

## **SPARKY AND THE CREATION OF AN AMERICAN ICON**

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I do not remember a time when I have picked up a newspaper and looked at the comics page and have not seen the comic strip, "Peanuts", as a regular feature. To my generation, it is an everyday staple. I have grown to know and love each and every character created by Charles Monroe Schulz, better known to his friends as Sparky.

Charles Schulz was born on November 26, 1922 to Carl Fred Schulz and Dena Bertina Halverson in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Sparky's father, Carl, was a barber and was for his entire working life. Carl was from German stock and was a hard-working man who provided for his family, even during the darkest periods of the Depression. His mother, Dena, was a homemaker and of Norwegian descent.

One of the most popular comic strips at that time was "Barney Google" with an also-ran racehorse nicknamed "Sparky". While still a baby, Charles was saddled (no pun intended) with that nickname by an uncle and it would stick with him for the rest of his life. To his friends, Charles Schulz would always be Sparky. Schulz's mother and family and relatives were quite poor,

and he learned at a very young age to be fearful of poverty. In fact, the contingent nature of survival in this world became a steady undercurrent in Schulz's work. It seems that Schulz learned grim humor and impulse from his mother's Norwegian clan and from his father, hard work and public relations.

Throughout his career, Schulz would draw on friends and family to frame the characters that would literally become iconic figures in American culture. One example is Sherman Plepler, who lived around the corner from Sparky as a young boy. "Shermy" played the violin. His mother was a fine pianist and Beethoven was Mary Plepler's favorite composer, and Sparky liked to come over and listen to her play. Who among us does not smile or harken back to innumerable comic strips involving the character of Schroeder hunched over his tiny piano playing strains from his favorite composer, Beethoven?

From an early age, Sparky exhibited a love of drawing. In fact, his kindergarten teacher, interviewed years later, recalled telling him, "Someday, Charles, you are going to be an artist."

I must attribute much of my research for this paper to David Michaelis' biography of Schulz. While reading it I was immediately struck by the many contradictions that formed Charles Schulz's personality, and, eventually, his

comic creations . When you think about it, as adults we are all shaped by our experiences as a child. In Sparky's case, this was especially true. As a young child, his teachers decided to skip him ahead a grade in school. As a result, Schulz was the smallest child in his class. While very bright, he never felt comfortable exhibiting his intelligence. This appears to have engendered a sense of resentment in Schulz. In later life, he was often humble and self-demeaning in interviews and public appearances. In private, however, Schulz often lamented that he was not appreciated for his talent, intellect and skill.

Cousins remembered young Sparky doodling randomly anywhere and at anytime, whether in a corner by himself when everyone else was playing, or even on formal occasions such as in church or at family gatherings. "He was always drawing something with a pencil."

On his 11<sup>th</sup> birthday, his mother took him shopping and Sparky bought a copy of "How to Draw Cartoons". This was a rather sophisticated manual in which the essentials of the craft were illustrated. Schulz studied the text, copied examples and began experimenting with pen lines, a true cartoonists' craft. It was then that he became, in his own eyes, a student of this compelling skill. Comic strips of this day were "Happy Hooligan", "Boob McNutt", "The Katzenjammer Kids", "The Gumps", "Gasoline Alley" and

"Blondie". Others included, "Terry and the Pirates", "Joe Palooka", "Li'l Abner" and "Snuffy Smith". By the mid-1930's Sunday comic sections had ballooned from the standard 8 pages to 16 pages and sometimes 32. There were seven major comic strip syndicates.

Despite being small for his age, Sparky, by all accounts, excelled at certain sports. He became a very good baseball player and constantly was the organizer of neighborhood games. It is easy to see how he created Charlie Brown's love/hate relationship with baseball and his enduring travails as the manager of a hapless neighborhood baseball team. In addition, Sparky was a good ice skater and hockey player. How can one ever forget Snoopy as the "world famous ice skater" or the fearsome hockey player.

