

## From faith to food: using oral history to study corporate mythology in Canadian manufacturing firms

by Janis Thiessen

**Abstract:** The study of corporate mythology, particularly through oral history, has received increasing attention from business historians. The role of corporate mythology is examined at two Canadian manufacturing companies: Loewen (a wooden window manufacturer in Steinbach, Manitoba) and WT Hawkins (makers of Cheezies, a cheese-flavoured snack made from extruded corn). Oral histories and Roland Barthes' writings on mythology are used to study an advertising campaign at Loewen, while corporate records and oral histories are used to explore Hawkins' corporate mythology. The author concludes that corporate mythology succeeded at Hawkins but failed at Loewen: Hawkins built a following for a single product made using outdated equipment, while Loewen reduced its workforce and was sold to a foreign holding company.

**Key words:** business history, mythology, Hawkins Cheezies, Loewen windows, advertising

Over the past fifteen years, I have conducted oral history interviews at a number of privately-owned manufacturing firms in Canada. My recent book, *Manufacturing Mennonites: Work and Religion in Postwar Manitoba*,<sup>1</sup> examines the ways in which such oral histories reveal the connections between corporate mythology and the religious beliefs of many of the owners, managers and workers at three Mennonite-owned manufacturers: Friesens (Canada's largest full-colour printing firm), Palliser (one of Canada's largest furniture manufacturers) and Loewen (Canada's largest wooden window manufacturer).<sup>2</sup> My current research uses oral histories to examine the production, marketing and consumption of Canadian snack foods such as Cheezies (extruded corn meal collettes which are fried and coated with cheese powder).<sup>3</sup> These two categories of businesses manufacture radi-

cally different products and responded differently to my requests for research access. Their creation and use of corporate mythology also differed in some interesting ways.

Loewen was founded by Mennonites in Steinbach, Manitoba in 1905, and their workforce remains primarily Mennonite. Mennonites are a pacifist Protestant sect with origins in sixteenth century northern Europe. Management at Loewen was keen to participate in an oral history research project, in part because the company's president had an interest in pursuing graduate studies in history. Another factor was that the Mennonite community itself cultivates a strong sense of its own history. As well, North American Mennonites have a history of suspicion of the ethics of business,<sup>4</sup> and so the oral history project was an opportunity for Loewen management and owners to explain themselves to their own com-

munity. The participation of snack food manufacturers in my oral history research, by contrast, has been more difficult to secure. The recent publication of a number of books critical of their industry (Michael Moss's *Salt, Sugar, Fat*, for example)<sup>5</sup> has made some hesitant to be interviewed. While it took only a few months to secure the participation of Loewen, it took me a year and a half to reach the same point with Hawkins. There are a number of possible reasons for this circumstance, including the absence of a shared ethno-religious heritage between me and those at Hawkins (both Loewen's ownership and I were Mennonites), and the absence of a compulsion on the part of Hawkins to defend their occupation against religious suspicion and criticism. The recent death of the last member of the original management team at Hawkins may have encouraged a desire to record some of their history, however.

Obtaining participation from Loewen in my research was a comparatively simple process. As part of research on Mennonite-owned manufacturing firms in Manitoba that later became my doctoral dissertation, I requested interviews as well as access to company records. Two other major Mennonite-owned businesses (Palliser and Friesens) had already agreed to participate in my research project. Loewen management was well acquainted with the ownership of those two companies, so their participation gave my project credence in their eyes. As well, Loewen's president had a strong interest in history. My Mennonite heritage may have encouraged Loewen management to believe that, as a fellow Mennonite, I perhaps would have greater understanding of and appreciation for their business.

In addition to access to numerous private documents (including the board of directors' minutes), I requested a list of long-term employees (production workers, managers and owners) as potential interviewees. Loewen management scheduled thirty-two interviews with such employees for me over the course of two weeks before and after Christmas 2003. These circumstances were not ideal, of course, as I thus needed to interview anywhere from one to nine people per day. The limited time and resources of a graduate student, however, left me with few alternatives: I was studying in New Brunswick and would be home for Christmas with family in Manitoba. From my perspective, it was an ideal time to do as many interviews as possible, as I had no personal resources to make a return trip – and certainly no funding to do so. In addition to these company-arranged interviews, I had identified an additional seven employees (five production workers and two managers) earlier through the snowball method and conducted interviews with them.

At the time I conducted the Loewen interviews, new legislation was passed in Canada that

affected my research. The Personal Information Protection and Electronic Documents Act (PIPEDA),<sup>6</sup> passed in 2000, regulates how private sector organisations may collect, use and share personal information. As with any new legislation, there was a learning curve associated with its introduction. Rather than risk a violation under the new rules, some businesses initially responded by drastically curtailing access to all information. At Loewen, the immediate consequence of this legislation was that I had to sign a confidentiality agreement that, in essence, prevented me from sharing any of the results of my research at the company with anyone. It was not long, however, before management and I reached an understanding that was more conducive to the goals of academic research. It was doubtless because of PIPEDA that the company decided to schedule interviews themselves rather than provide me with a list of contacts. In the years before PIPEDA, Palliser and Friesens had simply provided me with the home addresses and phone numbers of their employees. Under PIPEDA, doing so without each employee's individual consent is illegal.

PIPEDA was not the only challenge to conducting interviews at Loewen; obtaining approval from my university's research ethics board (REB) was also time-consuming. The interviews I had obtained through snowball sampling had been conducted while I was a member of a research team based at the University of Manitoba. Their REB at the time was well acquainted with the standards of oral history research and approved my procedures and consent forms with little comment. The interviews scheduled by Loewen were done while I was a doctoral student at the University of New Brunswick (UNB). UNB's REB at the time took a social science (rather than an oral history) approach to research with human subjects. I had proposed using the same procedures and consent forms as I had as a researcher affiliated with the University of Manitoba. UNB's REB, however, wanted all the interviewees to be anonymised and the recordings and transcripts to be destroyed after completion of the study. It took many months and much conversation before they accepted best practices in oral history of anonymising interviews only at interviewees' request and arranging for archival deposit of recorded interviews/transcripts.

