try their hands at the business. They bought the property and set up shop as the Pearl Milling Company.⁷ The mill's former operators had failed by marketing conventional products, selling flour in bulk to retailers, and Rutt and Underwood faced the same problem. They decided to create an entirely new product that in turn would create a new demand—a new use, really—for flour. Because pancake batter was difficult to make with any consistency, and because it used a relatively large amount of flour, Rutt and Underwood began experimenting with a self-rising flour that, when mixed with milk and cooked on a griddle, would produce pancakes. The product thus would be distinguished from competing flours by the fact that it was premixed and ready to use, an innovation only possible because the producer could package, brand, and ship it unopened and unchanged to the point of sale. After numerous tests on the kerosene stove in Rutt's home during the summer of 1889, they hit upon a mixture of wheat flour, corn flour, lime phosphate, and salt. They then conducted the first market test of a ready-mix product by inviting over the local librarian, Purd Wright, who told them it made good flapjacks.⁸

So when Rutt and Underwood sought to make their fortune in the food

business, they followed major market trends, aiming to mass-produce something that would be packaged, shipped, and sold in the same form in which it left the factory. They were remarkably successful in assessing the market and developing a product to meet it and particularly insightful in creating a product that indeed could not have existed without advances in packaging and transportation. A further task remained: the naming of the world's first self-rising pancake flour. It needed to be something familiar, accepted, inviting. In drawing from popular culture, Rutt continued to follow market trends, but choosing the name of Aunt Jemima was indeed an innovation.

Old Aunt Jemima, Oh! Oh! Oh!

Thus we are back with Chris Rutt, settling into a seat at a St. Joseph minstrel show sometime in the fall of 1889. The mix has been created, the stuff is in the bags, but the partners are at a loss when it comes to a name—"Self-Rising Pancake Flour" is not catchy enough. What we should understand about Rutt's epiphany in the minstrel hall is that there is nothing out of the ordinary in his search for a brand name, and that the one he settled on is more interesting in the respect that it makes perfect sense, given the times, than in the manner in which he stumbled upon it. The second verse of the song Baker and Farrell performed on the stage in St. Joseph went like this:

The monkey dressed in soldier clothes
 Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!
 Went out in the woods to drill some crows
 Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!
 The jay bird hung on the swinging limb
 Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!
 I up with a stone and hit him on the shin
 Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!
 Oh! Carline, oh, Carline
 Can't you dance the bee line,
 Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!

It is no surprise that Rutt, looking for a diversion, strolled into a minstrel show that autumn day. Although the peak years of the blackface minstrel, which

swept the nation in the 1840s, were long past, blackface performances were still common in American theaters throughout the second half of the nineteenth century and continued in some places even in the years following World War II. From the outset blackface minstrelsy balanced an envy of the supposedly pastoral, indolent lives of southern African Americans with an ostensibly realistic mocking of African-American mannerisms and speech—it was an act of both love and theft, as Eric Lott has written. It also was a reaffirmation of sorts for the white male working-class audience, which was invited to share in a preindustrial world of dancing, singing, fishing, and loafing while being reminded of its superiority to the silly, strutting coons depicted by white actors in burnt cork. The most familiar standard characters of early blackface minstrelsy were the country dullard Jim Crow, the subject of the most famous minstrel song (and supposedly inspired by the shuffling of a real crippled black man), and his city cousin Zip Coon, a posing dandy whose inbred stupidity unfolded in sketches. A confusing tangle of emotions, desires, loves, and hatreds was revealed during the interaction between a white interlocutor, the blackfaced sidemen, and the white men in the audience, an event that codified “the image of blacks as the prototypical Fool or Sambo,” in the words of Mel Watkins. But this staging of the pejorative quality of blackness was really an act of creating whiteness, reminding white audiences that regardless of whatever trials they faced at work or home, they were uplifted by their race. It was the pay window for the “psychological wage” that W. E. B. Du Bois said white workers received in lieu of gains that might be realized through biracial solidarity.⁹

