The ‘Shortage’ of Bathroom Tissue: A Classic Study in Rumor

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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 Wisconsinite 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, electricity 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 forested 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

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of Houston, "so I bought extra 21 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. Clara Clark, a housewife in Jenkintown, Pa., gave a party four-months supply for 18 guests asked what they could do, she said, "I told them toilet paper.

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. ... A toilet paper shortage is not a laughing matter. It is a problem that will touch every American."

"It's our attention to what we ever dreamed of," one said of the release. The wire services picked it up. So did the television networks. Radio stations called to talk. German correspondents lined up for interviews. In son reports, however, qualiﬁed the "did-you-see-that" syndrome. In the day-to-day language of the newsroom, the rumor was on the wane. The "potential" shortage was discovered to be valid. No one took it seriously. Everyone said, "It's a rumour."

"It's a rumour." Wire service reporters and broadcast newsmen passed the self-fulﬁlling shortage reports on to their readers and audien ces, 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.

"I heard about it on the news," said Mrs. Paulette W. Cooper, one of Houston's 10 largest paper manufacturers. "I just picked up the item from the paper and enlarged 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, chili sauce, vegetable oil, cheese, cat food, salmon, birdseed, raisins, toilet seats and yellow tennis balls.

"Everyone agrees consumers created the toilet paper shortage," says Mrs. Kathy Fi ttenenger 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."

Professor Britt said the rumor had all the necessary elements. "It could affect everybody 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 supply papers 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 it somewhat and made some jokes as to what they could do about it. There's no shortage."

The New York Times

Published: February 3, 1974

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