Growing up, Sparky loved dogs and, by accounts, his most beloved pet was Spike, a hound mixture, white with black spots, who quickly revealed himself to be one of a kind. From the start, Spike was the family clown. He knew how to ring a doorbell, and learned to wait for the evening newspaper. He had an array of quirks. He slept in a wicker clothes basket in the hallway and disdained to drink from a dog's dish, preferring – in fact, demanding – cold, running water from the tap of the bathroom sink, putting one paw on the sink and standing there until someone came in and turned the faucet for him.

Charlie Brown's refrain could have been Sparky's, "Why can't I have a normal dog like everyone else?"

At age 14, Sparky sent a pen and ink drawing to the syndicated comic feature, "Believe it or Not". His drawing was of Spike as a subject worthy of Ripley's daily offering of odd facts and conversation piece marvels. Robert Ripley, himself a high school dropout from Santa Rosa, California who had sold his first cartoon at age 14, accepted this edition and gave it good play. The by-line read, "Drawn by Sparky". King Features Syndicate ensured that the name "Sparky" was on display in as many as 300 newspapers in 23 countries around the world.

One night in January of his senior year in high school, his mother came into his room and said, "Look here in the newspaper." It says, "Do you like to draw?" and she showed Sparky an advertisement for mail-order art lessons. "Draw me," said a pouting girl fashionably adorned. The school in question boasted of opening doors to "big money" for cartoonists who completed its course. As it turned out, like many who responded to that well-known ad, his skills were insufficient to win a free course. However, by responding to the ad, Sparky and his family did earn a visit from a salesman from the Federal Schools offering a correspondence course in cartooning. On February 19,

1940, his father enrolled him as a home study student in Federal School of Illustrating and Cartooning.

Sadly, it was at this time that Sparky would learn that his mother, Dena, had contracted cancer and was slowly dying. After graduating high school, he did not follow many of his classmates enrolling at the University of Minnesota.

In his words, he was "too dumb". By this time, he was set on being a comic strip artist but he had no way of knowing how to do it. He began working long, solitary hours at night at a makeshift drawing board and began submitting sketches to Colliers or the Saturday Evening Post. Faithfully, he sent off his sketches, and the following week, back they would come in their self-addressed, stamped envelopes with rejection slips. Forty years later, Shulz would recall vividly the "sinking feeling on reading the brief note that told me my submission was not worthy." On December 1, 1941, Sparky officially graduated from Federal Schools, Inc.

Within days of his 20<sup>th</sup> birthday, November 26, 1942, Sparky received his draft notice and thereafter would embark on a life-changing experience. Within months, Sparky's mother, Dena, passed away from cancer and he would ship out to his duty station, Camp Campbell, Kentucky. These are his recollections: "The first few days – maybe a week or so – I was totally alone.

I didn't know a soul." Never having been away from home, he was lonely, friendless and homesick. Interestingly, never in his life had he handled so much as an air rifle, but training would reveal him to be a steady marksman. Habitually neat and organized, acutely observant, disinclined to speak, Schulz was bound to survive, and indeed to prosper, at an institution whose golden rule was keep your eyes open and your mouth shut. He once remarked, "I have never seen a country that could get so hot and so cold in short a time."

It is these memories, of being shipped off to his duty station at Camp Campbell, Kentucky, that evoked Charlie Brown's travails at summer camp; lonely, miserable and looking for friends. Schulz constantly carried a sketch book with him, but he compared his own half-formed, unmuddled GI's to Bill Mauldin's grimly authentic, front-line foot soldiers, Willie and Joe, in Stars and Stripes, and recognized his own shortcomings as a war cartoonist. By June of 1943, he had put on 25 pounds and was promoted to corporal. He was also selected to become one of the GI school teachers who would train the youngest and smartest of the new transfers. This may well have kept him alive. Selected to remain at Camp Campbell, he fell behind the typical assignments for civilian draftees his age whose units by early 1944 were being shipped to England, destined to the horrors of Omaha Beach and St. Lo,

Bastogne and the Battle of the Bulge. In 1944 Sparky was promoted to sergeant. In 1945 his outfit finally boarded a transport for Europe. Schulz had never before seen the ocean. While his unit did not see much action as the war was winding down, his unit would experience the horrors of such places as Nordlingen and Dachau.

