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The 'Shortage' of Bathroom Tissue: A Classic Study in Rumor

By **ANDREW H. MALCOLM**

Special to The New York Times

CHESTER, Pa., Feb. 2—"You know, we've got all sorts of shortages these days," Johnny Carson told his faithful late-night television audience. "But have you heard the latest? I'm not kidding. I saw it in the paper. There's a shortage of toilet paper."

Thus began, on the night of last Dec. 19, the second chapter in what may go down in history as one of the nation's

most unusual crises—The Toilet Paper Shortage — a phenomenon that saw millions of Americans strip every roll of bathroom tissue from thousands of grocery shelves.

It was a shortage full of humor, misunderstanding and fear. It was a shortage involving government officials, a TV personality, a well-meaning Wisconsin Congressman, eager reporters, industrial executives and ordinary consumers.

And it was a shortage that

need never have been. For the toilet paper shortage was a rumor run wild in a nation that has recently become geared to expect shortages in items considered absolute necessities.

Dozens of interviews seeking to reconstruct this latest shortage have uncovered what seems to be a developing "shortage psychology," almost an eagerness among many Americans to anticipate the next shortage. Such an attitude, brought on by shortages of gasoline, electric-

ity and, for a time, even onions, seems to assure no future shortage of shortage rumors.

Fears of a possible bathroom tissue shortage, which continue in some areas as the result of abnormal buying and hoarding, seem to have sprouted last November, when news agencies carried articles about a shortage in Japan.

Meanwhile, in Washington, Representative Harold V. Froehlich, a 41-year-old Republican from Wisconsin's heavily for-

ested Eighth District, was getting considerable complaints from his constituents of a shortage of pulp paper, allegedly caused by companies that increased paper exports to avoid Federal price controls.

On Nov. 16, Mr. Froehlich issued a news release that began, "The Government Printing Office is facing a serious shortage of paper." Like most other

Continued on Page 48, Column 4

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'Shortage' of Tissue: A Rumor Classic

Continued From First Page
of Second Section

news releases from such sources, it was virtually ignored.

Then Mr. Froehlich discovered that the Federal Government's National Buying Center had fallen 50 per cent short in obtaining bids to provide 182,050 boxes of toilet tissue a four-months' supply for the country's bureaucrats and soldiers.

On Dec. 11, a day no etched in the minds of Mr. Froehlich's staff, he issued another news release. It began:

"The United States may face a serious shortage of toilet paper within a few months. . . . We hope we don't have to ration toilet tissue. . . . A toilet paper shortage is no laughing matter. It is a problem that will touch every American."

"It got more attention than we ever dreamed of," one aide said of the release. The wire services picked it up. So did the television networks. Radio stations called to talk. German and Japanese correspondents lined up for interviews. In some reports, however, qualifying words like "potential" shortage somehow disappeared.

In Philadelphia, reporters called the headquarters of the Scott Paper Company, one of the nation's 10 largest paper manufacturers. Television crews then filmed supermarkets and toilet paper streaming from the machines in Scott's suburban plant here.

Company officers went on television to urge calm, saying there was no shortage if people bought normally.

Some consumers may have believed those remarks—until they saw other shoppers wheeling cases of toilet tissue from some stores or signs rationing each buyer to two rolls each. "There are so many credibility gaps today," said one paper executive, "and we fell into one."

Wire service reporters and broadcast newsmen passed the self-fulfilling shortage reports on to their readers and audiences, one of whom included Johnny Carson, a television talk show host whose nightly program is often geared to current events.

On Dec. 20, the day after his comments, the toilet-paper-buying binge began nationally.

In the Bronx, Jimmy Detrain, manager of the Food Cart Store on Lydig Avenue, watched customers check out with \$20 in toilet paper purchases.

"I heard about it on the news," said Mrs. Paul McCoy

of Houston, "so I bought extra 15 rolls."

In Seattle, one store owner ordered an extra 21 cases of toilet paper. When he received only three cases, he became worried and rationed his supply. That prompted more buying, even at increased prices.

When Mrs. Clare Clark Jenkintown, Pa., gave a party, guests asked what they could bring. "I told them toilet paper," she said.

Here in Chester, at Scott plant, the world's largest supply facility (capable of producing 7,500 miles of tissue every day), production continued full capacity.

Although paper industry officials say the Toilet Paper Shortage was hard to believe, Stuart Henderson Britt, a professor of marketing at Northwestern University, regards the shortage as a classic study in rumor.

"Everybody likes to be the first to know something," he said. "It's the 'did-you-hear-that' syndrome. In the old days a rumor took a long time to spread, enough time to let people discover its validity. Now all it takes is one TV personality to joke about it and instantly the rumor is in all states."

Professor Britt said the rumor had all the necessary elements. "It could affect everyone intimately," he said. "There was a Congressman, presumably an authority, talking about it. He says there could be a problem. The next person says there probably is a problem. The next person says there is a problem."

Mr. Britt expects the shortage rumor to die as soon as shoppers discover that tissue paper supplies have been replenished.

And things are returning to normal. Congressman Froehlich issued another release last week; it was largely ignored. At least one Chicago store is advertising that there is no shortage of record players, apparently hoping that this will prompt a run on record players. And Johnny Carson has apologized on his show.

"I don't want to be remembered as the man who created a false toilet paper scare," he said. "I just picked up the item from the paper and enlarged on it somewhat and made some jokes as to what they could do about it. There's no shortage."

More Shortages Feared

But even as they spread the word about the end of the toilet paper shortage, dozens of consumers are already expressing concern over other shortages.

Rumor in the supermarket aisles has it that there are new shortages in mustard, chile sauce, vegetable oil, cheese, catfood, salmon, birdseed, raisins, toilet seats and yellow tennis balls.

"Everyone agrees consumers created the toilet paper shortage," says Mrs. Kathy Pittenger of Paoli, Pa. "I wonder how many other shortages are created this way. You know, I can't stand to pass a gas station any more without filling up."



Production line at the Scott Paper Company plant in Chester, Pa.

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