The cakewalk number Rutt saw was typical of the minstrel form, usually coming at the end of the show, which had three parts and may have been created by a black theatrical family headed by the performer John Luca in the early 1840s. Shows opened with a parade, or “walk-around,” of all the blackface performers, who wore flashy clothes and took turns at singing popular songs. They arranged themselves in a semicircle, with the endmen—Mr. Tambo and Mr. Bones—at the end of the line, and the interlocutor, a white upper-class character, seated in the center. The interlocutor moderated the fast and ridiculous jokes and comic songs of Tambo and Bones, which often were at the interlocutor’s expense, to the enjoyment of a working-class audience that watched a pair of silly black men outsmart a pompous white character. The second act was a variety segment called the “olio,” in which the star attraction usually was a blackface

stump speaker who ridiculed some topical issue, using numerous malaprops to make sport of emancipation or women’s suffrage, for instance, and to show himself to be a fool as well.¹⁰

Rutt met Aunt Jemima in the third act. Typically, the final segment in a minstrel show was a plantation skit, heavy on slapstick, song, and dance, or, after the 1850s, farces based on Shakespearean drama. From the 1870s on, and especially in the 1890s, the final number was often a cakewalk, a dance in which the members of the troupe danced in a circle, with couples taking turns promenading in the center. Some scholars, such as Sterling Stuckey, argue that the circular cakewalk’s origins are West African, while others maintain that it was from Europe. But all agree that the dance was maintained in America during harvest festivals on southern plantations, where slaves lampooned their masters’ posturings instead of being lampooned themselves and competed for prizes, often a cake.¹¹ Thus the cakewalk that Rutt and the rest of the enthusiastic audience watched was the epitome of the minstrel show, at the same time both mocking and reveling in African-American culture, looking back longingly on an idyllic plantation South while nonetheless ridiculing its residents. The number wound up with this verse:

The bullfrog married the tadpole’s sister
Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!
He smacked his lips and then he kissed her
Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!
She says, if you love me as I love you
Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!
No knife can cut our love in two
Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!
Oh, Carline, oh, Carline
Can’t you dance the bee line,
Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!

The addition of the mammy—in this case, Old Aunt Jemima—in the pantheon of minstrel types appears to have been a postbellum event. Blackface transvestism is almost as old as the minstrel show, with, as Lott has observed, blackface “wenches” usually demonstrating the “profane and murderous power

of women."¹² But by the 1880s, the standard mammy, a fat, cantankerous cook who, like her literary counterparts, slaved in the kitchens of the plantation South, was as well established and recognized as Sambo.¹³ This was almost certainly due largely to the song Rutt heard performed by Baker and Farrell in 1889, which had been written fourteen years earlier by one of the greatest and most unlikely minstrel artists, a black musician named Billy Kersands.

Kersands, who was born around 1842, was perhaps best known for his comic routines. He not only was a songwriter, a 200-pound acrobat, and an innovative dancer (some historians credit him with the invention of the soft shoe), but he could, to an audience's amusement, stick several billiard balls in his mouth without interrupting his routine. One historian of nineteenth-century popular music wrote that Kersands's "massive mouth" was as famous then as Jimmy Durante's prodigious proboscis is today." W. C. Handy once claimed that he saw Kersands put a coffee cup and saucer in his mouth.¹⁴ But Kersands's most lasting contribution to the minstrel show was his music, which like the rest of its genre reinforced black stereotypes. One of his popular tunes, "Mary's Gone Home with a Coon," was the story of an old man whose daughter had run off with a black man:

He's black, as black as he can be,
Now I wouldn't care if he was only yaller,
But he's black all o'er, he's a porter in a store,
My heart is tore, when I think the matter o'er
De chile dat I bore, should tink ob me no more,
Den to run away wid a big black coon.¹⁵

His biggest hit was "Old Aunt Jemima." Kersands wrote it in 1875 and by 1877 had performed it onstage more than two thousand times, according to Robert Toll. He would continue to perform it until his death in 1915, and countless other minstrel performers copied it, bringing numerous Aunt Jemimas onstage into the 1890s. Eventually, other songwriters incorporated Aunt Jemima into their tunes in arrangements such as "Aunt Jemima's Picnic Day" and "Aunt Jemima Song."¹⁶ There were at least three versions of Kersands's original song (and probably more) by the time Rutt saw it performed in 1889, some substituting "pea-vine" for "bee-line" in the refrain, and one version explaining how emancipation was offered to a slave:

My old missus promise me,
Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!
When she died she-d set me free,
Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!
She lived so long her head got bald,
Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!
She swore she would not die at all,
Old Aunt Jemima, oh! oh! oh!¹⁷

