

OF THESE I SING

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To most Americans it must seem that time is measured from national crisis to national crisis. Over the past one hundred years hardly a decade has gone by that the country has not experienced a major catastrophic event. The Spanish American War was followed closely by the War to End All Wars which was followed by the Great Depression, World War II, the Korean Conflict and the thing in Viet Nam. Interwoven with these events were Civil Rights disturbances and minor recessions to give us a hundred years of crises intermittent with periods of peace and prosperity.

In spite of the trials and tribulations of the past century the country has held fast to its democratic goals. It has grown in size and strength. The people have persevered. They have depended on a source of strength, hope and inspiration that has served them well through the century. What is it that has provided greatest sustenance to this nation in recent years?

A culture should be judged by its actions rather than by its words, by what it does and yes, what it reads. Therein lies the source of American energy.

Since the advent of Richard Fulton Outcault's Yellow Kid on October 18, 1896 in William Randolph Hearst's American Humorist, the American newspaper comic strip has been the most widely read form of all American literature. Within fifty years of the first appearance of the Yellow Kid 81% of all

adult Americans over the age of 19 were regular readers of the comics. In 1954 the workshop on THE CARTOON NARRATIVE at New York University reported that four out of five adult Americans, regardless of education, station in life or sex were avid followers of the daily and Sunday funnies. This does not take into account the millions of children six years of age and older who were just as addicted to the comic pages. Nothing could have such a large following in a country without manifesting a profound influence on the society in which it flourishes. This is especially true when that stimulus is present in a society that is new and struggling for an identity of its own.

Let us look at this thing that has become a fundamental part of our day-to-day lives and has played such a major role in making us what we are today. It has not, as many of us assume, always been there. It just seems that way.

When this writer was a child the family visited two shrines each Sunday. One was the First Christian Church, the second was the street corner where we had a wide selection of Sunday newspapers from such far away places as St. Louis, Chicago, Memphis and Pittsburg, each with a large section devoted to the comics. We never left the corner without at least two newspapers--those with the best selection of comics.

When Outcault started publishing his McGoogan Avenue, which featured the Yellow Kid, the ingredients of the comic strip as we know it, came together to form the fetus of today's strip. Those who try to define the comic art claim that it must possess at least two common features

--one, a series of sketches laid out in sequence and two, a written narrative most often enclosed in balloons to indicate who is doing the talking in the panel. The strip should relate a gag or humorous event self-contained in the strip for the day or create enough interest to continue the particular escapade over two or more daily or Sunday editions of the paper. Outcault's strip met this criteria.

For sure, the bringing together of gag writing with a series of drawings was an American innovation--as American as apple pie, Old Glory, and Jazz, and Whoopie Goldberg. Add to this another great American tradition, greed, and the desire to make money and you have the formula for success.

Ever since we were ejected from the Garden of Eden we have had a basic drive to record our everyday life in a manner that would let generations to follow know something about how we lived. We have most often chosen to draw pictures in action sequences as our medium. When we lived in caves in Spain we drew pictures on the walls to tell how we were going to get our next meal. This primitive drive is so strong that many modern Americans still practice the art in public restrooms. We, in like manner, carved magnificent statues and placed them in a parade around the friezes and pediments of our temples and public buildings. We have, in like manner, painted murals depicting the lives of religious heroes. Our State Houses are decorated with scenes from our country's history showing the great men of our past. During the modern era cartoons of social satire such as those of Thomas Rowlandson and George Cruickshank in 18th and 19th century England have demonstrated this drive. All of this is a test to the power and appeal of conveying a story thorough visual means in

related sequences of pictures. Narrative art has been used to record acts, thoughts and feelings in terms reflecting contemporary human interests whether in religious ritual, historical event or sacred myths since we came upon the face of the earth. However, it was not until the close of the 19th century and the beginning of the age of mass communications that the technique of pictorial narrative became a major mass medium, comparable in its influence and popularity to moving pictures, radio and television.

When one reads the history of the United States and learns of the events that molded this great nation: The Revolutionary War, The War Between the States, and World War I and II it is unlikely that he/she will find any reference to the Great Comic Strip War of the turn of this century.

As most literate adults know, there were two newspaper giants in this country during the latter part of the 19th century and 20th century-- William Randolph Hearst on the West coast and Joseph Pulitzer in New York. As soon as it became apparent that the newly discovered comics would sell newspapers, the war was on. Comic strip artists were hot items.

