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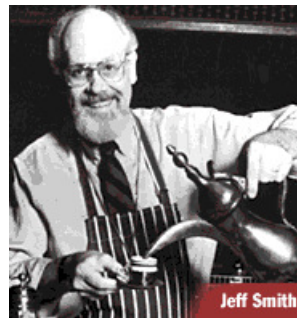
Cooking star pays plaintiffs in sexual abuse suits

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By **Steve Behrens**

[\(/wp-content/uploads/1998/07/peop813s.gif\)](#)In most sexual abuse cases, it's one person's word against another's. In the Frugal Gourmet's case, it was his word against 20 or more.

Four days before he was to face trial in Tacoma, Wash., Jeff Smith, host of the popular PBS cooking show, agreed July 1 [1998] to pay an undisclosed sum to seven young men who had accused him variously of groping, kissing and raping them when they were teenagers.



"Based on my interviews with a lot of the principals involved, I think it would have been pretty ugly," says Deborah Holton, a Portland *Oregonian* reporter who has followed the story closely. Court TV had asked to cover the trial, and it could have featured testimony against Smith from more than a dozen people who *didn't* sue him, as well as the seven who did. The plaintiffs' lawyer was also attempting to force testimony by Smith's wife and partner Patti, who has lived apart from him for years; Judge Fred Fleming had told her to testify, though Smith was appealing that ruling.

An eighth man had filed a separate suit, alleging that Smith already had agreed to a settlement with him in 1991 and had begun paying him hush money.

In settling with the seven, Smith, 59, did not admit to their charges, which he has flatly denied in the 18 months since the first suit was filed. Smith hasn't discussed the allegations with reporters, either; he declined *Current's* request for comments. No criminal charges were filed.

Though the law hasn't spoken on the accusations against Smith, the scandal has quick-frozen his 24-year career as one of public TV's kitchen stars. PBS broadcast rights for his latest series, *The Frugal Gourmet Cooks Italian*, expire in October, and United Methodist Communications last year canceled a separate series, *The Frugal Gourmet Keeps the Feast*, that ran on the Odyssey cable network.

Nat Katzman, Smith's producer for the last four series, says he'd like to make more *Frugal Gourmet* programs, but he and Smith haven't talked about a new series, and the chef hasn't put out a new cookbook on which to base programs.

If Smith does go ahead with a series, he probably will face the hurdle of signing an underwriter to cover all or much of the costs. PBS seldom puts money into how-to shows anymore, according to Katzman. And the *Frug* would face increased competition for airtime.

"While he was one of the first popular chefs, he's not the only popular chef available to us," says David Rubinsohn, programmer at WHYY, Philadelphia, which has continued to air the *Frug*.

Stations' reactions are sure to vary from city to city, predicts Judith LeRoy, a well-connected program research consultant. "There are a number of people who firmly believe he will be back."

In the Chaplain's Pantry

Except for one plaintiff, who says he was picked up and assaulted by Smith while hitchhiking in 1992, when he was 14, most of the men cite events in the 1970s. Observing a state law that exempts some cases from the statute of limitations, they carefully note in legal papers that they only realized in the 1995-97 period about the damage they had suffered.

In the 1970s, these plaintiffs were high school students working for Smith, a Methodist minister and former chaplain at the University of Puget Sound, when he operated a deli and catering service, the Chaplain's Pantry, near downtown Tacoma.

At the time, several staffers of public TV station KTPS (now KBTC) often ate lunch at the deli, and were impressed by the extroverted, knowledgeable proprietor, says John Givens, a travel program producer who was then

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executive producer at the station. Smith began making cooking programs for the station and soon adopted the title *The Frugal Gourmet*. With his lively, humorous presentation, his taste for theological and anthropological observations and his eclectic recipes, Smith came to rival Julia Child as a TV cooking personality. In 1983, Smith took the show to a bigger producer, Chicago's WTTW, and in 1990 to Katzman's A La Carte Productions. His cookbooks grew from a thin KTPS booklet to national bestsellers.

A key figure in Jeff Smith's drama is Clint Smith (no relation), one of the men who had worked for Jeff Smith at the deli and later served two years in prison for forging checks on the chef's business account.

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Clint Smith began making his accusations to reporters in 1993, according to press reports, and in summer 1995, went public on a local talk-radio program that was hashing over the topic of celebrity abusers. According to the *Oregonian*, he said: "I know you're listening, because whenever you hear the word 'pedophile,' you start to worry. So hear me, Jeff. It's over."

One person who heard Clint Smith on the radio, according to Holton, was George Heitman, a maintenance worker at a Christian day camp, who was the first to file suit. In January 1997, Heitman charged that the chef had coerced him to have sex when he was 15 — leading him to drugs and attempted suicide. He wanted to prevent the same thing from happening to anyone else, he told *USA Today*.

In April 1997, Clint Smith filed suit separately, through a different attorney, and six others joined in Heitman's suit several days later.

"When I read the articles in the newspaper, my jaw hangs open," says John Givens, who worked on the first *Frugal Gourmet* shows. Givens says he had never seen any sexual misbehavior by Smith, though he recalls hearing that someone had once leafletted cars around the restaurant, making accusations against the chef.

Clint Smith's suit charged the PBS star with both rape and breach of contract: that Jeff Smith had "intimidated, coerced and persuaded" him to have sex in the late '70s, when Clint was under 16; agreed to a large 1991 settlement; and then failed to pay the full amount. He filed a document purporting to be the settlement with the chef. The defense attorney called it "a bogus creation."

Judge Fleming dismissed the suit, now under appeal, but information on

the case is scarce; the judge closed hearings and sealed documents in Clint Smith's case last fall, apparently to avoid pretrial publicity that could sway potential jurors in the seven-person case.

"Just about everybody I talked to told a similar story of being encouraged to drink alcohol and undergoing a grooming process," says Deborah Holton of the *Oregonian*. "Jeff Smith was a well-known and respected member of the adult community there. The boys went in thinking this is a good guy, and they were pretty overwhelmed by the touching and the drinking. They ended up feeling they were a little collusive."

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One plaintiff, Chris Thomas of San Diego, told *USA Today* he stuck with the job at Smith's deli even though he was fending off advances by the boss. "It was one of those dirty little secrets — in a big way."

Heitman had been deeply ashamed of what happened. "I felt very trapped, and very confused," he told the *Seattle Times*. "My parents were happy that I was working. I wasn't a real high achiever at school. It was a total nightmare."

The plaintiffs tried to place some responsibility on Patti Smith, the chef's wife and business partner, for not stopping the abuses, and Holton, the *Oregonian* reporter, who has done volunteer work in social services, believes other members of the larger community may also have erred by not investigating rumors about Jeff Smith.

"In the course of talking with people around Tacoma, I found this was an open secret in Tacoma," says Holton. "This community had heard about this and known about it for years. ... I think part of the reason people don't want to believe it is that it means they had turned their back on it."

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