Despite what some might see today as the overt racism of some of his lyrics, Kersands's musical performances were hugely successful with the black audiences that occasionally saw them. Tom Fletcher, a black minstrel and contemporary of Kersands, said that "a minstrel show without Billy Kersands was like a circus without elephants." Toll offers an interesting explanation for Kersands's popularity among blacks: besides laughing at Kersands's exaggerated mannerisms, they read his lyrics very differently from white audiences. For example, in the version of "Old Aunt Jemima" that depicts crows, a symbol of blackness, escaping the "frog in soldiers clothes" who went out to "drill" them, Kersands might have been following black folk tradition of describing a black trickster, like Brer Rabbit, who escapes from a threatening authority figure. In the version in which a slave's mistress goes bald, black audiences "could endorse its protest against whites' broken promises while they laughed at the idea of a bald white woman." Toll notes that Kersands used the verse about the bald mistress long after white minstrels discarded it. Still, black minstrel troupes shared an important appeal with their white counterparts in the postwar era. Both races emphasized their characters' links to the plantation; even as white performers in black-face mugged and shuffled for their audiences, black minstrel troupes advertised themselves as "genuine plantation darkies from the South" and used names like Slave Troupe, Georgia Slave Brothers, and Georgia Slave Troupe Minstrels.¹⁸ However, the difference in what black and white audiences heard at minstrel shows goes deeper than the obvious references to plantation life.

The most important reason that black audiences might have appreciated Billy Kersands's performance of "Old Aunt Jemima" is the fact that Kersands did not write the lyrics that inspired Chris Rutt, but instead, as many minstrel performers did, adapted them from a secular slave song, the work songs they sang as they sowed, planted, and carried bales. The songs helped break the tedium

and coordinate work as slaves sweated under the sun and followed orders shouted by the overseer. As Sterling Stuckey and Sterling Brown have shown—and Frederick Douglass reported in his study of slave songs—slaves often performed songs whose lyrics commented on the irony of their situation: “We raise de wheat, dey gib us de corn; We sift de meal; de gib us de huss; We peel de meat, dey gib us de skin; An dat’s de way dey take us in.” Sometimes the songs focused on the broken promise of emancipation by a master or mistress, as in this example offered by Stuckey:

My ole missus promise me
W’en she died, sh’d set me free,
She lived so long dat ’er head got bal’
An’ she give out’n de notion a-dyin’ at all.¹⁹

It really was a slave song, after all. The very words Billy Kersands adapted to one of his versions of “Old Aunt Jemima”—the version, according to Toll, he used in front of black audiences, the one white minstrels were less likely to perform—had been first performed by slaves. Students of American blackface minstrelsy are familiar with ironies such as this; white men in blackface were grotesquely lampooning blacks by singing authentic black songs, unaware of the authenticity underlying their counterfeit. Meanwhile, Billy Kersands, in the same type of bizarre theatrical setting, was passing on pieces of that culture to black audiences.

One important difference remains, of course, between white and black performers who played Aunt Jemima: the white men were not only cross-dressing but blacking up as well. Aunt Jemima for much of her early career was a white man. The knowledge that the black woman was really a white man was an integral part of the pageant. Eric Lott and Natalie Davis both have observed that white men dress as black women at peculiar moments in history—“ritual and festive inversions” that might be in resistance to changing times or in support of tradition, depending on circumstances, paradoxically mocking and mimicking a culture for their own ends. It might be difficult for some to read black resistance into the lyrics of “Old Aunt Jemima,” as Toll does. But it is also difficult to imagine the appeal of a white man, in drag and blackface, to an audience of his racial and gender peers without some reading between the lines. Lott speculates that the racial and sexual anarchy typified by the minstrel mammy allowed white

men to relive “the forgotten liberties of infancy—the belly and sucking of breasts, a wallowing in shit.” White male anxieties could be exorcised through a symbolic taking of a black female body.²⁰

One does not have to accept Lott’s complex interpretations of drag and blackface to recognize that the interplay between the white male Aunt Jemima and his/her audience was, like so much in the American minstrel theater, deeper than the “genuine Negro fun” that the posters for shows advertised. Drag and blackface lampooning also could have represented, for example, a safe way of expressing control over mothers, rather than wallowing in infancy. In any event, it is not too much of a stretch to imagine different singers delivering the song in different ways to different audiences in the decades after it was written; many different people performed it, bringing Aunt Jemima into minstrel halls in cities large and small across the United States. Eventually, of course, Aunt Jemima’s largest and most important audience would be white women, and her claim to be an authentic black woman—not a white actor—would be the key to her success.

