

The History of the Twentieth Century

Episode 287

“An Eight-Minute Tidbit”

Transcript

[music: Fanfare]

Unhampered by any such classical limitations as dramatic unities, or even such customary necessities as the laws of gravity, common sense, and possibility, the animated drawing is the only artistic medium ever discovered which is really “free.” And this in spite of the fact that it is only an eight-minute tidbit thrown in at the end of a love drama while the audience is being changed.

Author and critic Creighton Peet, reviewing Felix the Cat cartoons in *The New Republic* in 1929.

Welcome to *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

[music: Opening Theme]

Episode 287. An Eight-Minute Tidbit.

The concept of telling a story through a sequence of pictures, with perhaps a little bit of written narration above or below, dates back to at least the Middle Ages. Think of the Bayeux Tapestry, for example.

The first books published for children began to appear in the 18th century. Over the course of the 19th century, as middle-class incomes and the numbers of literate children both grew, so did the demand for children’s books, so that by the late 19th century, children’s literature was a recognized literary genre.

And children’s literature is a topic I want to come back to in a future episode, but for today, let’s talk not about the literature, but about the pictures.

From their earliest days, children’s books included illustrations, meant to keep younger readers engaged, even though illustrations in novels and stories for adults are comparatively rare, even in our time. By the beginning of the twentieth century, top-of-the-line books for children included lavish full-color illustrations, while even the cheapest included at least a few cute black-and-white line drawings.

Newspapers and magazines of the 19th century published artists' renderings of newsworthy events before photographs in newspapers became common. From here it was but a few short steps to editorial cartoons that satirized political and cultural developments, and from there to cartoons simply meant to give you a laugh.

And from there it was but one short step further to publishing a daily cartoon with a recurring protagonist or group of characters, telling the story of their daily comic adventure, or even telling longer stories in daily installments. These came to be known as *comic strips* because the usual format was a series of cartoon panels that told a brief story, although some comic "strips" were and are simply one drawing with a caption.

This was a gradual process, and we could debate when and where the first real comic strip appeared, although one often cited is *The Yellow Kid*, which first appeared in Joseph Pulitzer's New York *World* in 1895, created by Richard Outcault. The titular Yellow Kid was a little boy in a yellow nightshirt, barefoot, with no hair, and a goofy grin. He lived in Hogan's Alley and apparently came from a desperately poor family, as his lack of shoes, his wearing a hand-me-down nightshirt, and his use of slang suggested, as did his bald head, which implied it had been shaved as a treatment for lice.

Two years later appeared *The Katzenjammer Kids* in the competing New York *Journal*, owned by William Randolph Hearst, and created by German-American cartoonist Rudolph Dirks. Dirks was apparently borrowing from *Max und Moritz*, a popular German children's book of the 19th century about two exceedingly naughty little boys and reimagining the characters as German-American children.

These two early comic strips established many of the conventions that comic strips have used ever since, such as word balloons and thought balloons, and the use of stars to signify pain.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, the Hearst and Pulitzer newspaper chains were locked in a bitter competition for readership. I talked about this a little bit in episode 243. They were fighting to win working-class readers at a time when the working classes could at last afford a newspaper and had literacy rates high enough that they could read them. One weapon in this competition was sensationalism, as in giving broad coverage to lurid crimes and scandals. This came to be known as "yellow journalism." But another arena in which this battle was waged was in comic strip offerings. In fact, some suggest that the term *yellow journalism* derives from *The Yellow Kid* comic strip.

The Hearst and Pulitzer papers competed to run the most and the best comic strips, devoting whole pages, and then multiple pages to them, as well as whole Sunday comic strip sections, in color. Newspaper pages devoted to comic strips came to be known colloquially in America as "the funny pages." As demand for more and better comic strips increased, the strips became syndicated, meaning Hearst and Pulitzer would sell the right to print their strips to newspapers in other towns. The result was that the United States in general and New York City in particular,

became world leaders in comic strips and in comic strip production. Often artists who illustrated children's books went into comic strips, and vice versa.

In these early days, say 1895-1920, comic strips had a poor reputation. Educated readers looked down on them for their similarity to children's books and their association with the lowbrow journalism of the Hearst and Pulitzer newspapers. It's telling that these two early comic strips I mentioned both had child protagonists, a reflection of the medium's roots in children's books and a trend that would continue throughout the twentieth century. Just off the top of my head, I can think of *Little Orphan Annie*, *Dennis the Menace*, *Peanuts*, *Bloom County*, *Calvin and Hobbes*, and *Boondocks*. I bet you can think of some more.

But by 1920, whatever the intellectuals thought, comic strips had become enormously popular in the US. Every newspaper, big or small, had to publish at least one page of comics every day, with the notable exception of *The New York Times*, which remained disdainful of comic strips and never did succumb to the fad. Some of the biggest comic strips of this era are still with us today, or at least are still familiar names today, including *The Katzenjammer Kids*, as well as *Mutt and Jeff*, begun in 1907, *Bringing Up Father*, begun in 1913, *Gasoline Alley*, begun in 1918, *Barney Google and Snuffy Smith*, begun in 1919, *Popeye*, also begun in 1919, and *Little Orphan Annie*, begun in 1924.