Despite these challenges, the process of obtaining company cooperation at Loewen was more rapid than at Hawkins. PIPEDA and the REB did not delay my research at Hawkins. Now employed at the University of Winnipeg (UW), ethics approval was rapid as UW has a strong oral history programme and its REB regularly deals with such projects. PIPEDA has been in operation for more than a decade, and so companies have developed procedures for compli-

ance with this legislation. Nonetheless, it was more than a year before I was invited to travel to Ontario to conduct interviews at the Hawkins factory. At least one member of the management team had heard of my first book and expressed some suspicion of how their company would fare if studied. The constant stream of news reports and popular books critical of their industry doubtless also slowed Hawkins' acceptance of my research project. In addition, Hawkins' owner did not reside in the same city as the factory and one of his family members was experiencing serious health challenges. Thus, obtaining the owner's permission to conduct research and finding a mutually convenient time to visit the factory was a lengthy process.

At both Hawkins and Loewen – as at all businesses where I conduct oral history interviews – I made the same commitments regarding data use. Consent to be interviewed was granted by the individual participants themselves and not by management. I did not seek permission to disseminate the recorded interviews online, but did insist (with few exceptions) that I would deposit recorded interviews at a national or provincial archive; and I retained copyright to interviews, as well as editorial control of the writing that I would produce based on my research at the companies.

An interest of mine in this research has been how companies create their own mythology. The study of corporate mythology, particularly through oral history, has received increasing attention from business historians. Peter Jackson, Polly Russell and Neil Ward, for example, have used life history interviews to examine the marketing by Marks and Spencer of a standard breed chicken (the Ross 508) as a new British brand of 'Oakham chicken'.<sup>7</sup> Oral historian Rob Perks notes that 'myth and storytelling play an important role in organisational culture: using oral history to capture them and understanding their function at different moments in a firm's history helps in analysing that culture'.<sup>8</sup> To the seven story forms outlined by organisational studies expert Yiannis Gabriel and cited in Perks' article 'Corporations are people too!', Perks adds an eighth: the story form 'fostered or invented by the company itself, often as part of brand development'.<sup>9</sup>

One expression of corporate mythology at Loewen was an advertising campaign that made use of their ethnic and religious heritage to sell windows. I use literary theorist Roland Barthes' explanation of mythology to dissect and analyse this advertising campaign. Barthes argues that mythology's function is to naturalise bourgeois ideology;<sup>10</sup> applying his work in semiotics allows me to 'read the signs' of this ad campaign as part of the business's ideological creation and use of religious values for capitalist ends. I do not view religion, however, as merely a paternalist tool of management; rather, embodied belief in the

workplace contributes to the development of a particular corporate mythology. Oral history interviews with management allowed me to explore further this mythology, its creation and purpose. Though I do not discuss it in this article, I have also used oral history interviews with Loewen workers to examine their reception of this corporate mythology.<sup>11</sup>

Hawkins, by contrast, did not make use of a religious component in their corporate mythology, but instead emphasised family, nationalism and the uniqueness of their product. Here I also found the work of Perks helpful on companies' creation of a story of themselves as a means of creating a brand.<sup>12</sup> In addition, the works of business historians Kenneth Lipartito and Richard R John, as well as oral historian Alessandro Portelli, were useful. Lipartito, for example, argues that businesses should be read as texts, using the techniques of cultural studies and semiotics to examine the ways in which they 'constrain, control, or claim to represent what is real'.<sup>13</sup>

### **Loewen<sup>14</sup>**

Loewen is a wooden window manufacturing firm located in Steinbach, Manitoba, Canada. The company's origins date to 1905 when CT Loewen left his father's sawmill and established a lumberyard.<sup>15</sup> He began building windows on housing construction sites in 1917. By 1919, production of window components moved to a small factory.<sup>16</sup> CT's sons joined him in business in 1946, and they took over management in 1951. The post-war housing boom benefited the company greatly, and in 1955 they began manufacturing ready-to-install (that is, pre-assembled) windows.<sup>17</sup> They rapidly became the largest employer in Steinbach. The company divided in 1971: one brother took the lumberyard, the other took the mill-work factory. The latter was incorporated as Loewen Windows in 1985, and then simply Loewen in 2001.<sup>18</sup>

To varying degrees throughout their history, the owners and managers of Loewen have represented their business as a Mennonite workplace. This portrayal has drawn upon a number of mythologies, including that of the refugee immigrant turned successful business founder and of the transplantation of 'Olde World' European craftsmanship to Canada. Cultural critic Roland Barthes notes that, while such mythologies are rooted in history, their function is the naturalisation of bourgeois ideology.<sup>19</sup> At Loewen, a specific form of bourgeois ideology took shape. This Mennonite corporate mythology was characterised by a strong work ethic reinforced by religion, an emphasis on quality craftwork, and a combination of religious humility and *Gelassenheit* (a Mennonite theological concept loosely translated as 'yieldedness,' or the submission of individuals to God and the ethno-religious community).

