

States of the Union

COUNTERING THE COMMERCIALS

BY RICHARD J. MARGOLIS

*There was a young man from Moline
who was paid to drink pop on the
screen;*

*but the chemicals soon
began to balloon,
and he floated back home to Moline.*

I HAVE been writing limericks of late for Robert B. Choate, that estimable gentleman who a few years ago waged a one-man crusade against hunger. More recently, in testimony before several Senate subcommittees, and amid anguished howls from the food industry, he has pointed a finger at many breakfast cereals, snacks, juices, and soft drinks, charging that they are nutritional ciphers, chock-full of "empty calories."

Choate is now chairman of an organization he helped to create—the Council on Children, Media and Merchandising—one of whose aims is to rescue youngsters from the brain-bondage of television advertising. He envisions a series of "countercommercials" to encourage a protective skepticism among young TV viewers. Hence the limericks.

The evolution of Choate's thinking represents a capsule history of

recent consumer-advocate struggles and frustrations. His attack on hunger among the poor met widespread incredulity in the mid-'60s ("Nobody starves in America!"). Yet ultimately both the Congress and the White House were compelled to accept the unpleasant news that thousands of poverty-stricken children were subsisting on near-starvation diets—a major victory for Choate and his cohorts but by no means an end to the fight.

Government investigators discovered that the poor were not the only victims. For example, Dr. Arnold Schaefer, Nutrition Program Chief for the U.S. Public Health Service, told a Senate committee in 1969 that malnutrition "occurs in an unexpectedly large proportion of our sample population." He singled out expectant mothers, infants and teenagers as persons frequently deprived of sufficient proteins, vitamins and minerals.

After sampling 7,500 households, the Department of Agriculture reported that one in every five American families was the victim of a nutritionally deficient diet. "The American diet has deteriorated in

the past decade," noted Nader's Raiders in *The Chemical Feast* (1969). They went on to quote the results of a three-year study conducted by the *Journal of American Nutrition Education*: "Nutrient inadequacies . . . reach into all income groups and all regions. . . ."

Brandishing the evidence, Choate and other activists sought redress from the Food and Drug Administration (FDA), a Federal agency that had supposedly been protecting consumers ever since Congress passed the Pure Food Act in 1906. But the FDA was not worried about malnutrition. "The normal American diet," declared a typical FDA "consumer-aid" booklet, "includes such a variety of foods that most persons can hardly fail to have an ample supply of the essential food constituents." That, of course, was precisely the view of the food industry the FDA was allegedly regulating. (In September 1970, after heavy pressure from reformers, the FDA hired the National Academy of Sciences to develop a set of *voluntary* nutritional guidelines for certain products, including TV dinners, snacks and other prepared foods.)

It wasn't just the empty calories that worried Choate, but the sugar, chemicals and various additives as well. How harmful were they? What was the FDA doing about them? In 1958 the agency had published its notorious GRAS list naming more than 500 chemicals that it insisted were Generally Regarded As Safe. To this day few of these substances have been thoroughly tested; some, like cyclamates, have proved to be far from harmless. In 1970, however, an agency official announced that "the GRAS list is up for grabs"—

dence suggesting that presweetened Kool-Aid caused tooth decay. But the university had conducted its tests under contract with General Foods, the producer of Kool-Aid, and was unwilling to release the results. "I'd hate to think what General Foods would do if we got out of line," the research director told me. "I've got 30-40 mouths to feed in my [research] group and I'm not going to do anything that would endanger them."

We then turned to the FDA, which had been monitoring the ex-

that seem to mesmerize millions of youngsters. "As one looks at advertising aimed at children today," observed Choate, "one has to admit there is an imbalance, a marshaling of forces on the side of the sponsors, the producers, the filmmakers and the jingle writers, that no 5-to-11-year-old can match." Perhaps three-fourths of the commercials directed at children promote food products. "The mass impact of these ads," says Choate, "is: 'Kids! Eat junk!'"

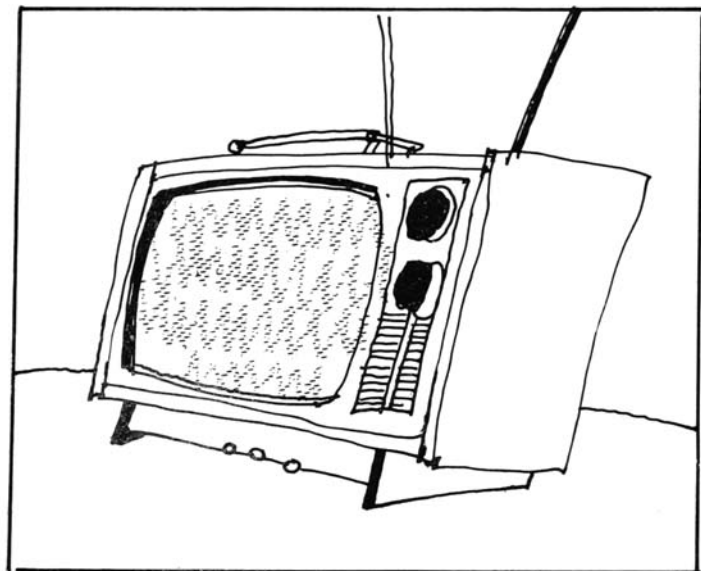
Choate hopes to counterattack through "compensatory spots" designed for children and their parents. The limericks are only one of many ideas he is considering. Whatever devices are chosen, my own view is that the countercommercials ought to attack more than malnutrition; they should challenge our national tendency to accept without serious question everything shown on the tube, not to mention our masochistic capacity for watching it. Here are a few limerical suggestions:

*There was an announcer who doubted
his viewers would buy what he touted;
if he couldn't persuade
he wouldn't be paid,
so he shouted and shouted and shouted.*

*A couple who lived in Hoboken
discovered their TV was broken;
after they fainted
they got reacquainted—
'twas the first time in years they had spoken.*

*There was a wise fellow from Stowe
who exchanged his TV for some snow.
'I'd much rather ski,"
he said with some glee,
'than watch those commercials they show."*

If you have any countercommercial notions of your own, send them to Robert Choate, 1346 Connecticut Avenue, N.W., Washington, D. C. They don't have to rhyme.



meaning that the FDA was finally willing to investigate which chemicals were safe and which were not.

*A lion I knew from the East
got breakfast confused with a feast.*

*He sprinkled his meats
with gallons of sweets—
now he's a toothless King of the Beasts.*

Choate also kept nagging the FDA to take action against the many presweetened drinks appearing on supermarket shelves. He and I discovered that a research team at Indiana University possessed evi-

periment from the start and had all the information in its files. The agency took the position that the findings contained possible trade secrets and therefore could not be made public. "Sealed in concrete" was an FDA official's response to our request that the files be opened.

GIVEN THE FDA's strange indifference to consumer protection, it was only a matter of time before Choate and others began seeking additional pressure points. They chose television and its advertisers, particularly the sponsors of those Saturday morning cartoons