So when Chris Rutt picked up on Aunt Jemima’s appeal—his blind coincidence, his moment of serendipity—he was merely awash in the popular culture of the time, when mammies were remembered fondly in novels and personal reminiscences and portrayed onstage. He did not invent this popular icon’s appeal; he only adopted as a trade name and image something that was readily evident in the public domain. To use a more contemporary example, think of the hundreds of products aimed at children in the 1990s that incorporated a drawing or picture of a dinosaur. “Dinomania,” as the biologist Stephen Jay Gould described the marketing phenomenon, had no logical explanation or starting point. It predated the release of the hit movie *Jurassic Park*, and the proliferation of dinosaur lunch boxes, bed sheets, and canned noodles can only be explained as a moment that numerous marketers, not acting in concert, accurately assessed the value of an existing interest that always had the potential for a craze.²¹ Aunt Jemima was ready for some marketer to exploit, particularly because of the need for distinctive, simple, and popular trademarks to accompany the advent of national brands. Chris Rutt showed up at the minstrel show, perhaps on a whim, perhaps not, but by the time he got there, Aunt Jemima had been waiting for years.

A more entertaining way of looking at Rutt’s “discovery” of Aunt Jemima might be to consider what else the pancake entrepreneur could have discovered

as his trademark, had he wandered into a different show on a different night. The possibilities certainly exist, since St. Joseph newspaper advertisements for 1889 show a wide-ranging number of available characters. The competing theaters offered up different minstrel shows in late summer and early autumn; on 26 August 1889 a Boston company performed an outdoor version of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* featuring the renowned Sam Lucas, the first black man to play the title role in a serious production.²² One might wish to argue that only by coincidence was the world spared "Uncle Tom's pancake mix" or "Little Eva pancake flour," but neither character lends itself to the product as obviously as Aunt Jemima in her kitchen. Most of the other acts Rutt could have seen in St. Joseph halls would have offered even less inspiration: the "Demon Man-Serpent" at the Dime Eden Musee, the "Semi-Human Acting Dog Trix" at the Grand Opera House, or "Spotted Ed, the Leopard Man," at the Musee.²³ None of these seems a likely candidate for immortality on the bag of ready-mix pancake batter.

By the fall of 1889, Chris Rutt seemed to have everything in place. The product was ready. The trademark's popular appeal was already demonstrated in the St. Joseph audience and in minstrel halls across the United States. One problem emerged in the months to come, however: Aunt Jemima pancake mix did not sell. It was not just bad luck that kept her from becoming a household name. Rutt and Underwood did not understand two further developments in the American economy that would become crucial to the product's eventual success: the evolution of marketing and distribution.

R. T. Davis Presents Aunt Jemima

Rutt and Underwood took the first two crucial steps in popularizing the Aunt Jemima brand, but they had no distribution network and little concept of the need to advertise a new product. By the end of 1889, they had no money, either. Rutt returned to writing editorials, and Underwood took a job with the R. T. Davis Milling Company, the largest flour miller in Buchanan County. Underwood's brother, Bert, registered the Aunt Jemima trademark and briefly attempted to market the mix himself. But in January 1890 the partners sold the company and recipe to Charles Underwood's new boss, R. T. Davis.²⁴

By 1890 Davis had been in the flour business for about fifty years. His products were on grocery shelves throughout the Missouri Valley, and he had the necessary capital to launch a new product. Davis also was experienced in the area

