

Lunchbox Lore

For one Mizzou alumna, the importance of the lunchbox extends far beyond lunch.

Story by Chris Blose

What kind of lunchbox did you carry as a kid? Did you pack your Thermos and PB&J sandwiches in a boyish box featuring Roy Rogers and Dale Evans at the Double R Bar Ranch? Were your Twinkies guarded by the smiling Southern faces of *The Dukes of Hazzard*? Or did you show your loyalty to the KISS army by brandishing the heavy metal band's box?

Your choice of lunchbox was probably not only a reflection of marketing at the time but also an expression of your personality, says Mary Hopper

Vanderlinden, BJ '86, of Reidsville, N.C. Vanderlinden, an assistant professor of journalism at North Carolina A&T State University, is a part-time expert in what might be called lunchbox studies. In March 2006, Vanderlinden got to put that expertise to use at a speaking job up the road in Danville, Va., where the Smithsonian "Lunch Box Memories" traveling exhibit made a stop.

It was Vanderlinden's first official gig

speaking about lunchboxes. She has only recently become a collector — or boxer, as they're called — but she has been studying them for about three years. Why? It all started with nostalgia and Nick at Nite.

"This is kind of corny," she says, "but I have pictures of myself back in the 1970s carrying lunchboxes [hers featured Peanuts], and when you watch some of the old programs like *Leave it to Beaver*, you see Beaver

and his buddies carrying lunchboxes. That's what really started me thinking about it."

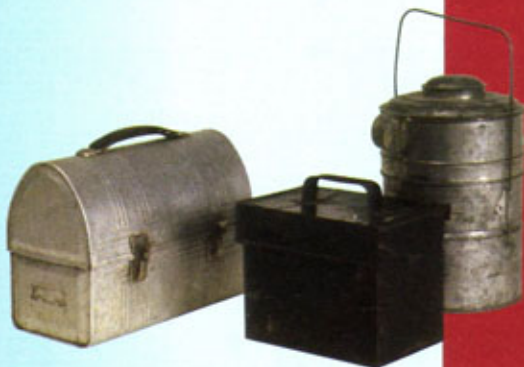
Corny old photos and TV may have started it, but to Vanderlinden, the significance of such pop culture studies goes much deeper: "I'm interested in the history behind the lunchbox and how it has mirrored what we've gone through in America."

The lunchbox has its origins in the Industrial Revolution, particularly in the early 1900s. With the transition from agriculture to industry, workers could no longer just run into the farmhouse for lunch, Vanderlinden says. There weren't many street vendors, and there wasn't yet a fast food joint on every street corner. Workers carried their lunches, a necessity that mothered the invention of the lunchbox. With the steel industry booming, steel became the dominant material for lunchboxes.

Later, what started as a product for adults morphed into a must-have for children. By the 1950s, lunchboxes had become full-fledged marketing tools, especially with the plethora of Western-themed boxes starting with Hopalong Cassidy. Over time, lunchbox designs came to reflect changing tastes in TV shows, movies and cartoons. Hence the marketing idea of planned obsolescence, meaning that parents would replace a perfectly usable lunchbox with a newer, trendier one. "It really gets into the fact that Americans were starting to have disposable income," Vanderlinden says.

Those changes in trends also reflected changes in social norms. The Partridge Family gave way to Rambo. A market that was once too timid for a Beatles box opened its arms to KISS. It's a matter of not only what sells but also what the public finds acceptable.

Vanderlinden has started to take these marketing and historical themes further by speaking at universities. For her, it's an open-and-shut case: "As you look at American history, and you really start to see the changes in industry, you see that the lunchbox has carried through." ■



Bites from the box

- The first known lunchbox, made of tin and designed to look like a picnic basket, appeared in 1902. Later boxes would be made of steel, a reflection of American industry, and eventually of vinyl and other materials. The first kids' box came out in 1920.
- The Twinkie, a lunchbox staple and example of increasingly "convenient" food, made its debut in 1930.
- Mickey Mouse became the first licensed character on a lunchbox in 1935. It was the first example of a marketing tie-in to the mostly utilitarian lunchbox.
- The Roy Rogers box in 1953, in a Western showdown with Hopalong Cassidy, stepped up lunchbox design by featuring color lithographs on all sides of the box.
- The Beatles had the first band box in 1965. Sales plummeted after John Lennon's remark about the band being bigger than Jesus.
- The original G.I. Joe box showed scenes of the iconic soldier in the Vietnam War. As sentiments about the war changed, so did the box. Later boxes would show Joe fighting pollution and other less controversial enemies.
- The last true mass-produced steel box featured Rambo in 1985. Around that time, overzealous parents and schools banned steel boxes because they could be used as weapons. How about a side of irony with that cheese sandwich?

Photo illustration by Davey Gilbert.
Lunchbox courtesy of Anthony Vanderlinden, War Dog Productions.
Lunchbox photos by Harold Dorman, Smithsonian Institution.
For more information: LunchBox.com and Out by Jack Mingo.