At Loewen, the operation of Mennonite values took a highly visible form. A weekly chapel service was provided, beginning in 1964, when employees requested an opportunity to gather for prayer after a worker died on the job.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, board meetings at the company always have begun with a religious message and prayer. Company president Charles Loewen explained that such practices stemmed from:

[a] sacred obligation. We've been taught that the earth is the Lord's and everything in it, ourselves and what we've been given. We know we're a gifted people in regards to our accident of history, my accident of birth, you know, in a family that's managed to be in a position to influence a lot of power and money, assets. And we are taught we are part of the pipeline and that we carry these responsibilities for a time. That those responsibilities, including the capital assets, are not ours to keep [...] [We] live good lives – very, very comfortable lives... and the gifts that we have, call it the Midas touch, or whatever you have, wealth creation, leadership, the ability to attract followers in a worthy cause, are gifts that we have not earned in and of themselves. We hone them, we're responsible to develop them, and that those can perpetuate a wealth creation machine which can be beneficial to many, many people.<sup>21</sup>

Such declarations of Christian stewardship are more than simply an evangelical Christian religious gloss on age-old paternalist business philosophies: they draw on particularly Mennonite theological emphases, such as neighbourly love and Christian discipleship. These theological emphases were reproduced in the company's 2002 advertising campaign known as 'Reflections'.

Loewen's 'Reflections' advertising campaign consisted of four photo spreads, each of a Loewen-made window in which a particular image is reflected.<sup>22</sup> The first image is of a young girl wearing a dark coloured shirt under a high-necked, sleeveless black jumper. Her long hair is parted in the middle of her forehead and protected by a conservative white head covering. The text accompanying the image declares, 'There's a remarkable story reflected in every Loewen window'. The second image is of a small white church, almost unidentifiable as such but for its modest steeple. Viewed through a window of Gothic design, the church sits 'atop a sparsely-treed prairie hill'. The tagline reads: 'Once, we made church pews. We've been seeking perfection in our work ever since'. In the third image, a river meanders through a bucolic landscape as seen through a circular window. The text questions: 'Why can't a window be as much of a work of art as the landscape it

frames?' In the final image of the series, rain streaks an arched window as it reflects a flash of lightning. The commentary reads: 'Windows designed to survive searing heat, arctic blasts and something even less forgiving: the fickle winds of fashion.'

While these images were used individually as advertisements in print publications such as lifestyle magazines, the series was also part of a promotional tool available from Loewen and advertised on its website as the 'Soul' brochure.<sup>23</sup> The four images are described on the final page as:

reflections of some striking photographs that reveal an essence of the Loewen brand. A young lady's intent gaze is returned by the glass in a Loewen Casement window; a lonely church atop a prairie ridge is captured in a Radius Top window with a Gothic grille; the Snake River is mirrored in a Loewen Round Top [window]; a Gulf Coast storm rages against the exterior of a stoic Picture Window.

Following the first image in the series is an opening page of text that briefly places the company's origins in historical context.

The first photo spread plays with signs of Mennonitism in a deliberate manner. Though the brochure copy identifies the young girl simply as a 'young lady', the first image contains multiple signs that connote Mennonitism: the conservative fashion of dress and hair styling, the distinctive head covering. Even the choice of the window in which her face is reflected is a sign: a casement window of simple lines rather than the comparatively ostentatious curves and flourishes, for example, of the company's round top window. The decision to portray a 'young lady' rather than a 'young gentleman' is in part a nod to the general public's greater familiarity with the outward signs of female Mennonitism. The hat, plain coat and knee boots of the conservative Mennonite preacher, for example, may be recognised within a segment of the Mennonite community itself; among outsiders, such items of male dress are not well known. The choice of a youth rather than an adult is also interesting, as youth (particularly female youth) is a signifier of purity and innocence. Taken together, these signs denote simplicity, innocence and humility.

Other elements of this image are more open to interpretation. What does it mean that the girl's portrait is in black and white? That the backdrop is of black emptiness? That the tagline for the advertisement is centred on the girl's jumper? These elements cannot be meaningless. The ad's text could just as easily have been placed over her shoulder in the inky blackness behind her, for example. Instead the text is placed on her

clothing, precisely where a T-shirt, say, would have a slogan or a logo. This conservative young woman would be unlikely to wear a branded T-shirt, yet here she advertises Loewen. It is not her clothing, but she herself who is being 'branded,' marked, commodified. Her Mennonitism, the 'remarkable story reflected in every Loewen window', is what is being sold.

What of the colour and background? The black and white colour scheme conveys a sense of the past. This girl, this image, this advertisement – and hence this product – is part of a long-standing and persistent tradition, the 'remarkable story', the 'fascinating journey' from Russia to Canada. The absence of a background makes it impossible to place the image in any specific time or place. Thus the product is made timeless: it is beyond trends; it will endure the ages.

The second photo spread does not contain such obviously Mennonite signs. The 'lonely church atop a prairie ridge' would not be identified by an insider as a Mennonite church, at least not a Manitoban Mennonite one. Traditionally, Mennonite churches do not have a steeple; modern Mennonite church buildings in Manitoba, while generally still steeple-less, are visually indistinguishable from Protestant churches. Here we see the necessity of the steeple and the choice of a Gothic window: these are signs easily read by both Mennonites and non-Mennonites as distinctly religious. Yet this image does point to the Mennonitism of the previous image of the girl in the window: it is an isolated church, a prairie church, a small church whose physical austerity signals an honest simplicity of faith. Viewed together, this overtly religious image reinforces the religious humility signified in the advertisement of the 'Mennonite girl.' Remarkably, a church that is clearly not a Mennonite church nonetheless references many aspects of Mennonite mythology.