For the rest of the century, comic strips would be well-known and widely read. Major developments in popular comic strips sent ripples across the popular culture. After 1970, their readership and influence began to wane, but persisted through the end of the twentieth century.

The concept of animated drawings is older than motion pictures. People in the 19th century were already familiar with flip books, books with drawings on each page. You flip or riffle the pages rapidly to produce a couple of seconds of animation. They were also familiar with the zoetrope, a rotating cylinder with narrow vertical slits. You put a strip of images inside the cylinder, then spun the cylinder rapidly while looking through the slits, and this produced the illusion of motion. There were earlier examples of similar devices, but the classic zoetrope was invented in 1865 by American William Ensign Lincoln, who was then a sophomore at Brown University. Lincoln sold his patent to game and toy maker Milton Bradley, who manufactured and sold the devices commercially.

Given that animated drawings were already everyday items when motion pictures came on the scene, the development of animated motion pictures is no great surprise. What is surprising is how long it took. Motion pictures were around for over a decade before we find the earliest examples of animation. This is probably because of the demanding requirements of the infant medium. At sixteen frames per second, the standard at the time, how many individual drawings would an artist need to make to produce a ten-minute animated film? The answer is: ninety-six hundred. That could give an artist writer's cramp.

Thus, the biggest challenge in producing animation on film was the daunting amount of artwork required, and producers of animation will ever be on the lookout for ways to reduce the artistic labor the medium demands, and therefore also reduce costs. This will remain true for the rest of the century.

The person usually credited with creating the first animated film is the French artist and cartoonist born Emile Courtet, but better known by his pseudonym, Emile Cohl. In 1908, when he was 51 years old, Cohl created a 77-second film titled *Fantasmagorie*. Cohl's artwork is as simple as it could be: just line drawings and stick figures, which he drew with black ink on white paper, then exposed the film to light shone through the paper, which produced a negative image. That is, the artwork appears on film as white lines on a black background, in a manner reminiscent of a chalkboard.

The artwork was as simple as it could be, but Cohl's vivid imagination shows through, and the film demonstrates some of the remarkable things that are possible in animation. At the beginning, we see the artist's hands as he draws the stick figure, who then comes to life and experiences the fantastic. People and objects morph from one thing to another; for instance, the stick figure encounters a huge bottle of champagne, which is then uncorked, then he becomes trapped inside the bottle, but is then free again after the bottle becomes a blossom and blooms.

Even at just 77 seconds, and even with some live action thrown in, Cohl had to make over 700 drawings to produce this film.

The earliest animated films, like *Fantasmagorie*, would be made up of simple line drawings, without backgrounds, because that was the quickest and easiest way to get the artwork done. And as was the case with motion pictures themselves, by the second decade of the twentieth century, the United States would become the world leader in animated films. This is partly due to the Great War of course, but also due to the prevalence of comic strips in America. The US had many comic strip artists, most of them based in New York, where the film industry was also based at the time. Several of these artists made the leap from comic strips to animated films, in some cases bringing their comic strip creations along with them.

One such artist was Winsor McCay. He began working for the New York *Herald* in 1903, when he was about 35 years old. McCay's exact age is not known. His parents were immigrants to Michigan from Ontario, and it isn't even clear whether he was born before or after they crossed the border.

McCay had already created a comic strip called *Little Sammy Sneeze*. At the *Herald*, he began *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*. Each episode featured a different character having a wild and vividly imagined dream after eating too much Welsh rarebit. The strip was intended for an adult audience, but in 1905, McCay spun off a children's version that became his most famous comic. Called *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, it featured the strange and surreal dreams of the little boy title character.

McCay's comic strip artwork was groundbreaking, vivid and imaginative, and he also drew editorial cartoons for the paper, but all this wasn't enough of a challenge for the adventurous McCay. He began working the vaudeville circuit, doing chalk talks. For those of you who may not know, a "chalk talk" features an artist giving a lecture, which may be serious or humorous or both, while simultaneously illustrating his talk by drawing on a chalkboard.

McCay then tried his hand at creating an animated film. He said later he was inspired by his son's flip books. It took him four years to create his first film, *Little Nemo*, based on his comic strip character, which debuted in 1911 and ran over eleven minutes. McCay drew the art for the film in ink on rice paper. It required 4,000 drawings, plus live action sequences at the beginning and end. The film was a success and McCay incorporated it into his vaudeville act. That same year, he left the *Herald* to take a better-paying job as a cartoonist for William Randolph Hearst's *New York American*.

Little Nemo was more a demonstration project than a real film. It had no plot, but like *Fantasmagorie*, it showed off the fantastical visuals the medium was capable of. The characters even talked to the audience using speech balloons, a device borrowed from comic strips.

The following year, McCay produced *The Story of a Mosquito*, a six-minute film. This one has a story. It features a giant mosquito repeatedly tormenting some poor guy who just wants to sleep. But his biggest success came with his third film, *Gertie the Dinosaur*, completed in 1914.