The new institution of the newspaper comic strip received its greatest impetus from a circulation war between the New York World, published by Pulitzer and the Morning (later New York) Journal acquired by Hearst in 1895. The World had ordered a color press with the intention of reproducing famous works of art, but its initial experiments with color drawings were so unsuccessful and public reaction so adverse that the plan was abandoned and the color press left idle for nine months.

In order to recover some of its investment, the World's general manager urged the Sunday Editor, Morill Goddard, to find some means of using the press to advantage. The results were the first full page newspaper comics in color, drawn by the World's editorial cartoonist, Walt McDougal.

Motivated by the idea that the public would respond more favorably to humorous cartoons than to political drawings, McDougal hired a draftsman named R. F. Outcault to draw comics for the Sunday color page. Outcault created a series depicting events in "McGoogans Avenue", "Casey's Alley", and "Hogan's Alley" in which there was one continuing character, a nameless and hairless waif dressed in a four sack. Due to accidents in the dyeing process, this sack changed color in nearly every printing, until a time when both the gamin's face and his garment became a bright yellow, and the public was so arrested by his appearance and antics that the series came to be called the "Yellow Kid".

The attention accorded the "Yellow Kid" caused William Randolph Hearst to order a color press of his own and hire Outcault away from the World. Hearst described his new Sunday color comic weekly as "eight pages of iridescent polychromous effulgence that it makes the rainbow look like a lead pipe " (Americana).

From then on the comic war started in earnest. Hearst's Journal carried Fredrick Burr Oppers' "Happy Hooligan" and a series called "The Katzenjammer Kids" based on the Max and Mority cartoons by William Bush in Germany and drawn by Rudolph Dirks. James Swinnerton was brought from San Francisco to continue his "Little Tigers and Bears" and later to

create "Mount Ararat", "Mr. Butch", and "Little Jimmy". Shortly thereafter, the World found a comic strip genius in George McManus, creator of "Bringing Up Father", and the Herald began to compete with its own comic artists. According to Carlton Waugh in his historical survey, The Comics (1947), the three pioneers of the comic strip were Outcault, Swinnerton, and Dirks.

The continuing character was contributed by Swinnerton and Outcault.

The sequence of pictures was tried out experimently by Outcault and used regularly for the first time by Dirks and refined in technical detail by Swinnerton. Speech in the drawing started with Outcault and was developed into true comic form by both Swinnerton and Dirks as well as Outcault in his later works.

It remained for H. C. (Bud) Fisher in his "Mutt and Jeff" (1908) to combine these three elements into an actual strip of pictures across the page, thus establishing the comic strip in its present form. It also established the fact that the newspaper comic strip was a major circulation device and an integral part of American culture.

Some historians mark the Spanish American War as the emergence of the United States as a world power. It could, perhaps, be a coincidence that the war happened at the same time that Maggie and Jiggs, Hans and Fritz, Mutt and Jeff, Krazy Kats and their colleagues were providing impetus for our coming forth as a great nation with a cultural identity.

Week day comic strips in black and white were initiated in the Hearst morning and afternoon papers across the country in the early 1900's. At first these were minaturized versions of the Sunday comic strips--self-contained gags about reappearing characters for whom the strips were named. Some might appear for as many as ten successive week days, but that was accidental. The average frequency was for three days a week and the editorial purpose was to provide daily variety in the strips, not daily duplication of the same features.

On January 31, 1912 Hearst introduced the nation's first full page daily comic section in his New York Evening Journal; adding it to his other afternoon papers from coast to coast a few days later. Initally made up of four large daily strips, including Harriman's "Family Upstairs" and Harry Hershfield's continuing cliffhanger, "Desperate Desmond", the Hearst page expanded to five, then to six and finally to nine daily stips through the teens and twenties. Other papers copied Hearst and by the 1920's the phenomenon was to be found in hundreds of newspapers around the country, fed by dozens of daily strips distributed by a multitude of small syndicates. From these early small syndicates emerged the giants of the '30's, such as Hearst's King Features, Newspaper Enterprises Association, The Chicago Tribune - New York News Syndicate, The Associated Press and United Features from United Press.

By the 1930's the comic strip by the daily pageful and Sunday color section collections were to be found in most American and Canadian papers. The comic strip was given increasing space and prominence, with editors vying for the newest, strongest, and most original. As a result, the comic strip was to be seen at its most varied, inventive, colorful and exciting

plenty in the '30's and early '40's--a peak of creativity and popularity it has not held since.

Locally, the Kentucky New Era was carrying one could-be called comic strip entitled "Everett True" as early as 1925. This was a three panel strip with the rectangular panels stacked vertically.