The positioning of the church with respect to the window is worth noting. From the standpoint of the viewer, the church is slightly elevated. The advertising copy describes it as a church on a prairie ridge – in other words, a church on a hill. As such, for religious viewers, it immediately conjures up references to the 'city on a hill' in Christ's Sermon on the Mount:

You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot. You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.<sup>24</sup>

Christ's 'city built on a hill' has become, in the parlance of the twentieth century Christian community, the 'church on a hill.' The image links the values of the Sermon on the Mount with the Loewen product. Beyond such obvious connotations of faith, the image also evokes subtle but specifically Mennonite references. The 'salt of the earth' has become a secular cliché for honest, hard-working, trustworthy, rural people. Not coincidentally, these are the very characteristics referenced as values in Mennonite corporate mythology at Loewen. One of the owners, Clyde Loewen, noted the Mennoniteness of this particular image himself. Offering to provide me with a copy of the advertising campaign's brochure during the course of our interview, I asked, 'Is this the one with the Mennonite young woman reflected in the window?' His honest reply moved us both to laughter: 'This is the young woman who is portrayed as a Mennonite'. He went on to explain that the advertising campaign's images, particularly those of the church and the girl, related to 'strong cultural touchstones' which were 'probably recognisable in values' even to those unfamiliar with Mennonites. Those values, he noted, are sincerity and honesty.<sup>25</sup>

Only these first two of the four images in the campaign were highlighted on the Loewen website in 2004. The 'Mennonite girl' appeared on their homepage; the church image was used on the 'About Us' web page. Clearly these two images were central to the advertising campaign, and not the other two – the river and the rain-storm. Indeed, Clyde Loewen's remarks above indicate as much. With their emphasis on quality and durability, the latter two images did little to differentiate Loewen's products from those of any other brand. Instead, what set Loewen products apart was their 'soul.'

What, then, is the 'soul' of a commodity? The soul – the essence, that which is unique to an individual – is a religious notion. The products at Loewen are invested with an invisible yet crucial quality that is not obviously discernible in either their physical appearance or their technical durability (the message of the last two images in the 'Reflections' campaign). That invisible quality is introduced by virtue of the nature of the individuals who manufacture the windows: these are products of a Mennonite family, the Loewens, and their primarily Mennonite employees, who remain 'faithful to [their] roots,' to their 'deeply-held traditional craft values' and 'work ethic'. They exhibit both 'pride in craft' and 'abiding humility'. They are constantly 'seeking perfection'; their work is in essence a spiritual quest.<sup>26</sup> The 'soul' of a Loewen window, then, is the commodification of the Mennonite corporate mythology.

Though less central to the campaign, the last two images in the series do serve to reinforce the signs in the first two photo spreads. The third

image is of a tranquil rural landscape. The lazy meandering of the river and the smoothness of the water's surface signify peace. The waterway is identified as the Snake River, the main branch of the Columbia River, which stretches across Idaho and Oregon. Why this particular river? Idaho is rural farm country, a state without a major urban centre; Oregon is noted for its forestry and wood production industries. Simultaneously, they reference both rural qualities (honesty, dependability, simplicity) and the natural substances (wood) from which Loewen products are made. At the same time, these products are separated from the conditions of production. The landscape seen through/reflected in the window shows no signs of human habitation, much less industrial production.

The text accompanying this image returns to the religious motif of the first two images. 'Why can't a window be as much of a work of art as the landscape it frames?' The work of art here is nature itself; God is the artist. The window, a human-made product, is equated with the Creation.<sup>27</sup> At the lower right of the image is the invitation: 'Discover the world's most inspiring windows at [www.loewen.com](http://www.loewen.com).' The page of text that accompanies this image in the brochure elaborates on the 'inspirational' nature of the product:

To our way of thinking, a window should be more than just a source of natural light and air. It should be a source of inspiration.... Perhaps the most important distinguishing feature of our windows, however, is the artistry and obsessive perfectionism of the people who craft them. In their skilled hands (aided by the most advanced production technology available), wood, metal and glass somehow magically meld, flow and even soar.... Which means you may have trouble deciding which is more inspiring: the view outside your windows or the windows themselves.<sup>28</sup>

Loewen's products are not only inspiring, but also inspired; in a word, they have 'soul'.

The final image of the series depicts the elements of nature attacking a Loewen picture window. The product meets the challenge of the environment. But not only the rainstorm is held at bay: so too are the 'fickle winds of fashion'. Recalling the first image in the series, nothing could be further from fickle fashion than the conservative Mennonite presentation of the young woman. In contrast to the changing whims of society – inconstant, questionable and unreliable – what is offered are the enduring values that emanate from the timeless, static, church-ordered society of the Mennonites. The product itself takes on these qualities: it is not merely a picture window, but a 'stoic' one, we are informed by the promotional text. Stolid, com-

posed, calm, at peace – like the five hundred year tradition of the Mennonites themselves, these windows will 'stand the test of time'.<sup>29</sup>

The 'Reflections' campaign was designed by Loeffler, Ketchum, Mountjoy of North Carolina. Mitch Toews, advertising and corporate communications manager at Loewen, explained the process that was the generation of the campaign:

We said to them, 'We have an almost hundred year old company that has grown a thick layer of moss over what the true, the core of the company is. You know, our view is jaded. We don't know exactly what we are. You know, we're too close to it. So give us your impression'.<sup>30</sup>

The agency conducted research not only at Loewen but 'in the marketplace, through our dealers, through competitors, through architects, through builders' to devise a means of 'branding' Loewen.

And they came up with the heritage, the Mennonite heritage, which to them was striking.... [W]e really had this good product, that enabled us to go into the luxury market in the US and elsewhere and say, 'We have a product for you, even though we're this humble company. We're not sophisticated like the marketplace, and yet we are because we have this wonderful product. We really have the product'. And that's what they saw.<sup>31</sup>

Of course, hiring an ad agency which develops a campaign that markets religious heritage is hardly a sign of a lack of sophistication.