Schulz, in his later life, played down his service in the military, however it is clear that his awakening to his abilities to lead other men and the skills he learned while in the military would bolster an admittedly low opinion of himself.

After the war, Sparky returned to Minneapolis and continued his drawing. He returned to Federal Schools, Inc., now called Art Instruction, and was hired as a part-time instructor. During this time, he was constantly submitting samples of his work.

In April of 1947 Sparky, toying with a number of different ideas for comic strips, created four serial panels which showed recurring child characters in on-going settings and situations. But now, instead of including parents and teachers as he had in earlier parts, he eliminated grownups entirely. "I began to experiment with drawing little, tiny kids. I must confess that, at the time, I only had a meager interest in drawing little kids. I drew



them because they were what sold.”

Schulz took a batch of the new cartoons to the Minneapolis Star Tribune. The editor liked them, bought them and published the first block of four as a panel entitled “Sparky’s Li’l Folks” on Sunday, June 8, 1947, following up with another the next week and then offered to publish the feature “off and on during the summer.”

As Li’l Folks was launched in St. Paul, Schulz made his first trip to Chicago to try out the syndicates that summer of 1947. Carrying a package of some 15 samples, without an appointment (he did not know he was supposed to have one) he could advance no further than the receptionist. He did manage to get shown in to the editor of Publisher’s Syndicate, but a grim-faced editor told him that his work was “not professional enough”. Sparky returned to Minneapolis but was undaunted. He returned to his work in the Educational Department of Art Instruction and continued submitting samples of his work.

Then one spring day in 1948, Sparky had a fresh idea. Thinking of the gag cartoons he had loved before the war, little kids with great big heads as he described them, Sparky enlarged the heads of his characters, shortened the arms and knew immediately that he was on the right track. Over the next

12 months the size of the characters had substantially changed. The children now stood 2-1/2 heads high overall, and the girls as big and strong as the boys. None of the children were pretty, let alone cute. By June of that year, the heads of Schulz's kids had swelled, each being almost  $\frac{3}{4}$  as far across as the torso in width alone. The mouth, in some renderings, as wide as the waist. Schulz's Li'l Folks - normal-looking kids at the start of their run - provided the body types that would help them create a radically original comic strip in 1950. When one thinks about it now, the size of the characters' heads in Peanuts seem nothing out of the ordinary. But when one looks objectively at the characters as rendered by Schulz, they could almost be considered grotesque. So what caused this change?

In 1948, Frieda Mae Rich, joined the Art Instruction faculty. She was a dwarf, born with a condition that limited her adult height to four feet. Witty, charming, morally courageous, she was 27 years old and never let her size stop her. When Frieda put her elbows on Sparky's desktop, she did not have to lean over. Another employee recalled how she'd be resting on her elbows the way the Peanuts characters rest their elbows on the stone wall while they talk. When she sat at her desk, her feet would plank outward in front of her, never touching the ground. Her legs would be straight out just the way

Schroeder would be when he played the piano. Among Sparky's colleagues, it was recognized that the physical characteristics of the Schulz characters were lifted right from her body, the way she stood, sat and moved and the relative size of the head and body passed directly into the strip. Frieda also had another magic quality that reached deep into the characters: she was an adult in a child-shaped body. Do any of you recall the character of "Freida" in "Peanuts"? The "girl with the naturally curly hair"?

Another employee of Art Instruction was Donna Mae Johnson, "a soft-skinned, rosy-cheeked Swede, pretty and petite, with red hair, bright blue eyes and a radiant smile." Donna Mae Johnson would become Charlie Brown's "little red-headed girl" that he would forever pine for but to whom he could never be able to reveal his feelings.

