

A RUDE WORD IN THE ALPHABET SOUP

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Horace Greerly looked at his spoon first in amazement, then in a mixture of disbelief and horror.

"Martha," he said finally. "There's a rude word in my alphabet soup."

"Yes, dear," said Martha absently, and proceeded to ladle out helpings for herself and the children.

"I shall have to write to the manufacturers," said Horace firmly. "You must be my witness that I found the word."

"What is the word, dear?" asked Martha, showing a flicker of interest for the first time.

"I could not possibly utter it in front of the children," said Horace decidedly. "Nor, of course, could I permit you to read it for yourself. You will just have to take my word for it."

"Then I can't be much of a witness, can I?" said Martha sweetly, and proceeded to butter the bread. This proved to be an unfortunate manoeuvre, for she bumped Horace's elbow, and the spoon he had been contemplating disappeared again under the level of soup in the bowl.

"Bother!" said Horace. "I was going to dry out the letters of the word and send it to the manufacturers as proof. Oh, well, I suppose I'll just have to fish it out again."

But, try as he might, Horace could not achieve the rude word again. He made CKQFRNZ, and TNMFUWA, and 8B55TFRH4, but he could not find the word he had originally seen.

"Dad," said Kevin, the youngest of the Greerly children, "the letters on my spoon spell S-N-O-T."

"That is an inelegant word, but not a rude word," ruled Mr. Greerly. "Nevertheless, I shall write to the company."

The next morning, Mr. Greerly switched on the dictaphone and composed a letter to the Paragon Soup Company:

Yesterday when partaking of your alphabet soup I was astounded to observe that the alphabet noodles in my spoon formed an objectionable word.

Naturally I cannot put the word down in print, but it was one of the more offensive four-letter words commonly referred to as Anglo-Saxon.

You will realise that being confronted with such a word was a great shock to me, and I received an even greater shock when I realized that the word could just as easily have been found by my wife or one of my young children. I trust you will take steps to ensure that your alphabet noodles do not in future form words which could offend the mature and corrupt and deprave the innocent.

Horace was very pleased with this letter, and waited anxiously for the reply. At last it came, an envelope with a Melbourne post-mark, containing a communication from Mr. R. Baluster, Public Relations Officer of the Paragon Soup Company:

We were sorry to hear that you were offended by a rude word in one of our alphabet soups - soups which nevertheless are renowned for their flavour and body. But, much as we appreciate your distress, you will, I think, agree that we cannot be held responsible for the accidental combinations of letters formed by the noodles in our alphabet soup. We take pride in the fact that each can of Paragon Alphabet Soup contains all twenty-six letters of the alphabet, as well as ten numerals, each repeated many times over. The number of words that may be formed is very large, and it is quite possible that offensive words, as well as innocuous ones, may be formed; but I do not see what we could do about it.

Please accept once again our assurance of regret that you have been offended. We enclose a voucher which is exchangeable for a complimentary can of Paragon Alphabet Soup at your local retail outlet.

Horace Greerly was not satisfied. They must be able to do something, he felt. That evening he sat alone in the house with the letter-tiles from a Scrabble set, and would not let his wife or children near him to see what he was doing. The next day he was able, triumphantly, to dictate the following letter:

Thank you for your letter of 15th May, in response to my letter of complaint that I had found an offensive word in a can of Paragon Alphabet Soup.

I am unconvinced by your statement that you are not in a position to prevent such incidents recurring in the future. I have established, by careful calculation, that by omitting the letters C, I, and T from the alphabet, it is impossible to form any of the Anglo-Saxon words to which objection is normally taken.

It would be a simple matter to eliminate these letters from future cans of Paragon Alphabet Soup, and thereby avoid giving offence to any section of the community.

Thank you for the complimentary voucher. I shall continue to purchase Paragon Soups, if I have your assurance that the offensive letters will be deleted; but without such assurance I shall be forced to take my custom elsewhere.

That's telling them, thought Horace.

This time, Mr. R. Baluster's answer was a little longer in com-

ing, and when it did Mr. Greerly read it with great interest:

* Your letter has greatly disrupted our work routine at the Paragon Soup Factory. All of our staff have been trying out combinations of letters at every possible opportunity, and we have lost about two days' production.

