Inside the Classroom (And Out)

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Published by University of North Texas Press

Untiedt, Kenneth L.
Inside the Classroom (And Out): How We Learn through Folklore.
Project MUSE. muse.jhu.edu/book/7372.

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The Faultless Starch Library

by Ellisene Davis
An unusual collection of thirty-six little booklets called *The Faultless Starch Library* records an interesting era of history in a very different mode. Created in the early 1900s to advertise Faultless Starch, the contents of the library and the story of its creator give an interesting picture of “the folk” at the turn of the century in a unique and interesting manner.

Located in the “west bottoms” of Kansas City, Missouri, near the point where the Kansas River flows into the Missouri River, the Faultless Starch Company still produces starch for Americans. The company lost vital information about their history in two well-remembered floods in June 1903 and July 1951. Although the company still retains three complete sets of the original booklets, the flood destroyed the records of the creators of *The Faultless Starch Library*.¹

There is one clue to the past that time and the flood did not erase. Although none of the booklets carried his name, the company believes that D. Arthur Brown wrote the text. Who was this man? Certainly a large part of the character of D. Arthur Brown can be seen in the spirit of the light-hearted little booklets. An intense search in Kansas City revealed new answers—a testimony to the immortality of a very special printer.²

The Faultless Starch Company distributed starch in early 1900 to many rural homes. A peddler made his rounds with his horse

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¹ The Faultless Starch.

² The original Faultless Starch.
and wagon. To each ten cent box of starch, the distributor banded a booklet. Oftentimes, the mercantile store kept a supply of the booklets. On Saturday trips to the general store to get supplies—a two hour trip by wagon—my family collected and stored away in an old trunk a complete set of *The Faultless Starch Library*. Many poor and isolated families made the trips to town no more than once a week. Sometimes, circumstances delayed travel for as long as three weeks. The infrequent trips for supplies made collecting the booklets difficult, and children considered the starch advertisements a very special prize. Distributed first in Texas, the booklets became a text for some parents who used the library to teach their children to read.³

Children in the cities as well as in the country collected and traded the booklets as a pastime. In the thirties, the Faultless Starch Company distributed the booklets wrapped in a pad and placed on top of the cartons in the corrugated cases before the workers sealed the boxes. When the retailer opened the case to stock his shelves, he would keep the booklets “under the counter” for the children of his customers or rubber band one booklet to each individual package. Random distribution led to a lively trading market among the kids.⁴

The mystery of the man who created the advertising copy for Faultless Starch nettled my curiosity. I knew the man loved jokes, life, parlor games, the Bible, and children. A query to the Kansas City library revealed a newspaper obituary dated December 20, 1944. “D. Arthur Brown, president of the Charles E. Brown Printing company, died today at St. Petersburg Florida. Mr. Brown, 74 years old, formerly was a Baptist minister and was a leader for many years at the First Baptist Church. He learned the printing trade as a youth in Missouri and worked on newspapers at Kidder, Plattsburg, and Lathrop before attending William Jewell College. There he studied for the ministry, and became pastor of the First Baptist Church at Salt Lake City. . . . As an early member of the Old Advertising Club, Mr. Brown was among the first in Kansas City to emphasize the value of church
advertising. For many years he was on the executive committee of the Graphic Arts Association.”

The Faultless Starch Company hired D. Arthur Brown to advertise starch. Merchandisers wanted to make the product more appealing. Charles Brown believes his father wrote the booklets as an extra to get the printing. Because D. Arthur Brown understood the mind of “the folk” and possessed an incredible optimism, he began a very successful campaign.

Collecting *The Faultless Starch Library* can be an interesting hobby for the folklorist. The original printing of the books carried the word “Beaham’s” above the Faultless trademark. In the thirties, the starch company reprinted the booklets, and reproductions did not have the word Beaham’s written above the trademark.

An examination of *The Faultless Starch Library* reveals that D. Arthur Brown felt an appreciation and understanding of how much “Ordinary People” needed laughter and goodness in their lives. Arthur wrote that for *Elisa May* ironin’ day is just “the worst, it’s worser lots ‘n th’ day before.” Don’t sass Elisa on that day. Of course ironin’ day is just like play. “Since she buys this Faultless Starch, ironin’s as gay as a circus march.” Arthur Brown tucked in the pages of *The Tuttles Fourth of July* games and the “Secret of