in which Rutt and Underwood were especially naive: the revolution in production and promotion of consumer goods that occurred during his years in the business, creating a mass market for consumer goods as the nation moved from rural to urban, production to consumption, and agricultural to industrial. Changes in law and technology in the 1880s and 1890s facilitated this process. From 1870, when Congress passed the first act protecting trademarks, to 1905, when trademark rights were affirmed to the point that they had no legal expiration date (unlike copyrights, for instance), the number of protected corporate names and emblems grew at a prodigious rate. Only about a hundred trademarks were registered with the federal government in 1870. By 1875, 1,138 were registered, 10,500 by 1906, and more than 50,000 by 1920. While the law protected the language that major firms used to communicate directly to consumers, advances in printing processes provided the means. Changes in printing costs and processes meant that publishers could depend on advertising instead of only literary content to make money, and a number of prominent magazines established in the 1880s—*Ladies' Home Journal*, *Cosmopolitan*, *McClure's*—set out to do so, directing content "toward the increasingly numerous and prosperous urban middle classes," who previously had shown little interest in literary monthlies. Changes in magazine content during the last decades of the nineteenth century created a demand for a new type of producer—the advertising agency. Before the 1890s advertising agents mostly brokered space, purchasing it from newspapers and magazines and selling it to manufacturers, who planned their own campaigns and wrote their own copy. In 1880 the Wanamaker clothing retail firm hired an agent to write its copy, and other large department stores began to adopt that approach. Likewise, producers of household products increasingly employed agents to write their copy, although in 1900 more than twenty-five hundred manufacturers still crafted their own ads. From the turn of the century to World War I, ad agencies were increasingly hired to promote new products.²⁵

What companies could propose to consumers through advertising changed during the last two decades of the nineteenth century. After 1880 the extension of railroads helped create regional markets for products that could be produced uniformly and in greater quantities through centralized manufacturing. Still, most products were unbranded, and wholesale distributors, not the more distant producer, dominated the process of selling and controlled the way products were marketed. Manufacturers like Davis, however, sought greater control over the

pricing and distribution of their products in order to assure maximum profit and predictability; "massive outputs demanded dependable markets." Firms such as Procter and Gamble worked to centralize the distribution process as well as manufacturing and thus took a greater stake in the promotion of their products, courting local merchants, creating in-store displays, and providing instructions on how the product should be used. New promotional strategies meant a new relationship had to be forged between the maker of a product and the person who eventually purchased it. Because the manufacturer's interest was not only in selling the product but in supporting a predictable price, the buyer needed to be convinced to accept no substitute for the manufacturer's product, and thus to distinguish among brand names.²⁶

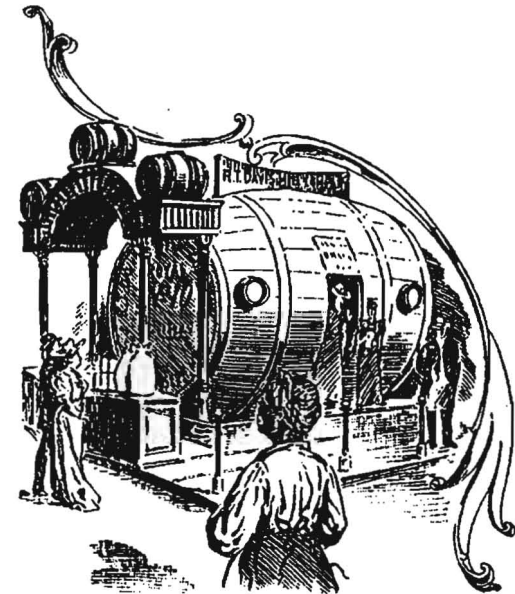
Davis put more than capital behind the Aunt Jemima brand; he brought a promotional strategy. He also possessed the insight to make three changes in Aunt Jemima. First, he added powdered milk to the mix, which meant that housewives needed only Aunt Jemima and water to make pancakes. Second, he added rice and corn sugar to improve the product's texture and flavor. The third change, however, was by far the most important: R. T. Davis decided to promote Aunt Jemima pancake mix by creating Aunt Jemima—in person. He mixed the mammy and the mass market, and the two have been inseparable since.

The image of Aunt Jemima as a legendary cook was the one upon which Davis attempted to capitalize in 1890 after buying the Pearl Milling Company, which he merged with the R. T. Davis Milling Company. He sent out requests to his large network of food brokers, asking them to keep an eye out for the personification of Aunt Jemima: a black woman with an outgoing personality, cooking skills, and the poise to demonstrate the pancake mix at fairs and festivals. In a time long before television and its myriad animated trademarks, Davis had decided to take product promotion a step further. His trademark not only would breathe and speak, but, in the tradition of traveling salesmen, its personality would sell the product, charming audiences into giving the mix a try.²⁷ This was a first, tentative step off the minstrel stage; Aunt Jemima needed to make personal appearances—live performances—before she gained a foothold in the world of trademarks. The purpose of a live appearance, however, was not to amuse with counterfeit of drag and blackface but to persuade with the presence of a "real" slave woman. As the trademark enabled producers to reach consumers directly—without the retail middleman's cracker barrel—the living trademark would enable Davis to talk to potential purchasers. A real living black woman,

instead of a white man in blackface and drag, would reinforce the product's authenticity and origin as the creation of a real ex-slave.