It is true that by eliminating the letters C, I, and T, one avoids almost all the possible offensive words in the English language. However, our Managing Director has pointed out that there is a four-letter word meaning 'buttocks', beginning with the letter A, and a five-letter word, meaning 'testicles', that begins with the letter B. To eliminate these words it becomes necessary to remove either A or S from the alphabet noodles in Paragon Alphabet Soup.

We were preparing to go into production, omitting the letters C, I, T, and A, when one of our celery-shredders pointed out that there was a large immigrant population in Australia, and that we could not therefore consider the English language only. The letters already eliminated will also suffice for Italian, as we established through considerable research, but to avoid giving offence to Hungarians it is necessary to omit also the letters F, G, and Z. For German, one must also leave out the letter R, and for French, the letter E. No further deletions are required for Turkish, Polish, Czech, or Serbo-Croat.

We have decided that the above languages are those most significant, in Australian conditions. There seems little point in catering to those who, like Greeks, Lebanese, and Russians, do not use the Roman alphabet. It is possible that the letters we retain may give offence to Eskimos, but we feel the possibility is remote. In any case, we do not have an Eskimo on our staff to teach us the potentially offensive words in that language.

We are therefore about to go into production of our Paragon Super-Refined Alphabet Soup, with the reduced alphabet as outlined above. We enclose a complimentary voucher, which within a few weeks you will be able to exchange at your local retail outlet for a can of our new Super-Refined Alphabet Soup, totally guaranteeing to give no offence.

Mr. Greerly did not quite know how to reply, so he left the letter on his desk for a few days. Before he got round to answering it, there came another letter from the Paragon Soup Company, this time marked Special Delivery. Mr. Greerly read it with mounting indignation:

Contrary to any statements we may have made in our previous letter, we have discovered that it is not practical for us to market Paragon Alphabet Soup with the omission of the letters A, C, E, F, G, I, R, T, and Z.

Our Legal Department advise that, under the Trade Practices Act, we could no longer advertise our soup as Alphabet Soup, but would have to call it Letter Soup, or something of that nature. This would involve changing our entire packaging and labelling, and

would necessitate a new and expensive advertising campaign, which our directors feel is at this stage unjustified.

Furthermore, one of our workers, who is responsible for making the stencils for the letter A in our noodle-cutting machine, has threatened to take the whole noodle section out on strike if the letter A is omitted. Other stencil-makers have indicated that they would share the same attitude about the omission of other letters.

In addition, the possibility of encoding messages means that, in order to be absolutely sure of giving no offence, we would have to omit the entire alphabet. Even the numbers are not safe; a sequence such as 9897659743 could stand for a very rude word indeed.

We therefore propose to go on making Paragon Alphabet soup to the same exacting taste and alphabet formula that has made it justly famous in the past. We trust that you will continue to enjoy our product, and that you will not again be offended by any of its contents. However, if you are offended, may I say that, as far as the management and staff of Paragon Soups are concerned, you can go and get ----

Mr. Greerly read no further. Whitefaced, he crumpled the letter into the wastebbin, making sure that the numbers that represented the last offensive word were not visible. That evening, he took from his cupboard two unopened cans of Paragon Alphabet Soup.

"Martha," he said, "would you mind taking these cans to the supermarket tomorrow, and exchanging them for two cans of Excel-sior Alphabet Soup?"

And that, as far as Mr. Greerly was concerned, was the end of the matter.

A PHONIC DICTIONARY

Word City (Pilot Light, Stone Mountain, Georgia, 1982) is a 352-page paperback compiled by Marvin Morrison, containing approximately 50,000 words arranged phonetically - that is, by their consonantal sounds: By, eaCH, Day, iF, Go, He, HW:why, Joy, K:cow, KS:ox, KW:equal, alL, May, iN, NGK:ink, Pie, aiR, S:ice, SHow, Toy, THin, V:of, We, You, Z:is, ZH:vision. Thus, under the entry KSH can be found the words acacia, cache, cachet, cachou, cash, cashew, cosh, cushy, kasha and quiche, and under WRD is award, ward, weird, weirdie, weirdo, word and wordy. It can be purchased for \$5.45 (one copy) or \$11.95 (three copies) from Pilot Light, PO Box 305, Stone Mountain GA 30086. The editors will pay \$1 apiece for "useful words or expressions" not in *Word City* or the dictionary, if accompanied by pronunciation, definition, and an estimate of the location of and number of people that use the word.