Company vice-president Clyde Loewen explained that the advertising campaign evoked 'strong cultural [Mennonite] touchstones' of sincerity and honesty. The decision to use religious heritage as a marketing tool was not easily made, he asserted. '[I]t was with *some* degree of unease that we did that [campaign], because it felt a little, you know, at times, a little exploitative or something like that. Not overwhelmingly so, or we wouldn't have done it'.<sup>32</sup> Advertising and corporate communications manager Mitch Toews declared the company went with the ad campaign 'because it was true and because it was the unfiltered view... it was all true'.<sup>33</sup>

Mennonite religious values of honesty and simplicity, used in the advertising campaign to sell windows, are not always, however, compatible with the demands of capitalism. For example, the global nature of twentieth and twenty-first century capitalism has necessitated a renegotiation of what it means to practice Mennonite humility in a competitive marketplace. At a board meeting in 2001 to discuss corporate expansion, company co-owner John Loewen

asked, 'Will we like who we become?' The reply was, 'Yeah, of course, why wouldn't we?' In an interview recalling that incident, he reflected that 'modesty, humility' were 'valid value[s] to have... What's inherently noble about staying at a hundred million? Add another zero, that won't determine who you are... The actual number is largely immaterial when it comes to those values'. He noted that such questions were never again raised, nor did they need to be. '[I]t's more important that you act and behave modestly and responsibly with yourselves, the community and your employees'.<sup>34</sup> Company president Charles Loewen noted that his brother John's question 'hangs to this day' and is a reflection of 'family culture'.<sup>35</sup> He echoed his brother's observation that humility can be a disadvantage when competing in a global marketplace: '[W]e don't blow our own horn quite enough... I remember once I taught Sunday School... and I posed this theoretical question: "If you're a Mennonite, and you make the best windows in the world, is it okay to say that? Or is it wrong not to say it?"... [W]hat's more important to a Mennonite: telling the truth or their false humility?'<sup>36</sup>

Despite the use of Mennonite heritage in the advertising campaign, Charles Loewen declared that he was not interested in the static preservation of a corporate culture rooted in Mennonitism:

I mean, I went to university, studied philosophy, so I'm an existentialist, I'm a post-modernist and, you know, we're all Marxists and so we're all – what do you call it. Unions and so on and so forth. I mean, once you become aware of those issues, you can't help but be influenced by them. And yet, we're finding what it means to be people of faith in our tradition, Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition. Our Anabaptist-Mennonite tradition, informed by those other learnings as well. And we're quite different than our father was, who had a much simpler and narrower exposure. Doesn't make mine superior. My children's will be different again. And the words that we have faith God gave to us will be interpreted differently at a different time in history. Inevitably. And we don't try to freeze that. That's part of what it means to me, part of my father's phrase, 'you don't rule from the grave'.<sup>37</sup>

A frozen representation of Mennonitism may be useful for advertising products, but within the company itself, the myth must find new forms. Charles Loewen insisted that 'in an age of diversity, we're not a Mennonite town any more... [and] we *never* call ourselves a Christian company'. While the Mennonite origins of the founding family were communicated to board members, Charles Loewen claimed there was no need to maintain some ethno-religious status quo:

You know, if we were to have a plant in Indonesia dominated by Muslim workers, then we could allow and celebrate Muslim faith. Inspiration in that workplace could be part of a brand new interpretation and extension of the family culture in this community of faith. [...] [Such an outcome is possible] in a postmodern age, in an age of diversity and international global understanding.<sup>38</sup>

The corporate mythology developed at Loewen was shaped by the Mennonite heritage of its founders, workforce and surrounding community. Over time, the corporate mythology will be reinterpreted – though its purpose will remain the same. The myth exists to encourage conformity to the demands of capitalist production; such conformity is the ideology concealed by the myth. The religious vocabulary of the myth serves to place its content beyond doubt or question; what is depicted is not ideological need, but sacred truth. Mennonite corporate mythology therefore could be transformed into a Muslim corporate mythology, if the needs of production demanded it.

### **WT Hawkins**

As at Loewen, corporate myths have developed over time at WT Hawkins. Here, however, the myth I analyse is not contained in an advertising campaign – indeed, Hawkins does not advertise. Rather, the myth is communicated through stories those in the company tell themselves. Management and long-term employees at Hawkins tell three key stories: Cheezies as sole product; workers as family; and Hawkins as part of Canadian identity.

The Cheezie is a cheese-flavoured snack made from extruded corn and manufactured by WT Hawkins, Ltd. While similar snacks are marketed by other companies, Cheezie fans and the Hawkins company themselves argue that the Cheezie is distinctive and superior. In the words of one blogger:

It's difficult to convey to the uninitiated the vastness of the gap that separates Hawkins Cheezies in their assymetrical [sic], lumpy, orange-fingered grandeur, from the inferior sort that melts into grainy sludge in your mouth.<sup>39</sup>

Cheezies are a 'hard bite' snack (unlike the 'soft bite' of the better known Cheetos by Frito-Lay) and are made with real Canadian cheddar cheese.

Cheezies are manufactured at only one small factory, located in Belleville, 190km east of Toronto on the northern shore of Lake Ontario. The original facility, however, was in Tweed, Ontario (a village of a few thousand people north-east of Toronto). WT Hawkins' Cheezie

factory was opened by Jim Marker and Web Hawkins (the son of WT) on 27 June 1949.<sup>40</sup> WT Hawkins was the founding owner of what was apparently then one of North America's largest snack food companies, Confections Incorporated of Chicago.<sup>41</sup> In the late 1940s, WT learned of an Ohio farmer, Jim Marker, who had designed and built an extruder that allowed him to process and store corn meal more efficiently for his cattle in winter. WT had the idea of frying the extruded corn meal, coating it with cheese and marketing it as a snack food. The two became partners and opened the plant in Tweed in 1949 to manufacture Cheezies and a few other snack food products.<sup>42</sup> Shortly thereafter, the Chicago parent company folded, the victim of the four marriages and divorces of its founder, WT Hawkins. With the death of WT in 1961, only the Canadian branch plant remained, under the direction of Web Hawkins and Jim Marker.<sup>43</sup>

Marker explained that Canada was a practical and economical choice for the location of the factory:

For all we know, we might have ended up in Mexico but there the main language used at work there is Spanish. Besides, you could instruct or supervise but you couldn't work there because one had to be a Mexican to be employed there. So, we decided against it and began to look closely at Canada.<sup>44</sup>

As has often been the case with manufacturing in North America, this US company was interested in opening a branch plant in Canada because of the lower wages. Marker explained:

We became an employer to many there, just regular folks, you know. The work involved was not high-tech. It did not need highly-skilled workers. They worked hard and at the end of the day they earned themselves a wage just like everyone else.<sup>45</sup>

Operating in a building owned by Tweed Steel Works, the Canadian factory had two shifts and 125 workers at its peak and \$1.5-2 million in annual sales.<sup>46</sup> From the 1960s to the 1990s, the number of employees ranged from twenty-five to seventy-five – the higher numbers employed during the busy summer seasons.<sup>47</sup> Throughout the company's history, the majority of production workers have been women.