In 1950 newspaper circulation had reached its zenith, but with the coming of television and the new consumer society, all was about to change. Between 1946 and 1966, one in every four morning dailies expired. However, in 1950, television was still in its formative stages. A mere 3 million American families owned a TV in 1950. Nearly 100 million Americans still read the comics everyday.

It was at this time that Sparky again set out to submit his new

characters and his original style of drawing. One of his submissions had been noticed by the editorial director of United Features Syndicate, a syndicate in New York. The editors liked Schulz's drawing style and the simplicity and subtlety of the themes of his cartoons but urged Schulz to define his characters' personalities.

When Sparky returned to Art Instruction he showed the first "definite" character to his friend and fellow employee, Charlie Francis Brown, who later recalled he came over to Brown's desk to announce, "I have a new idea but it involves using your name." Whereupon Schulz laid before him a drawing of the little balloon-headed boy on whom he had begun to focus the strip. His friend Charlie Brown studied the figure for a moment and then asked, "Couldn't you make him look a little more like Steve Canyon or Superman? He looks so simple, don't you think?" With his huge, weightless sphere of a head, Charlie Brown looked like an Alka-Seltzer advertisement. As Schulz began drawing it in 1950, the depiction of Charlie Brown and his gang would be continuous, albeit with subtle changes, until his death.

Schulz once noted, "To be a cartoonist is to speak, not only to draw. Comics say things. The words must come from somewhere." And as he told a friend at Camp Campbell, he was not so much concerned with his ability to

draw funny pictures as he was worried about whether he would be able to put words in the characters' mouths.

On Wednesday, June 14, 1950, Schulz was offered the standard five-year contract; the syndicate would own the copyright on the characters and split profits 50/50. Two days after the Trade Press announced the fall release of Li'l Folks, Tack Knight, creator of "Little Folks", a defunct strip of the 1930's, saw fit to claim exclusive rights to the title for use in films, television or radio, arguing that "although the spelling of the Schulz feature is different, the sound is definitely similar and the subject the same." Three days later, after a search of the U.S. Patent Office, attorneys confirmed that Little Folks had been a registered trademark since 1931, and so the syndicate telephoned to say they needed a new name for Schulz's strip.

To Sparky's ear, "Charlie Brown" or even "Good Old Charlie Brown" sounded appropriate. But, in New York, one of the United Features executives happened to notice an article about the Howdy Doody Show, the children's television program at that moment gaining fabulous popularity in which an audience, comprised exclusively of boys and girls, sat under a white banner loudly emblazoned Peanut Gallery. Every broadcast of Howdy Doody was opened by a signature greeting of, "How, Peanuts", by Chief Thunderdud

played by Bill LeCornec. For whatever reason, "Peanuts" was added to the list of possible names, and the executives at United Features summarily decided that "Peanuts" should be the name for the strip.

Sparky hated it. "I don't think with a name like that it will go very far." To top it all off, one other name had to be changed before publication. The nameless little black and white dog who had appeared in Li'l Folks and several post cartoons was now slated to reappear in the strip as "Sniffy". Then, one day during his lunch hour at Art Instruction, as Sparky was walking around the Powers Department Store in uptown Minneapolis, he passed a magazine stand displaying a new comic book about a dog of that very name, and he thought, "Oh, no, there goes my dog's name." But as he was returning to his office, a conversation with his mother prior to her death came to him. She told Sparky, "If I ever have another dog, I think we should name it Snupi", a Norwegian term of endearment. Schultz changed the name to Snoopy and the rest, as they say, is history.

United Features Syndicate unveiled "Peanuts" on October 2, 1950. On that day, Sparky set out in a driving rain to buy every paper that carried the strip besides its hometown access in the Minneapolis Tribune. When Sparky asked the news dealer if he had any papers with "Peanuts" in them, the news

dealer said, "No, and we don't have any with popcorn either," his worst fears about the title came crashing down upon him. The more he thought about it, the angrier he became. He simply hated the name. Again and again in the early years of the strip, the question would arise, "Who is Peanuts anyway?" "Is Charlie Brown Peanuts?" "Is Peanuts Snoopy?" One magazine editor wrote, "Peanuts never appears in the strip. None of the characters ever mention the name, no reference is made to him, or it, in any way."