Charles Jackson, a food wholesaler, found the first Aunt Jemima. She was Nancy Green, a fifty-nine-year-old servant for a Chicago judge. Born into slavery on a Montgomery County, Kentucky, plantation, she enjoyed sharing stories of her childhood in slavery. Davis, certain he had found the living Aunt Jemima, signed Nancy Green to an exclusive contract to play the role of her life. Her debut came at the World's Columbian Exposition of May–November 1893 in Chicago, within a booth designed to look like a giant flour barrel (fig. 1). She greeted guests and cooked pancakes, all the while singing and telling stories of life on the plantation, some real, some apocryphal. Purd Wright, the librarian who had taste-tested the first batch of pancakes and now served as Davis's advertising manager, distributed a souvenir button he had designed. On it was the likeness of Aunt Jemima; below her smiling face was the caption "I'se in town, honey." Aunt Jemima's debut was a smashing success. Crowds jammed the exhibit, waiting for a glimpse of her, and "I'se in town, honey," became a catchphrase. Fair officials awarded the "pancake queen" a medal, and Davis claimed that merchants who had attended the fair placed more than fifty thousand orders for his pancake mix. But more importantly, the persona of Aunt Jemima had proved to sell a lot of pancakes. Green, whose more pleasant face had replaced the hideous mammy on Rutt's original logo, began participating in sales promotions across the country. Aunt Jemima herself could not be everywhere; the legend, however, could.²⁸

Purd Wright wrote the earliest version of Aunt Jemima's life story. Titled *The Life of Aunt Jemima, the Most Famous Colored Woman in the World*,



1. "Aunt Jemima at the World's Fair," *The Life of Aunt Jemima* (St. Joseph, Mo., 1895). (Courtesy of Burkett Collection, Hillsdale, Mich.)

the pamphlet blended fact and fiction—Nancy Green's slave stories with Wright's imagination—and served as the rough outline for more detailed stories in twentieth-century advertisements (fig. 2). Aunt Jemima was the loyal cook for Louisiana's Colonel Higbee, a prosperous planter on the Mississippi. Her pancakes were the envy of the region, but she would not share the secret recipe. During the Civil War, Union soldiers were threatening to rip Higbee's moustache off his face when Aunt Jemima interceded, offering the northerners pancakes, and the colonel was able to escape. According to the legend the northerners never forgot the taste of the most delicious pancakes in the world. After Higbee's death some of them persuaded Aunt Jemima to come upriver and share her secret with the world.²⁹ Themes that would dominate Aunt Jemima ads for years to come were introduced for the first time: Aunt Jemima rescues her owner or another man with pancakes; northerners discover a southern secret and return years later to bring it to the nation; Aunt Jemima demands to be paid in gold, not currency, for her recipe.

This is the essence of the myth that Davis used to promote the pancake mix until his death in 1900, a story maintained by the executives who followed him through one bankruptcy and a reorganization in 1903. Robert Clark, Davis's former general manager, assumed control of the company that year and renamed it Aunt Jemima Mills. He extended Aunt Jemima's visibility by

beginning a rag-doll coupon promotion in 1906. Eventually, Aunt Jemima gained a husband, Uncle Mose, and "two cunning pickaninnies," Diana and Wade—all available to those who sent in three boxtops and sixteen cents or four boxtops and a dime.³⁰