The Cheezie manufacturing process has remained virtually unchanged since its 1949 début. Corn meal is extruded under pressure and heat, transforming it into a gel. The gel is then pushed through dies that expand it to form the Cheezie shapes. The extrusion machines used in the factory today are those originally designed by Jim Marker, which produce non-uniform sizes and shapes. The raw Cheezies are fried in oil

before being seasoned in a tumbler where the seasoning is sprayed onto the cooked Cheezies as a 'cheese slurry'; that is, a mixture of oil, cheese and salt. The finished product is collected from the tumbler in large barrels. Once cooled, the Cheezies are packaged for sale – originally by hand and with weigh scales, but now with packing machinery.<sup>48</sup>

The majority of production workers at the company have been women, most of them working as packers. There are two explanations for this gender distribution. First, corn meal is delivered to the plant in fifty-pound sacks and dumped by hand into the extruders; in earlier years, these sacks weighed one hundred pounds. The plant is small and its configuration does not allow the use of either a forklift or vacuum-assisted lifting devices for this task. Working on the packing lines used to be 'probably considered a more menial job'.<sup>49</sup> Therefore men have tended to apply for work on the process lines and women on the packing lines; and more people are needed to run the packing equipment than to operate the extruders, fryers and tumblers.<sup>50</sup>

While Cheezies are now the company's only product – and have been for more than fifty years – the company used to make other snack foods. These included potato chips, 'midget donuts', popping corn, popcorn balls, caramel popcorn and packaged nuts.<sup>51</sup> Hawkins' Gold Star potato chips were sold from coast to coast, and Hawkins was the first to offer barbecue-flavoured chips in Canada.<sup>52</sup> Hawkins designed their own potato chip frying equipment, noting that other companies' equipment resulted in chips that were 'overcooked, some undercooked, some blistered' and were 'very uneven in character'. Other companies, Hawkins claimed, dumped raw chips in cooking oil and used direct heat, with the consequence that chips stuck together to create blisters, clogged the stirrers and cooked unevenly. Hawkins' machines moved cooking oil at 145 gallons per minute to keep all chips separated and heated the oil twenty feet away from the chips themselves. The result was chips that cooked evenly and oil that did not become rancid from direct heat. Other companies packaged their chips in glassine or foil bags that were not air-tight; Hawkins used double-walled cellophane bags, which not only kept out air but also allowed consumers to see the chips.<sup>53</sup>

Hawkins caramel corn took two years for the company to develop. 'Even DuPont said we could never manufacture and package such a product for a shelf life of thirty to forty-five days', WT declared, but the company succeeded. The superiority of their product over that of competitors was explained to Hawkins' salesmen: Western Biscuit Ltd in Canada had tried to make similar product in 1948, but it 'stuck together, stuck to one's teeth, didn't have the proper flavour... and in time the line became such a fail-





The Hawkins factory packaging line circa 1970s. Photo courtesy of W T Hawkins, Belleville Ontario, Canada.

ure, they discontinued the department, sold out what equipment they had (which was the wrong kind) and quit with a heavy loss'. Cracker Jack, WT claimed, had tried unsuccessfully to copy Hawkins' product. The key differences were that Hawkins used only a particular sugar, an exact mix 'to the fraction of an ounce', cooked the coating to 'within three degrees' of the necessary temperature, used a 'special butter' that was added 'at just the right point', and sold the product in an air-tight bag.<sup>54</sup>

One of the unique products offered by Hawkins was Magic Pop, a dual-chambered package containing popping corn and cooking oil. Magic Pop was offered as a solution to the 'challenge' of making popcorn at home:

You understand that even a slight variation, as little as three per cent in shortening and corn will result in small popped kernels, hard centres, many unpopped grains, etc. Here is a ready-mixed package, balanced to the fraction of an ounce. What housewife knows such a balance or even by guessing could do it if she tried. Plus all this, see how simple and easy it is to prepare hot, thrifty popcorn with MAGIC POP.<sup>55</sup>

Magic Pop was considered a complement to the 'frozen foods, prepared cake mixes' and other products that a postwar world had 'made so simple and easy for the housewife to prepare'.<sup>56</sup> Magic Pop, WT explained, had been in development for nine months:

At times we almost gave it up. It seemed impossible. We found, however through hundreds of test poppings at Tweed, how we could do it. It takes a *very special* shortening [...] just the right balance of everything. It was a long, hard job, but we did it!<sup>57</sup>

Not only was Magic Pop a boon to the housewife, it was so easy to use that: 'Any person, in fact, any child can make two quarts of excellent popcorn with our Magic Pop. There is no trick at all: just SQUEEZE, HEAT and EAT'.<sup>58</sup> Studies had shown, WT asserted, that only one in ten families popped corn at home. Others refrained from doing so perhaps 'because they don't know how or don't want to buy a popper or don't want to mess up the kitchen doing it the old fashion[ed] way'.<sup>59</sup> Magic Pop could be made in any pot, and required no skill: simply 'cut the end, pour it in the pan and pop it'.<sup>60</sup>



Hawkins' product displays, including Magic Pop and Cheezies. Photo courtesy of W T Hawkins, Belleville Ontario, Canada.