Schulz never stopped resenting the cute label forced on his creation, insisting that it was "the worst title ever thought of for a comic strip".

It was at this time that Sparky met and married Joyce Halverson (no relation to his mother). Joyce had an infant daughter whom Schulz would adopt and they would have four other children themselves. In October of 1951, "Peanuts" had increased its roster of daily subscribers from the initial seven to a scant 36 newspapers, but for the syndicate to break even on expenses, the sales manager had set the bar at 100. Walt Kelly's "Pogo", another thinking man's comic strip, was being published in 80 newspapers. But Ernie Bushmiller's "Nancy", another strip owned by United Features Syndicate was being published in more than 400 newspapers.

It is interesting to note at this time that the American assumption was

that children were happy, and childhood was a golden time; it was adults who had problems with which they wrestled and pains that they sought to soothe. Schulz (no doubt drawing on his own childhood) reversed the natural order of this universe by showing that a child's pain is more intensely felt than an adult's, a child's defeats are more acutely experienced and remembered. "Would you like to have been Abraham Lincoln?", Peppermint Patty asked Charlie Brown. "I doubt it," he answers. "I have a hard enough time just being plain Charlie Brown." Schulz gave his characters life-long dissatisfactions, the stuff of which adulthood is made.

On March 3, 1952, a little girl entered the strip who did not just make sport of Charlie Brown but demolished him, and before long, would change everything....Lucy Van Pelt. Before Lucy, "Peanuts" had been relatively quiet in tone, but her aggressiveness threw the others off balance. But, for all her bluster, Lucy is a fairly direct and literal person, and only Charlie Brown would be taken in by her. She depends as much on Charlie Brown as he depends on her. Only Charlie Brown, frantic for someone to trust, believes her – he is even, indeed, at times bewitched by her. Never, not once, in the life of the strip was Charlie Brown able to kick that football.

In September of 1952, Lucy's little brother first appears in the strip.



Linus Van Pelt would bring intellect, reflection and a wonderful sense of self to the strip. Linus would speak with simplicity and force about literature, art, classical music, theology, medicine, psychiatry, sports, law and life in general. Linus employed a subtle sense of morality and ethics. He was Schulz's favorite character to draw.

Schulz would later say that he gave his wishy-washiness and determination to Charlie Brown, the "worse side of himself" to Violet, to Lucy his sarcasm, to Linus his dignity and "weird little thoughts", his perfectionism and devotion to his art to Schroeder, his sense of being talented and unappreciated to Snoopy.

In September of 1954, Schulz per month share of profits from "Peanuts" had jumped to \$2,500.00 – at a time when annual earnings of a middle-income family were \$4,000.00. By 1956, Schulz was bringing home \$4,000.00 a month.

It is ironic that "Beetle Bailey" had debuted a month before "Peanuts". Hank Ketcham unleashed "Dennis the Menace" only a few months later. Both strips initially grew faster than "Peanuts". It was truly an amazing span of time for American cartooning.

For Schulz, the art of cartooning was "a deadly serious business." Each

week throughout 1957, another two newspapers added themselves to Schulz's list of subscribers, boosting the total in 40 states and Canada to 230 dailies, 102 Sundays, with 16 college newspapers besides. By the end of 1958, "Peanuts" had reached a grand total of 400 newspapers, including every ship and station newspaper in the Navy. Despite this newfound success, Sparky was never satisfied, always working harder. In addition to the daily and Sunday strips he was producing each week, he also found time to publish two books containing collections of daily strips (eventually there would be more than 30 such books).

Later in life, whenever Schulz revealed that he had been trained through the mail, audiences and interviewers would laugh. Television host Larry King laughed at his account of working as an instructor at the school that conducted the ubiquitous "Draw Me" contests. "You were in that?" snorted King, as if Schulz had been in the mafia or the 1950's quiz show scams. For Charles Schulz, Art Instruction would always be the institution that helped make his long-held dream possible. The smart, young people in the Educational Department had initiated him into the finer forms of art, music, and literature, and he always credited them for having done much to affect his later life.

