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Yankee Doodling

BY JOHN THORN

In the years before the Revolution made it America's patriotic anthem, "Yankee Doodle" was a song of derision that the British heaped upon ignorant colonists hoping to attain foppish stature by aping English gentlemen. The first verse and refrain, as generally sung by children today, run thus:

Yankee Doodle went to town,
A-riding on a pony.
He stuck a feather in his hat
And called it macaroni.
Yankee Doodle, keep it up,
Yankee Doodle dandy.
Yankee Doodle round the world,
As sweet as sugar candy.

This seems a mild enough if not fully fathomable jest—hardly a slander. How then to account for the eponymous hero's enduring power as a figure of fun? What precisely was a Yankee, or a Doodle, or most intriguingly, a macaroni?

Some savants trace the history of "Yankee Doodle" back to a harvesting song of fifteenth-century Holland, "Yanker dudle doodle down," sung by laborers who were paid with a tenth of the grain and all the buttermilk they could drink. Others find echoes of the melody in the equally old English rhyme "Lucy Locket" ("Lucy Locket lost her pocket, / Kitty Fisher found it; / Nothing in it, nothing in it, / But the binding round it"). In the days of Oliver Cromwell, one of the nicknames that the Cavaliers bestowed upon the Puritans was "Nankee Doodle." An Albany-area tradition attributes a 1758 incarnation of "Yankee Doodle" to Dr. Richard Shuckburgh, a British army surgeon, wit, and musician who is said to have written it at Fort Crailo to mock the ragtag New England militia serving alongside the redcoats.

No matter; the essence is that it is a song of insult. The Yankee—as Captain Yankey (the Dutch pirate), or Jan Kees (the Dutch for John Cheese), or Cooper's Algonquian Yengeese, or Irving's fanciful yanokies—was a strong, silent sharpster who was after your money. A doodle was simply a fool, and so we may fairly term Yankee Doodle a sophomore, a wise fool.

Although earlier clues abound, we need look back no farther than 1775, when after the battle of Bunker Hill, the Continental army, under General Washington's command, was encamped in the vicinity of Boston. The Tories were then singing to the old tune of "Lucy Locket" these lines:

Yankee Doodle came to town
For to buy a firelock;
We will tar and feather him,
And so we will John Hancock.

Thomas Ditson, of Billerica, Massachusetts, was the one actually tarred and feathered for attempting to buy a musket in Boston in March 1775. The Battle of Bunker Hill in June turned the tables, however, as "Yankee Doodle" came to be sung by the patriots. The complete Americanization of the song ensued as Harvard student Edward Bangs penned the following during George Washington's presence at the provincial camp in Cambridge in 1775:

Father and I went down to camp,
Along with Captain Gooding,
And there we seed the men and boys
As thick as hasty pudding.
Yankee Doodle, keep it up,
Yankee Doodle Dandy;
Mind the music and the step,
And with the girls be handy.

Following General Burgoyne's surrender of British troops to the Continental Army on October 17, 1777, British officer Thomas Anburey wrote:

The name [of Yankee] has been more prevalent since the commencement of hostilities. . . . The soldiers at Boston used it as a term of reproach, but after the affair at Bunker's Hill, the Americans gloried in it. "Yankee Doodle" is now their paeon, a favorite of favorites, played in their army, esteemed as warlike as the "Grenadier's March"—it is the lover's spell, the nurse's lullaby . . . it was not a little mortifying to hear them play this tune, when their army marched down to our surrender.

Although musicologists have not found an eighteenth-century version of "Yankee Doodle" with the immortal line "He stuck a feather in his

hat and called it macaroni," that jibe may well have originated about the time of the Macaroni Club, established in London in the 1760s by men of polymorphous sexuality. By 1772 the macaroni was a national infatuation, even spawning the *Macaroni and Theatrical Magazine*. According to contemporary Thomas Wright:

The macaronis were distinguished especially by an immense knot of artificial hair behind, by a very small cock-hat, by an enormous walking-stick, with long tassels, and by jacket, waistcoat, and breeches of very close cut. . . . Macaronis were the most attractive objects in the ball, or at the theatre. Macaronis abounded everywhere.

Named for the vermicelli-based pasta enjoyed by cultivated young Englishmen of the 1760s on their tours of Italy—thought by the English to be a particular den of perversion, even more so than France or Spain—the macaroni embodied the consumption of continental fare in intellectual and moral spheres, as well. Old-fashioned Englishmen came to identify macaroni culture with all that was outlandish and effeminate.

Between yesterday's macaroni and today's metrosexual there may not be much to choose. In a 1994 article in the *Independent* titled "Here Come the Mirror Men," Mark Simpson coined the term.

Metrosexual man: the single young man with a high disposable income, living or working in the city (because that's where all the best shops are), is perhaps the most promising consumer market of the decade. In the Eighties he was only to be found inside fashion magazines such as *GQ*, in television advertisements for Levis jeans or in gay bars. In the Nineties, he's everywhere and he's going shopping.

Yankee Doodle Dandy indeed. ▼

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