The rag-doll campaign, even in bad times, was a consistent success for the milling company, as Clark recalled in a 1925 company memo; the first year, Clark found to his surprise that the company needed to hire extra help to process all the "bushel baskets" of requests "for this delightful southern mammy that could be cuddled, dropped, thrown and sat upon, and would

still turn up, good as new. But it was impossible to deliver the dolls quickly enough." In late 1923 the company sought to measure interest in the rag-doll promotion and began offering consumers a choice: either six cents for a sample package of buckwheat flour, a sample package of regular flour, and a recipe folder, or, for thirty cents, all that plus the "jolly Aunt Jemima family" of rag dolls. When the responses to the ads in *Good Housekeeping*, the *Ladies' Home Journal*, and the *Chicago Tribune* were tallied, 3,309 had chosen the six-cent offer and 4,853 the thirty-cent offer. In December 1923 the company placed a series of ads across the country, offering the samples for free and the rag-doll family for an additional dime. The ten-cent offer received 6,692 responses, outdrawing the free offer's 3,716 replies. The advertising memo only noted that it was "interesting" that the free offer was less attractive than the rag-doll offer, and that "the amount of money enclosed with the coupons has exceeded the cost of the space used to advertise the offer. It seems quite probable that this could continue to pull for some time."³¹

The personal appearance of Aunt Jemima at the 1893 World's Fair set in motion a promotional approach that persisted throughout most of the twentieth century, as real-life Aunt Jemimas—the descendants of the white and black men who played her on the minstrel stage—made thousands of personal appearances. The myth of Aunt Jemima and its trappings—rag dolls, salt and pepper shakers, and cookie jars—continued as the company prospered under Clark and again struggled during World War I. The story of the black mammy's pancakes was maintained by the Quaker Oats Company, which bought Aunt Jemima Mills in 1925 and applied its considerable marketing resources. The legend even survived the death of the original Aunt Jemima, Nancy Green, who was struck by a car in 1923. Other women eventually became the national Aunt Jemima in different media, and dozens of women played Aunt Jemima in smaller promotions as the personal appearances continued throughout the first half of the century. Throughout their careers, as with Nancy Green, the differences among the women who played Aunt Jemima and the character herself, as well as her origins, tended to blur. For example, the 15 November 1923 issue of *Missouri Farmer*, under the headline "Aunt Jemima Is Gone," mentioned that Green had been struck by a car and then blended the facts of Green's life with the fiction of Aunt Jemima's. It said that the boys in the home of the Chicago judge where Nancy Green worked loved the pancakes made by the ex-slave from Kentucky, and her pancakes became famous throughout the neighborhood. "In due time,



2. Inside cover, *The Life of Aunt Jemima*.
(Courtesy of Burkett Collection)

a big St. Joseph mill heard about her, obtained her recipe and induced her to make pancakes at the Chicago World's Fair. . . . After the fair, the mill itself adopted her name and she was employed to go from one exposition to another to demonstrate her skill."³² Nancy Green, of course, adopted Aunt Jemima's name, not the other way around. The idea that Aunt Jemima was a real person—or that Nancy Green and Aunt Jemima were the same person—has lasted a long time and can even be found in recent accounts. For example, a Gannett News Service report in 1989 said: "Aunt Jemima was a bubbly person and fun to talk to. Born in Montgomery County, Ky., she moved to Chicago shortly after the turn of the century and cooked for a judge's family, where her specialty was—get ready—pancakes. Aunt Jemima became famous at the World's Fair in Chicago in 1893 where, legend has it, she flipped more than a million pancakes by the time the fair was over. In 1923, Aunt Jemima, 89, and jolly as ever, died in a car accident."³³

Nearly a hundred years after Davis's brainstorm at the Columbian Exposition, reporters still occasionally referred to Aunt Jemima as someone who actually lived, if not "the most famous colored woman in the world." R. T. Davis and Purd Wright built their legend to last. It was no coincidence that it did; rather, its lasting appeal reflects a century of hard work and a response to changes in marketing, advertising, popular culture, and technology.

But the legend would need caretakers during its long life—people with the vision to keep it alive and to expand upon it. Billy Kersands founded the character, based on the slave icon of southern reality and memory, and the dozens of black and white minstrels who performed the musical number kept her in the public eye. Chris Rutt capitalized on the image, and R. T. Davis understood how to use it. The people who really kept the image going, however, were those in the audience, the ones who applauded the original number, who responded to the mammy image in personal appearances. The aim of modern advertising, as it developed in the early twentieth century, was to give the audience what it wanted. And perhaps no one better understood that than the man who would do the most to shape the image of Aunt Jemima. James Webb Young was already a star adman by the time he met Aunt Jemima, but he would take that slave image, combine it with what he knew about the Old South and, more important, the contemporary market, and leave a permanent mark on American culture.