By 1932 the local paper had a full page of funnies. There were two one panel features at the top of the page. "The Boarding House" starring Major Hoople and "Out Our Way" were oversize panels that stretched across the page. Just below these were three and four panel strips that included "Boots and Her Buddies", "Freckles and His Friends", "Mom and Pop" (later changed to "The Newfangles"), "Wash Tubbs" , later "Captain Easy" and "Salesman Sam". These were all daily black and whites as the New Era had no Sunday edition.

During the first two decades of its existence, the new comic strip medium appeared chiefly on large pulp paper pages in color-printed Sunday humor and magazine sections of the most prosperous metropolitan newspapers. Three comic figures of popular fiction dominated, virtually to the exclusion of all others, the demon child, the clownish innocent, and the humanized animal. "The Yellow Kid", "The Katzenjammer Kids", "Outcaults", "Buster Brown", "Little Sammy Sneeze" and C. W. Kahles, "Bobby Bounce" are prime examples of the demon child.

George Herriman's "Krazy Kat" starting in 1916 is the best known of the humanized animals.

"Boob McNutt" by Rube Goldberg is a good example of the innocent clown.

The Golden Age of the Comic Page ranged from the mid-twenties to the late forties. This was the period in which weekend comic sections went from four to eight and then to sixteen pages, with the Hearst papers initiating a fantastic thirty-two page tabloid in 1935.

By this time the comic pages included, along with the humorous gag strip, continuing adventure tales such as "Tarzan", "Prince Valiant", "Wash Tubbs", "Mandrake, the Magician", and "Dick Tracy" as well as Herald Gray's strip about a misfortunate orphan named, "Annie". Most of these were drawn in cartoonish fashion, but some were painstakingly drafted with each panel representing a work of art.

It would be difficult to find an adult American who does not have a favorite comic strip, one that is currently being published or one that is remembered from a nostalgic period of earlier life. It would also be an exhaustive effort to try to mention each and every title that has graced the pages of the nation's papers and it is not the intention of this paper to give a review of each strip, but rather to emphasize the impact that the comics have had on American life.

What were you doing on December 7, 1941 when you first heard of the bombing of Pearl Harbor? This writer was stretched out on the living room floor looking at the Sunday comics and listening to Uncle Don on Radio WMC Memphis read the same pages.

Let's look at some of the ways that the comic strip has helped to mold American culture.

Our vocabulary has been enhanced by such words as "goon" and "jeep" from the comic strip, "Thimble Theater", starring Popeye. Al Capp gave us the word, "Smoo" and the term "Mickey Mouse" applied to any project has come to mean small or childish.

How many college students have attended Sadie Hawkins' dances whose name is derived from Al Capp's "Lil Abner" and the day when courting procedures were reversed.

There are sites and monuments all across this country named for comic strip characters. Mount Joe Palooka is near Wilkes Barre, Pennsylvania. Crystal City, Texas has a statue of Popeye in appreciation for his help to the spinach farmer, and not over ninety miles from this location there is a monument to the man of steel, Superman, at Metropolis, Illinois.

The comics have had their influence on fashion as can be tested any day one visits a local school and sees sweat shirts adorned with the likes of Garfield and Snoopy. Just after World War II women began wearing wedge shoes inspired by space shoes worn by the women in the Flash Gordon strip.

Characters from the comics have also appeared in other entertainment media from movies to ballet.

Movies include "Dick Tracy", "Blondie", "Popeye", "Buck Rogers", "Red Ryder" and who, over age 50, can ever forget the Saturday movie serial, Flash Fordon, starring Buster Crabb.

There were, and are, Broadway musicals: "Annie", "Popeye" and "Lil Abner" to mention but three. Radio serials of "Dick Tracy" and "Little Orphan Annie" were after school favorites of school children in the '40's.

And there have been songs written about the people in the funnies: "Popeye, the Sailorman", "Betty Boop", "Barney Google" and others.

During World War II many a fighter plane and bomber were decorated with the pictures of comic strip characters and at least one army division used a comic hero on its shoulder patch. The Fighting 31st used a picture of "Felix, the Cat" carrying a lighted bomb.

The comics have been read on the air to entertain boys and girls. They have also been used to gain political influence. In the 1930's New York Major Fiorello La Guardia went on the air and read the Sunday comics during a strike of the city's newspaper employees.

Comic strip personalities have played important roles in the promotion and sale of consumer products for many years in this country. Their likenesses have been displayed on everything from corn flakes to automobiles. The jeep, a magical little animal from the "Popeye" strip, gave his name to a rough, tough little vehicle that could transverse almost any terrain during the Second World War. The name continues to be used on a line of American made cars today.

