

products now constitute the fastest-growing component in the entire fast-food industry. "Where's the beef?" may soon apply to its originator. Wendy's abruptly withdrew the slogan that was on everyone's lips during the 1984 presidential campaign because it was interfering with the chain's plan for a newly introduced chicken sandwich.

When food experts tell us that food habits are the parts of culture that change most slowly—so slowly that America's preference for beef harks back to Vedic times—they have obviously not paid much attention to the history of meat consumption in the United States. (Incidentally, chickens were domesticated in the jungles of Southeast Asia and were never part of the basic Indo-European, pastoral-farming complex. They probably first reached Europe only in Greek and Roman times.) The dead hand of tradition has not noticeably slowed the vast gustatory tides that have swept over the United States from Colonial times to the present. In America as never before in history, good to eat is what is good to sell. Yet no less emphatically than in other cases I have been examining, the ups and downs of American tastes in meat are not mere random fashions that aggressive agribusinesses have been able to exploit at will. No less than in Hindu India, the interplay between nature and culture, no matter how ingenious the technology that mediates them, places definite limits on profitability, whether measured in terms of energy, proteins, resources, or dollars and cents. And we must never forget that there are many chickens that have yet to come home to roost. Although I have been emphasizing short-run improvements in the efficiency of converting plant foods to meat, one must not lose sight of the fact that fast-food meats are an energetically inefficient way to feed people. The engineering triumph embodied in the latest superchicken is predicated entirely on the availability of chicken feed which contains not only corn, soybeans, sorghum, and other proteinaceous plant foods, but animal products as well—principally fish meal. This concoction belies its name. It is nutritionally, and energetically too valuable to be called "chicken feed." Nutritionally speaking, all that high protein

plant and fish food means that the average American chicken eats better than three fifths of the people in the world. And energetically speaking, each calorie of chicken breast costs at least six calories of fossil fuel. This means that the sumptuous diet of America's chickens (and pigs and cattle) rests entirely on the continuing drawdown of still relatively cheap nonrenewable sources of fossil energy. As I said at the outset, the orgy of carnivory in America may yet prove to be as transitory as it was in Vedic India. In the meantime, I hope that I have demonstrated that the principal features of America's meat preference hierarchy—from horsemeat to beef and chicken—have rapidly adapted to novel combinations of nutritional, ecological, economic, and political conditions rather than remaining fixed and unresponsive as an arbitrary heritage passed on from the remote past.

I am not disputing the fact that some foodways are extremely tenacious. In addition to preferences and avoidances which last only decades, there are others which last for millennia. But as the next riddle shows, the dead hand of tradition is no more convincing as an explanation for food-ways which persist for thousands of years than it is for those which persist for only decades.