A significant event in the company's history was the fire on 6 January 1956 that burned the Tweed factory to the ground; the factory was a victim of its proximity to the railway. Marker explained: 'The sparks fell on the burlap that was used for insulating up near the eaves. There was this water station nearby and when the trains start up again to go, they generated sparks, which fell on our building'.<sup>61</sup> Fortunately, none of the company's seventy-five employees were on site at the time, though other losses totalled \$250,000 in 1956 dollars (the equivalent of \$2.2 million today).<sup>62</sup> Marker declared at the time: 'The fire in Tweed was bad; everything buckled. We lost a lot of tools. These have been replaced and we are now building new equipment'.<sup>63</sup> The reeve of the village of Tweed 'held a special meeting of council' shortly after the fire 'with a view to keeping the plant in Tweed'<sup>64</sup> but was unsuccessful, as the mayor of the neighbouring city of Belleville took advantage of the situation. The same day the plant burned, Belleville's mayor contacted the company; the following day, she and the chair of Belleville's Industrial Commission met with Web Hawkins. Web was given a choice of sites in Belleville, and he chose what was known as the Graham Building at 105 South Pinnacle Street.<sup>65</sup> The building had housed the Belleville Canning Company from 1899-1960 (which made cans using tin imported from Wales); during the Great War the building was used as a military barracks.<sup>66</sup>

The fire and subsequent relocation of the factory to Belleville were seen as an opportunity by the company. The Tweed plant, Marker declared,

had been 'terribly congested... We not only have more space here [in Belleville], but it is better laid out and will make for great efficiency'.<sup>67</sup> The company's expectations were high: they hoped to employ 150 people at a \$5,000 weekly payroll in their new 20,000 square foot facility in Belleville (6,000 square feet larger than their Tweed plant had been).<sup>68</sup> Fifteen days after the fire, they signed a lease on the building and began moving seven train carloads of machinery.<sup>69</sup> Workers from Tweed commuted to the new plant, less than forty kilometres away. Management intended to produce Cheezies within seven days at their new facility (a feat they were able to accomplish), and planned to produce Magic Pop and Gold Star potato chips 'as machinery became available'.<sup>70</sup> 'If they had been out of production for an extended period, they may have lost their place on store shelves'.<sup>71</sup>

As in all businesses, corporate myths have developed over time at Hawkins. These myths serve both to create a particular workplace culture and to market the product. Management scholar Georges Lewi explains that myths are:

(often unusual) *stories* that people tell and consider to be true. They explain the situation of an individual within a group, of a business in its economic context, and the reason why things are as they are. Myths enable us to shape the future since they provide an *overall explanation*, give meaning to what exists and (re)define identities, the *raison d'être* for each individual in a group.<sup>72</sup>

The corporate mythology of Hawkins Cheezies contains three key stories: Cheezies as sole product; workers as family; and Hawkins as part of Canadian identity.

The devastating fire at the Tweed plant and the non-business-related decline of the American parent company contributed to the reduction of Hawkins' product range to only one item – the Cheezie – but there were other factors. Cheezies were more popular sellers than other Hawkins products. Potato chip manufacturing was abandoned by the company in the late 1970s, former office worker Barbara Bosiak explained, since it was difficult to compete with Hostess and Frito-Lay; very few area farmers raised chipping potatoes; potatoes needed to be processed rapidly and Hawkins had limited storage facilities; and potato chips (unlike Cheezies) were fragile and could not be shipped cross-country.<sup>73</sup> Hawkins' management explains their specialisation in Cheezies, however, as a deliberate choice tied to quality control and tradition. Current president and owner Kent Hawkins notes that the one small factory and single product line means:

We can make a decision quickly and easily without being constrained by the bureaucracy that characterises many other companies. [...] It started as a sideline but we've been at it ever since and today, I get to make a living from it. I'm very proud of my family heritage and of all that we've created [...].<sup>74</sup>

Cheezie inventor Jim Marker asserted: 'If you're doing something well, you should continue to do it. Cheezies has been our forte and Cheezies will remain our forte'.<sup>75</sup> Even the distinctive variety of shapes of Cheezies is explained not as a consequence of the manufacturing process but as a deliberate marketing decision. WT Hawkins explained to salesmen in 1955 that Cheezies are:

made in odd-sized pieces, some larger than others, because we found that the public preferred it that way. Some folks like the smaller pieces and others prefer the larger ones. Plus this, it has a home-made appearance. In other words, it doesn't look like a molded manufactured piece where every piece is exactly the same form and size.<sup>76</sup>

Manufacturing only Cheezies, and manufacturing them in non-uniform shapes, are here presented as logical choices as much as they are the result of circumstances.

The familial nature of the factory is a second aspect of the corporate mythology of Hawkins. Though situated in a city of 50,000 people, shop-floor relationships are more reminiscent of those in a small town. This familial atmosphere was shaped in part by hiring family members of existing factory workers. For example, at least one of

Doris and Albert Short's ten children worked at Hawkins every year for fifteen years. Shirley Woodcox, plant manager for fifty-six years, explained: 'You always remember the real good ones and the family name registers the next time you're going through a batch of job applications'.<sup>77</sup> Oriol Short, the youngest of the Short children, told the local newspaper in 1978: 'It's like one big family here'.<sup>78</sup> Production line manager Geraldine Fobert worked at the company for more than half a century, and her twin sister Joyce Brady worked for many years as supervisor of the 'Dirt Patrol' (the cleaning crew).<sup>79</sup> Fobert stated that past and present employees often stopped her in the street to inform her of their family members' health concerns. She and her sister 'went to every wake [because we] cared about the people'. Women in the plant 'would tell you stories of their lives while you were doing laundry', washing the rags that the Dirt Patrol used to clean the equipment. 'That's what makes people united in many ways. You don't forget, because you carry them here all the time', Fobert declared, pointing to her heart. Throughout her interview, Fobert (who has never married and has no children) referred to the workers as her 'kids'.<sup>80</sup> Finance Director Tony McGarvey explained that the familial atmosphere derived in part from the fact that Marker was similarly unmarried and neither he nor Woodcox had children, 'so they made the workers their family'. Marker's birthday and Hawkins' incorporation date were the same; and so his birthday and the company's anniversary were celebrated simultaneously. For many decades, a huge barbecue and party have been held by Hawkins on 27 June, shortly before the national long weekend to celebrate Canada Day on 1 July.<sup>81</sup>