Several titles from the Faultless Starch Library, including *Elisa May*, *Little Jack*, and *Honey*. 
Success” (A Comical Travesty). “‘Push,’ said the Button; ‘Take pains,’ said the window; ‘Be up to date,’ said the calendar; ‘Make light of everything,’ said the Fire. . . . And naturally, ‘Find a good thing and stick to it,’ Faultless Starch.”9 Sallie Short and Lillie Long share the secret of all success in the home—Faultless Starch.10 Old Uncle Ritts and the children went to sea only to be shipwrecked, but they floated home on boxes of starch. Their mother told them wisely—“And not only has Faultless Starch saved your life, but that of your mamma also. If through these years I’d ironed with other starch, I’d been buried long ago.”11

Old Granny Grak gave the children some gladsome games, some jokes, some rhymes, and a box of Faultless Starch filled with gold.12 You know it’s worth its weight in gold. Proud Tommy Tilt has a silk hat that shines with starch.13 Bin and Bun drank the starch and became so stiff they fell off their bicycles.14 The Four Little Sunbonnets,15 Little Jack,16 Mildred and Rosa,17 Honey,18 and Gentle Jane have warm jokes, stories, interesting facts, Bible facts, trivia—enough to play Trivial Pursuit. And what is the eighth wonder of the world?—That everybody doesn’t use Faultless Starch.19

His greatest tribute to this eclectic of “Ordinary People” is a clever section of curious epitaphs.

**LINES ON A MAN NAMED OWEN MOORE**

Owen, Moore has run away,  
Owin’ more than he could pay.

And another . . .

Sad was her fate, she met it thus—  
She was run over by a bus.

And last . . .
LINES ON AN EDITOR

Here lies an editor,
Snooks, if you will!
In mercy, kind Providence,
Let him lie still.
He lied for his living, so
He lived while he lied,
When he could not lie longer,
He lied down and died.²⁰

Arthur Brown recognized the importance of the ABCs for children, and he created his own poems to illustrate the alphabet. “D is for Dog, a fine, handsome fellow. He’s a big St. Bernard, and is all white and yellow.” If he managed a commercial, all the better: “F is for Faultless Starch, the very best. No ironer without it, In comfort can rest.” And always he gave the children conundrums! “Do you know why a proud woman is like a music box? She is full of airs.”²¹

Arthur Brown borrowed from the favorite tales of children, giving them a twist in the tradition of folktales—the storyteller feeling free to add his own interpretation. The Owl and the Pussy Cat went to sea in a beautiful pea green boat. “Oh Pussy,

The ABC Book.
oh Pussy, oh Pussy my love, Do you use Faultless Starch for your hair?” He added the fun of character reading in handwriting for all the hopeful fortune tellers. There are peculiar abbreviations and a little nonsense for gaiety.22 Little Red Riding Hood, all done up with Faultless Starch, completely charms the wolf from his evil ways.23 And who would need Faultless Starch more desperately than Three Naughty Kittens, who must wash their mittens?24 How could anyone dare to consider “the washing—a dreadful sight, That looked as though it had suffered blight, Before it was starched with the kind of starch they used in The House That Jack Built?”25 You’ll never guess that brand. Mother Goose danced across the pages of the booklets in like style: “There was an old woman, who lived in a shoe. She had so many children, she didn’t know what to do; So she starched all their dresses with Faultless so fine, And sent them to walk, for a long, long, time.”26
Arthur Brown understood that fantasy entertained children as well as aroused their curiosity. He portrayed the job of ironing as enchanting and fun because work enriches life. “Once on a time I went to sea, In a sieve with a sail of silk,” which could only happen in *Upside Down Land*. There are starch ghosts, little frogs, mice, monkeys, bears, ants, and grasshoppers who find life much richer because they use Faultless Starch. He never forgets to add some sobering facts, such as one penny saved each day for fifty years at six percent interest will yield $950.00. And he speculated about how love would be for his grandchildren:

**HOW IT WILL BE IN 1950**

The coatless man puts a careless arm
’Round the waist of a hatless girl,
As over the dustless and mudless roads
In a horseless carriage they whirl—
Like a leadless bullet with a hammerless gun,
By smokeless power driven,
They fly to taste the speechless joy
By endless union given.
Though the only lunch his coinless purse
Affords them the means
Is a tasteless meal of boneless cod
With a “side” of stringless beans.
He puffs a tobaccoless cigarette
And laughs a mirthless laugh
When papa tries to coax her back
By wireless telegraph.

Arthur Brown added fairy tales to his collection, knowing that everyone needs a pocketful of magic. Arthur told the story of *The Prince’s Bride*, a Cinderella tale. Kelp, a fairy, found a magic potion—Faultless Starch—for a tired old dress that the bride wore to the ball. *A Trip to the Moon* reveals what everyone knows to be
true: fairies wash the moon with Faultless Starch and that is why it is white. Fathers were always remembered in the booklets in fanciful ways. “Breathes there a man with soul so dead that never to himself hath said. Faultless Starch my wife shall have.”