On April 26, 1956, the National Cartoonist Society voted Schulz the Outstanding Cartoonist of 1955. By 1957, Schulz was earning more than \$90,000.00 per year, twice as much as the highest paid college president in the country.

As he had done at Central High School, he made a point of camouflaging his true intellectual ability. Built up in the press as semanticist, psychologist, man of culture and letters, super intellectual, and the leading intellectual comic strip artist, he scoffed at the whole business. "I'm as far away from an intellectual as you can get." Camouflaging intellectual ability with humor seems to be an American trait that goes back to the folksy masks that Abraham Lincoln and Mark Twain used to disguise high intelligence and to disarm potential opponents. And in a typical comic reversal, he would famously write, "Happiness is finding out you're not so dumb after all." Whenever called upon to discuss his life, he made a point of proclaiming himself a failure in all but his work.

The first national account of his rise to the top of his profession was published by the Saturday Evening Post in January 1957. In "The Success of an Utter Failure," Hugh Morrow declared, "All this might have never come to pass if Schulz hadn't been such a miserable failure."

In 1958, Schulz and his family moved to a farm on Coffee Lane in Sonoma County, California. During this time he formed a lasting business relationship with a young and relatively unknown husband and wife marketing company, and soon the comic strip characters were being marketed in any number of ways: calendars, plastic figures, and greeting cards. In November of 1959, Ford Motor Company paid a licensing fee for the exclusive right to have the "Peanuts" gang speak for their new compact model, the Falcon, in all media. Schulz put together a book entitled, Happiness is a Warm Puppy. It remained on the best-seller list for 43 weeks. The "Happiness is....." formula permeated mass culture, not for a season or even a year, but for almost a decade.

In May of 1965, a young Hollywood producer contacted Schulz to announce that he had just sold a Christmas show to Coca-Cola and he prevailed upon Schulz to use the "Peanuts" characters as the basis for a Christmas special. Schulz insisted on having total control. The decision was made to use children for the characters' voices. The show's soundtrack was among its most original and powerful strengths (although he was initially resistant to the jazz themes). Schulz hated laugh tracks and proclaimed that "A Charlie Brown Christmas" would not have one. The catchy rhythm of

"Linus and Lucy", a piano piece that Vince Guaraldi composed and played at the Monterey Jazz Festival, became the centerpiece of "A Charlie Brown Christmas", and eventually a pop music standard. Schulz especially wanted to comment on the commercialization of Christmas and insisted that the season's true meaning could be found in the Gospel according to St. Luke. The producers did not realize just how much of the Gospel Schulz intended to include in the movie. When Sparky began work on the script, he proclaimed that there would be one whole minute of Linus reciting the Gospel (not reading it). Schulz's insistence on the inclusion of this recitation was a true indication of just how deeply religious he was.

Network broadcasting in the three-channel world of the early 1960's was driven by a single, impossible mission: to please everyone and offend no one. Not only would the show have to pass muster ahead of time with its commercial sponsor and network executives, but it would also be vulnerable to government regulation as well as popular taste. Despite arguments about its inclusion from the entire creative team, the nativity story remained and a plot of "A Charlie Brown Christmas" was set; Charlie Brown is searching for the true meaning of the holiday. He doesn't understand why he should feel depressed, with Christmas only days away. The childish greed of his amateur

psychiatrist (Lucy), his little sister (Sally) and his nutty dog (Snoopy), each of whom has found a way to make money from the holiday's excesses, only adds to his dismay. He therefore takes on the job of directing the school's Christmas play. All of the characters are there: Linus as a shepherd who hangs on to his security blanket by turning it into a burnoose, Pigpen as the dusty innkeeper, Freida as his dirt-allergic wife, and Snoopy, the scene-stealer, as all the animals in the manger. Charlie Brown decides that a Christmas tree is what the show really needs. Alas, the sad little fir that he brings back to the set provokes jeering, scorn and personal insults; yet just as he is about to give up on Christmas altogether, Linus takes the stage, asks for the auditorium lights to be dimmed, and recites the story of the birth of Christ.