Cheezies are portrayed by the company, and are perceived by consumers, as distinctly Canadian. The company markets itself as a Canadian product, even placing a red maple leaf on its packaging. The American origins of the now-defunct parent company are neither promoted nor hidden by Hawkins, nor are they unusual in a country like Canada whose manufacturing firms often have been branch plants of US companies.<sup>82</sup> Hawkins has described Cheezies as 'a staple of the Canadian diet'.<sup>83</sup> The Canadian Oxford Dictionary even has a listing for the product: 'Cheezies *plural noun, Cdn proprietary* a snack food consisting of finger-sized pieces of extruded corn meal coated with powdered cheese'.<sup>84</sup> Local newspapers declared Cheezies were 'the all-Canadian snack food'.<sup>85</sup> And many consumers cite the independent Canadian identity of the product as part of its appeal:

I love that they taste better than any other cheese snack, they have no preservatives, they are gluten free, and it helps they are Canadian!<sup>86</sup>

Hawkins are one of the last truly Canadian junk foods out there for us to enjoy – along with ketchup chips!<sup>87</sup>

Best memory of eating Cheezies... Saturday nights watching *Hockey Night in Canada* with my dad and having hot dogs and Cheezies for dinner.<sup>88</sup>

These Cheezies destroy Cheetos. Canadian Pride!<sup>89</sup>

## Conclusion

The particular expressions of corporate mythology at Loewen and at Hawkins, then, differed: Loewen expressed their myth (in part) through an advertising campaign; Hawkins transmitted their mythology through stories. The purpose of these myths was very similar: myth, Barthes tells us, 'has the task of giving an historical intention a natural justification, and making contingency appear eternal'.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the purpose of corporate mythology is to naturalise the demands of capitalist competition and the necessity of worker loyalty and compliance. The consequences of these corporate mythologies at Hawkins and Loewen, however, were not the same. To an extent, the corporate mythology of Loewen was a failure while that of Hawkins was a success.

Loewen's 'Reflections' advertising campaign was short-lived: created in 2005; replaced in 2004. A press release from the company at the time explained that the advertising campaign gave potential customers 'the unintended suggestion that Loewen is best suited to a particular style of architecture' – traditional, rather than modern.<sup>91</sup> While the ads had succeeded in capturing and promoting the identity of the company, they had not succeeded in securing new customers. After cutting its workforce by more than half, the company was sold by the

Loewen family to Danish firm VKR Holding in 2010.<sup>92</sup>

Hawkins' corporate mythology, by contrast, has seen more positive results. They have been able to cultivate an image of themselves as producers of a unique product that is distinctly Canadian. The American historical origins of the company are subsumed in this mythology. The refusal to modernise equipment in the plant is recast as evidence of a quirky individualism that privileges diversity (of Cheezie shapes) over the uniformity of typical mass production. Hawkins' corporate mythology succeeds in setting the company apart from its larger capitalist competitors.

Business historian Per Hansen argues that a cultural and narrative approach offers insights not afforded by the traditional economic and social science approach to business history.<sup>93</sup> A study of corporate mythology through oral history allows us to do just that. The corporate mythology developed at Loewen made use of and was reinforced by ethno-religious identity. In the absence of a shared religious heritage at Hawkins, corporate mythology made use of the rhetoric of family and national identity. At both businesses, the function of corporate mythology has been to cultivate customer (and worker) loyalty, with varying degrees of success. By creating a story of themselves that explains accident and economic necessity as religious values, rational choices or patriotism, owners and managers at these companies were able to create larger meanings for their activities. In the process of studying corporate mythology, then, we learn not just about the cultures of these businesses, but how these businesses shaped and were shaped by broader social processes such as nationalism and religion. Business historians must embrace oral history to a greater degree, so that business history becomes part of the history of society, and not merely a specialised sub-field.

## NOTES

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4. See, for example, the discussion in the following sources: Calvin Redekop, Victor A Krahn, and Samuel J Steiner (eds), *Anabaptist/Mennonite Faith and Economics*, Lanham MD: University Press of America, 1994; Roy Vogt, *Whose Property? The Deepening Conflict between Private Property and Democracy in Canada*, Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1999; Calvin W Redekop and Benjamin W Redekop, *Entrepreneurs in the Faith Community: Profiles of Mennonites in Business*, Scottsdale PA and Waterloo ON: Herald Press, 1996; Royden Loewen, *Diaspora in the Countryside: Two Mennonite Communities and Mid-Twentieth-Century*

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11. See Thiessen, 2013.
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27. At the same time, the equation of industrial production with Creation points subtly to the environmental stewardship of the company.
28. 'Soul' brochure, 2002.
29. 'Soul' brochure, 2002.
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- 91.** Loewen, 'Loewen launches new ad campaign', August 2004. Accessed online at [www.loewen.com/home.nsf/about/pressroom/archive/PLEE-633PFT](http://www.loewen.com/home.nsf/about/pressroom/archive/PLEE-633PFT), 30 August 2006.
- 92.** Three years later, VKR Holding sold the company back to two members of the Loewen family and a number of other shareholders. 'Loewen family, investors buy back Steinbach manufacturing company', *Winnipeg Free Press*, 2 July 2013; Martin Cash, 'Loewen window firm all in the family again', *Winnipeg Free Press*, 3 July 2013.
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