There have probably been a million wrist watches sold by none other than Mickey Mouse.

Red Ryder BB guns that once sold for less than five dollars are now priced at about \$35.

The 1990 Sears Christmas Wishbook listed the following items bearing comic strip character pictures on them:

Garfield telephones

Minnie Mouse tricycles

Dick Tracy detective kits

Mickey Mouse and Snoopy tents

Bugs Bunny pajamas

Superman pajamas

Dick Tracy, Garfield, Mickey Mouse, Snoopy, and Bugs Bunny watches.

This year not one item featured Popeye or Annie, both of whom have been major sellers in the not to distant past.

To illustrate just how seriously Americans take their comics, when Milton Caniff portrayed the death of Raven Sherman in "Terry and the Pirates" 1400 letters of sympathy poured in from all over the country. On the day she was buried in the hill country north of Chunking, 450 students at Loyola University in Chicago paid tribute to her by gathering on their campus facing east for a minute of silence.

When Smiling Jack, in the strip by the same name by Zac Mosley, was lost in the Pacific, Pan American Airlines was urged by agitated fans to send out a rescue plane and when Little Annie Rooney was pictured without gifts for Christmas, the papers, which carried the strip, were deluged with toys.

Some of the strips of the past and several today have tried to carry messages for social change but for the most part these strips have been short lived and unsuccessful in their mission. Perhaps the most popular strip with a message of social protest was Al Capp's "Lil Abner". One strip with considerable following today is Garry Trudeau's "Doonsbury". There are a few who claim to have the intellectual ability to understand his messages, but they are suspect. They are much like the public in the children's story, "The Emperor and His New Clothes".

On how the comics should be viewed, John Carady wrote, "You have to be lucky enough to have been around for a rather long stretch of years, say seven decades, to remember a time when newspaper comics were just newspaper comics rather than sociological documents and works of art with their own set of innovative ethetic principles, which they have become. If you have been really lucky, luckier than all but a handul of people I know, the comics are tied to a time when you were a small boy in a town about a hundred miles from Kansas City and your weekly reward for good behavior in Sunday School was a nickel for a copy of the Kansas City Star. Along with reports of the sinking of the Titanic in 1912, the declaration of war in Europe in 1914 and other events in the fictional area outside a ten mile radius from the Bourbon County Court House in Fort Scott, the Star kept you abreast of the adventures of "The Katzenjammer Kids", "Happy Holligan", "Buster Brown" and other personalities of the real world."

The Commonwealth of Kentucky was not without its contribution to this real world of the comics. Fontaine Fox, Jr. of Louisville was the author of "Toonerville Folks" which featured the famous trolley by the same name.

The strip which began in 1915 featured Mickey "Himself" McGuire and ran until 1955.

When the historians write the final chapters covering the past one hundred years of the story of America, it is unlikely that our friends from the comics will be mentioned. But if we who are much closer to the era under consideration give serious thought to the matter we might, perhaps, produce a slightly different version of the past century.

It is entirely possible that our ship of state could have sailed through the First World War without Woodrow Wilson or John J. Pershing, but could we have survived without "Maggie and Jiggs", "The Katzenjammer Kids" or "Mutt and Jeff"?

In like manner we could have lived through the twenties without Warren G. Harding and Herbert Hoover, but how could we have made it without "Krazy Kat" and "The Toonerville Trolley"?

We could have survived the thirties without FDR but not without the "Gumps" or "Moon Mullins". And what would life have been during the forties without "Popeye", "Buck Rogers" and "Alley Oop"?

And, of course, today when we tire of the antics of Wally Wonderful, and the goings on in Washington, we can find blessed relief in friends like "Ziggy", "Beetle Bailey" and "Hagar and The Wizard of Id".

The real beauty and strength of the American newspaper comic strip is that the truly successful ones have not attempted to change us, to

sway us either to the left or to the right, but rather they have reflected us. They have caused us to look at ourselves and to laugh. "Beetle Bailey's" success has resulted because so many of us have been there, so with "Blondie", "Gasoline Alley" and if you are old enough, "Apple Mary". Whenever we have gotten carried away with our importance, these fictional friends have been there to bring us back to the real world. "Pogo, the world's most famous possum, created by Walt Kelly, put things in their proper perspective when he said, "We have met the enemy and he is us". And on another occasion in a statement that could well be applied to modern America, "We are beleaguered by insurmountable opportunity".

Viva La Comics!

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