Arthur Brown did not forget the ethnic groups. In the tradition of one little, two little, three little Indians, Arthur subtracts pickaninnies for a lesson in math. The final line reads, “One little pickaninny, when with Faultless Starch she’s done, Finds she’s turned all over white, and so there are none. Hans and Gretel are Dutch, and Arthur remembers The Indians. The Chinese are not forgotten. He spins a tale of love with its painful moments of competition, even suicide. Of course, there is a happy ending because of Faultless Starch. “Chin-chin married Chow, and they did live a long and happy life, upon the shelf behind the vase—Chin-chin and Chow, his wife.”

The Kansas City Historical Association sent a family record that listed D. Arthur Brown’s children—four boys and a girl. Fortunately, I found a son listed in the Kansas City general information. The telephone call to Albert Brown became the first of many warm conversations with the Brown family, all living. The sons of D. Arthur Brown added a new dimension to the story of The Faultless Starch Library.

Art Brown worked in the Charles E. Brown Printing Company when the firm printed The Faultless Starch Library. He remembers
that the old engraving house, Teachenor-Bartberger, drafted the artwork. Located in the same plant as the Charles E. Brown Company (701 Central Street, Kansas City, Mo.), the engravers created the covers of the booklets by making half-tone engravings. First, the engraver made a photographic negative of the copy. Constructed of two glass plates cemented together, the half-tone screen is placed between the film and the lens. One is ruled with vertical lines, the other ruled with horizontal lines. Together they form a mesh of tiny squares. An arc lamp floods the copy with light. Dark areas on the copy absorb most of the light. Bright areas absorb little light. As it goes through the screen, the light is broken by tiny lines of the screen into thousands of separate beams “burning” tiny dots into the emulsion of the film. The negative is printed on a sensitized plate made of copper. Then, the plate is etched in much the same way as a line engraving. The dots transfer ink to the paper, blending in the viewer’s eye to re-form tones of the original picture.

Art explained that the Charles E. Brown Printing Company printed the interior of the starch booklets and set the type by hand. Employees printed the pages in sheets and saddle stitched them with a Christensen machine, then used a power cutter to slice two hundred books per stroke. A child gained prestige in his neighborhood if he could own the booklets and a Sunkist orange spoon, both considered waste advertising.³⁶

The eldest son, William R. Brown, joined the Charles E. Brown Printing Company first and handled the selling on the outside. After Arthur Brown died, William became president of the firm. When asked to comment about what he remembered most about his father, he said, “My father was a montage of many good things. He was a whole hearted, happy spirited individual—optimistic, attuned to others’ problems. There were jovial times around the table. We were happy. Once a man asked dad why he had so many children. Dad answered, ‘Which one of them would you have me do without?’”³⁷

Charles Brown, the youngest son, became a writer and publicist. He remembers his father as, “Basically, very even tempered,
very affectionate, thoughtful, a considerable character. This generation would say he was an authoritarian. Understanding what motivated people enhanced his ability to be a good businessman and a money-maker. He possessed honesty and integrity—a man of probity.”

Al Brown remembered that some of the ideas for the stories of the booklets came from family members. His sister, Rebecca, was the little girl who lost her hat. The family saw Rebecca’s hat on a lake where the children played and believed “Becky” had drowned. Fortunately, she made her way home safely. Merwin Brown, son of Charles E. Brown who founded the printing company, posed for the picture of Little Jack, a cover with the photograph of a very important little boy with his feet propped on a desk.

I treasure the thirty-six booklets found in my grandfather’s trunk. The booklets gave me a very unique and special touch with the past. I encountered relationships with new and interesting people. Most important of all, the booklets gave me laughter—rich flowing, healing laughter. D. Arthur Brown’s work demanded that I know him. The acquaintance with his story reveals that his children and readers remember him with warmth and affection.

Endnotes

1. Faultless Starch/Bon Ami Company, 1025 West Street, Kansas City, Missouri 64101, correspondence.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid.
5. Kansas City Star, [Kansas City, Missouri], December 20, 1944.
7. Faultless Starch/Bon Ami Company, correspondence.


20. ———. *Mildred and Rosa*.


35. Biographical Data of Kansas Citizens, Citizens Historical Association, Public Library, Kansas City, Missouri.
36. Brown, Art N. 12630 Crystal Lake Dr., Sun City, West, Arizona 85375.
School Days

School days, school days
Dear old golden-rule days!
Reading and writing and ’rithmetic,
Taught to the tune of a hick’ry stick.

You were my bashful barefoot beau,
I was your queen in calico.
Oh, for those days, I loved them so,
When we were a couple of kids!