The clean and forceful words of the Gospel revived Charlie Brown and, his faith in the meaning of the season renewed, he takes the little fir home to his back yard to decorate it properly. But when the weight of a single scarlet ornament borrowed from Snoopy's crazily-decorated, prize-winning doghouse threatens to snap the tree in two, he gives in once more to despair. Only the love and attention of his newly-forgiving friends bring about the final miracle. The entire cast of characters turn their backs to the audience and take down the ornaments from the garish doghouse to transform them into the proper

trimmings of a gently beautiful, unassuming monument of faith. The entire cast blurt out, "Merry Christmas, Charlie Brown!" and the show ends in the singing of "Hark, the Herald Angels Sing".

In the screening room at network headquarters at CBS, two vice-presidents watched the show in silence. Neither of them laughed once. When the lights came on, the executives shook their heads and made comments such as: "Well, you gave it a good try," "It seems a little flat," "Too slow," "The Bible thing scares us."

Despite all of the executives' doom and gloom, "A Charlie Brown Christmas" was broadcast as scheduled at 7:30 p.m. on Thursday, December 9th. Almost half the people watching television in the United States tuned in, some 15-1/2 million households. For years, viewers (and I count myself in that number) would be surprised to find themselves once again moved to tears by Linus' unadorned rendition of the nativity story.

The next day, "all heaven broke loose" and across the country reviewers raved about the "special that is really special". It won an Emmy for Outstanding Children's Program. Today, over 40 years later, "A Charlie Brown Christmas" is viewed by millions and enjoyed every bit as much as it was at its release in December of 1965. In the end, there would be 75 different "Charlie

Brown specials". Its soundtrack became a multi-platinum recording, whose themes became showbiz standards. Gross annual earnings for the Peanuts brand were \$150 Million Dollars by 1971.

The characters of Peanuts have evolved over the life of the strip. In the late 1960's, Snoopy had come a long way from the puppy who had entered the strip as an ordinary domestic pooch, not even yet a beagle. Snoopy's stardom and, for a time, dominance in the strip, grew out of Schulz's ability to create an intimate bond by letting the reader in on the dog's continual awakening to his most human thoughts. Snoopy became identities such as: rhinoceros, pelican, moose, alligator, kangaroo, gorilla, vulture – of which would eventually give way to the serial "world famous" characters who would illuminate his spirit behind a showcase of false fronts as sportsman, lover, spy, pilot, art aficionado, magician, attorney, surgeon, and of course, Joe Cool. In this make-believe world without adults, Snoopy now behaved for all intents and purposes like the one and only child. He is the one character the strip allowed to kiss, and he kisses the way a child does: sincerely and to disarm.

The WWI Flying Ace took off one day late in the summer of 1965. Sparky was at the drawing board when his son came in with a model plane. It was a Fokker triplane. It came to him, why not put Snoopy on the doghouse



and let him pretend he's a WWI Flying Ace?

Schulz's fellow cartoonists read and re-read the Red Baron episodes to figure out how Sparky was getting away with it. His rival, Mort Walker, looked on dismayed. The gag-minded creator of "Beetle Bailey" had been able to follow along with Schulz when Snoopy was perched in a tree, pretending to be a vulture, but, a dog...flying a Sopwith Camel that was actually a doghouse, which he couldn't sit on anyway? "That's when I realized I didn't know anything about the comic business," said Walker. "What does a dog know about WWI and the Red Baron? Where did he get the helmet?" Most astonishing of all, what was Schulz doing showing actual bullet holes in a doghouse?

