

## RELIGION

## Video series uses vegetables to teach Bible lessons

By DEBRA HALE SHELTON  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

CHICAGO — When was the last time you saw a cucumber with bulging cheeks puffing on a tuba? How about a singing tomato or an airborne carrot with yellow pigtails and freckles?

Make them Bible-thumping veggies, and you have the recipe for "VeggieTales," a series of wildly popular animated videos aimed at teaching children biblical stories and values.

They're not the "The Prince of Egypt," but they are hot. Chicago-based Big Idea Productions, Inc., which produces the videos, has sold about 7 million copies since 1993 — 4 million this year — and has released three veggie music albums and six books.

These brightly colored veggies, who blend rhyming rap with silly tunes and a bit of blues, star in the top 10 selections on the Christian Booksellers Association's video bestseller list. Among all children's videos — not just religious ones — four "VeggieTales" videos recently ranked in the top 30 sellers, according to VideoScan.

The tales' hosts are the good-hearted but gullible Larry the Cucumber and his big-eyed, wiser sidekick, Bob the Tomato.

Larry and Bob — described by the company's founder as the "Abbott and Costello of the vegetable kingdom" — appear in all of the series' videos. Guest stars include the likes of 5-year-old Junior Asparagus; his best friend, Laura the Carrot; Madame Blue-

berry; and a zucchini portraying Moses.

"The veggies retell Bible stories like David and Goliath and the Good Samaritan in the hopes of teaching basic values like loving your neighbor and telling the truth.

For example, "Rack, Shack & Benny" uses chocolate bunnies to retell the story of Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego and the fiery furnace. The story shows everyone else eating as much candy as they want and some getting sick while Junior Asparagus remembers what his mother taught him and resists peer pressure.

Most of the stories come from the Old Testament because "We made a rule very early on that we would not portray Jesus as a veg-

etable," said Phil Vischer, the founder of Big Idea and co-creator of "VeggieTales."

Vischer provides the calming voice of Bob the Tomato, while Mike Nawrocki, writer and director at Big Idea, provides Larry the Cucumber's voice.

The videos are aimed at children ages 3 to 9. But with spoofs of Monty Python, Dr. Seuss, "Gilligan's Island" and even "Madame Bovary," the tales also appeal to college students, who have begun holding "VeggieTales" parties.

"It almost has like a cult following among college students," said Tim Burton, manager of Baptist Bookstore in Chattanooga, Tenn., where 1,200 people turned out to watch the "Madame Blueberry" video when

it was released last summer. That day, Burton sold about 500 copies of "VeggieTales" videos, which now number 11 and run about 30 minutes each.

Like other retailers, the store also offers veggie paraphernalia toys, stationery, ties, postcards, diaries and more.

Christian Taylor of the Chicago suburb of Wheaton said her 2-year-old son is "addicted" to "VeggieTales."

"He asks me to watch 'VeggieTales' all the time" and dances to the music, she said. Her 8-year-old son understands the videos' value discussions and watches "them over and over again."

Vischer, 32, thinks the videos, which sell for \$12.99 to \$14.99 each, are popular because "Parents are just really excited to see

something that really reflects their values and they can trust."

The popularity is reflected in his company's growth — from a staff of six or so in 1994 to 70 now. Big Idea also has expanded its sales, now offering some of the videos in mass-market stores instead of just Christian bookstores.

As for Bob the Tomato, he lets the audience know he's clearly sold on the series when he recites the opening lyrics to the show's theme song.

"If you like to talk to tomatoes, if a squash can make you smile, if you like to waltz with potatoes up and down the produce aisle, have we got a show for you," he sings as Larry the Cucumber makes not-so-lyrical music on his tuba.

## Convicted arsonists make video for Justice Department

THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

MOBILE, Ala. — Five young people convicted of burning a rural black church in southwest Alabama appear in a videotape prepared for the Justice Department that warns youths around the country about the penalties for arson.

The five whites, who were between 18 and 21 years old at the time of the fire, were convicted in federal court for burning the St. Joe Baptist Church on July 3, 1997.

The stiffest penalty went to Alan Odom, who got 15 years under a federal arson statute that had been recently strengthened after a rash of church burnings, some racially motivated.

Odom said race wasn't a motive for the fire.

"We did it, I guess, just trying to act macho," he said.

"Fifteen years — it's hard to get up and face every morning," Odom says on the video made by Trident Productions Inc. of Charleston, S.C.

Trident selected the case and shot the film earlier this year. The film also includes a Florida case.

Michael Woods and Odom set the fire, according to testimony.

"I just wanted to fit in with everybody else," Woods said. "I didn't want to be a weenie, I guess. I'd rather be called a weenie every day than be locked in here. I don't care what you call me."

Woods, Odom and three others — Jeremy Boone, Brandy Boone and John Kenneth Cumbie — all began federal prison terms last year, their sentences ranging from 41 months to the 15 years given to

Odom.

The Justice Department commissioned the \$75,000 video, titled "Burned: The Consequences of Juvenile Arson," and plans to distribute 10,000 copies to high schools all over the country, said Carol Winfield with the Justice Department.

"Obviously, we're going to have to target some areas," where teens have committed arson, especially involving churches, she said.

"Many teens aren't aware that arson is a crime. They think, 'Oh, we'll just set a fire,'" said Pat Mieszala, a nurse who specializes in burn cases and who is a consultant for the film. "The video points out a couple of things. It's not something to goof around with. You don't have to be the one to light the match to get in trouble."

The St. Joe arsonists were

interviewed in prison, with the exception of Jeremy Boone, who was still free on bond at the time. Odom, Woods and Cumbie are seen sharing the same small cell in Baldwin County, eating and playing cards.

Brandy Boone was interviewed in a Tallahassee, Fla., prison. According to testimony, she used a racial slur in encouraging the group to set fire to a black church. She was pregnant when she began her sentence.

"I won't get to see my baby. I'll have to come back here," Boone said. "If I don't get out next year, he or she will probably be two years old when I get out."

Cumbie's lawyer Dennis Knizley said the five contributed to the video voluntarily and they do not anticipate a break in their sentences for helping.

MAY THE  
SOURCE  
BE WITH  
YOU

Don't let the dark forces of ignorance defeat you. Right in this galaxy you can tap into the source—the free Consumer Information Catalog. It lists free and low-cost federal publications on a variety of important topics.

So dispel the darkness and get the source. Call toll-free 1-888-8 PUEBLO for your free Catalog.

Or set your coordinates for the Consumer Information Center Web site: [www.pueblo.gsa.gov](http://www.pueblo.gsa.gov)

Ten thousand eyes are on me,  
shouting Casey go all the way.

First base, second base, third base.  
Make your move today.

Do it, Casey, do it.  
Score, mighty Casey score.

But I just don't get it.  
Is that what girls are for?

Ten thousand times I've wondered,  
do I have to go all the way?

First base, second base, third base.  
If I say no, will he stay?

Do it, they say, do it.  
Or he'll find someone who will.

But if I'm just not ready,  
will he want me still?

If you don't talk with your kids about sex, who will? Be sure to start an honest, open dialogue with them at an early age. Call for a free booklet that can help you discuss sex, AIDS, violence and other tough issues.

Imaginations run wild. Talk with your child.

Call 1-800-CHILD-44.

Ad  
Council

CHILDREN  
NOW

KAISER  
FAMILY

[www.childrenow.org](http://www.childrenow.org)