On March 10, 1969, the "world famous astronaut" was dispatched into space. Two months later, in a command module named Charlie Brown and its lunar module, Snoopy, NASA astronauts piloted the Apollo 10 spacecraft on a scouting mission to the moon rehearsing for the history-making Apollo 11 landing in July.

By 1971, Schulz had an estimated 100 million readers. As a humorist and observer of human nature, he had no equal. He was the number one cartoonist in a way that none had ever been before. By 1989, annual

revenues from "Peanuts" global worldwide merchandising empire topped One Billion Dollars. Over the next dozen years, the brand name appeared on over 100 million packages of consumer goods annually, and Schulz split with the syndicate a 5-10% royalty on the wholesale price of every item. This ranked him among the nation's highest-paid entertainers, topped only by Michael Jackson, Steven Spielberg and Oprah Winfrey. On every continent, Snoopy made "Peanuts" second only to Disney in the sale of merchandise. In January of 1985, Snoopy appeared on national primetime television as a "spokescharacter" for Metropolitan Life Insurance Company.

By this time, Sparky could have maintained his presence at the top just by hiring a team of assistants to draw changes on his themes, but instead, he made a strict point of getting himself to the drawing board every morning and consciously striving to be a better cartoonist. From the beginning, only Schulz drew and lettered the strip and he still wanted "Peanuts" to be everyone's favorite strip.

Although the competition changed, "Peanuts" remained on top. Strips such as "Garfield", "Tumbleweeds", "Doonesbury", "For Better or For Worse", and "Calvin and Hobbs" all took turns at trying to knock "Peanuts" out of the "top spot" in the daily and Sunday funnies. Next came "Bloom County" and

"The Far Side". Each and every one of the artists of those strips held great reverence for "Peanuts" and Schulz, its creator. In the late 1980's, some critics would say that "Peanuts" was a shadow of its former self or "isn't as funny as it was", but Bill Watterson, creator of "Calvin and Hobbs", said it best, "I think what's really happened is that Schulz, and "Peanuts", changed the entire face of comic strips, and everybody has now caught up to him. I don't think he's five years ahead of everybody else like he used to be, so that's taken some of the edge off of it. I think it's still a wonderful strip just in terms of solid construction, character development, the fantasy element – things that we now take for granted; reading the thoughts of an animal, for example."

Schulz turned 75 in 1997 and grew more and more depressed about growing old. He took his first break in 47 years. As of that date 17,170 strips had been published. He continued to draw and letter his strips through 1999. On Tuesday, November 16, 1999, he was working on the daily strip for Friday, December 31, the last appearance of "Peanuts" before the much-anticipated rollover into the year 2000. He had already drawn the strip for Saturday, January 1, 2000, although he had not yet lettered it. After a total of 17,896 strips – 15,390 dailies and 2,506 Sundays, this would be his last strip. He fell

ill and had to be hospitalized. He recovered but was having a difficult time seeing clearly and could not draw. On December 14, 1999, he addressed a letter to his estimated 300 million readers and said that he would retire in January and revealed for the first time that he was recuperating from colon cancer. The final strip printed (borrowed from the title panel from the November 21, 1999 Sunday page) in which Snoopy, head down typing a letter, beginning, "Dear Friends....." followed by the line "my family does not wish 'Peanuts' to be continued by anyone else, therefore I am announcing my retirement." Snoopy would appear in the lower right corner, reflecting at his typewriter, while in the pale blue sky above him floated cloud-like cameos of the strip's most cherished characters taking a curtain call in their most iconic moments. And so it was that the final glimpse of Schulz's characters were of Lucy and the football, Woodstock racing the Zamboni over his frozen birdbath, Peppermint Patty and Marcy in the classroom, Snoopy dueling the Red Baron and Lucy dispensing psychotherapy to Charlie Brown. In the morning of February 13, 2000, the Sunday paper carrying his last original cartoon arrived with the news that Charles M. Schulz had died in his sleep of complications of colon cancer, just hours before the final "Peanuts" strip appeared around the world. To the very end, his life had been inseparable from his art. In the

moment of ceasing to be a cartoonist, he ceased to be.