On the vaudeville stage with his first two films, McCay discovered that the audience had trouble believing in the films. They suspected it was some kind of stage trick, like shadow puppets projected onto a screen. For *Gertie the Dinosaur*, McCay pulled out all the stops. It began with a live-action sequence which showed how the ten thousand animation frames were drawn and assembled. *Gertie the Dinosaur* was the first animated film to have a detailed, unchanging background. To achieve this, McCay hired an assistant to trace the background onto each of his drawings. Since the human eye and hand are not perfect, the lines weren't exactly the same, meaning the background shimmered a bit in the final film.

McCay also developed the technique known as *inbetweening* to save time. This means that McCay would not draw every frame himself; only certain key frames, while delegating to an assistant the job of drawing Gertie's movements between the key frames.

The film was created to be used in McCay's vaudeville act. McCay would speak to Gertie and give her commands, which Gertie would obey. But Gertie had a will of her own, and sometimes balked. Then McCay would call her a "bad girl," and Gertie would cry. McCay would then console her by throwing her an apple, which would become a drawing of an apple onscreen, which Gertie would catch in her mouth and chew it. For the finale, McCay would leave the stage and appear as a drawing himself on the screen, mount Gertie, and ride off on her.

McCay would produce more animated films, but *Gertie the Dinosaur* would be his most famous and influential, inspiring a number of other comic strip artists to try their hand at the new medium. McCay himself would leave animation by 1920. His boss, William Randolph Hearst, became unhappy with McCay's animation and vaudeville work after learning that McCay was spending more time on that than on his duties for the newspaper. Hearst believed the quality of McCay's work for the paper was suffering from this lack of attention.

But McCay's *Gertie the Dinosaur* film was a huge hit. Many of the artists who entered the field in the nineteen-teens were inspired by *Gertie the Dinosaur*. Unlike McCay, these artists would produce their films not for the stage but to be shown as part of the program in the nickelodeon, alongside live-action films. Three of them would build studios and devise new production techniques to make cartoons more efficiently, with less artistic labor.

One such artist was John Randolph Bray, who also began as a comic strip artist. Some of his earliest films centered on the implausible adventures of a character named Colonel Heeza Liar—sort of a modern-day Americanized Baron Munchausen. Bray produced a series of animated short films about the Colonel and his latest tall tale, a sort of moving picture version of a comic strip. And this format, a continuing series of short cartoons, each depicting the latest adventure of a familiar character, would become the standard for animated films.

Bray developed a technique for giving his cartoons a static background by printing the same background drawing on a large number of sheets, then overlaying them with a blank sheet of paper where the artist would only need to draw those elements of the scene that were in motion, greatly simplifying the work.

Bray also copied many of his animation techniques from Winsor McCay. He actually visited McCay's studio and pretended to be a newspaper reporter to induce McCay to explain his methods. McCay never bothered to patent any of his techniques, but Bray did, and then had the cheek to sue McCay for patent infringement. But this backfired, and Bray ended up having to pay royalties to McCay.

The second was Raoul Barré, a French-Canadian cartoonist in Montreal who created the first French-language comic strip in Canada. (Canadian listeners take note; I mentioned your country.) In 1903, Barré moved to New York City to get in on the lucrative American market for comic strips. In 1912, after seeing McCay's *The Story of a Mosquito*, Barré was inspired to begin his own animation studio, in partnership with an American, Bill Nolan. With cartoons being drawn on multiple sheets of paper, keeping the papers properly aligned became a major challenge, which Barré solved by punching two holes on the bottoms of the sheets and putting two pegs on the animation table, which would insure the paper was always aligned correctly, while Barré's partner, Bill Nolan, was the first to conceive of drawing the cartoon background on a longer sheet of paper, allowing the background scenery to slide to the left or right as the

characters walked, creating the illusion of movement even though the character is actually walking in place.

Back at the Bray studio, one of his animators, Earl Hurd, was the first to make use of sheets of celluloid in animation instead of rice paper. Rice paper animations involved shining a light through the pages from underneath, but this lost detail in the background and sometimes made visible variations from the texture of the paper. Celluloid was clear, but you could paint on it, and the background art would show through clearly everywhere else.

So by 1915, all of the most important processes for making animated films were in use, although it would take another decade or so for them to become standard at every animation studio. After that, these would be the techniques behind the making of animated cartoon films for the rest of the century.

The third major animation studio of the era was established in 1915, not by an artist, but by William Randolph Hearst. Whatever Hearst thought about McCay moonlighting in vaudeville, he couldn't help noticing that his newspapers were carrying the most popular comic strips in America, a gold mine of properties that could easily be adapted to cartoons. He founded an animation studio called International Film Service, which produced cartoon versions of Hearst's most popular comic strips, including *The Katzenjammer Kids*, *Krazy Kat*, and *Bringing Up Father*.

Hearst pioneered the method of building an animation studio by poaching animators from your competitors. There weren't very many artists skilled in animation, and Hearst was willing to pay them more than anyone else. (He also poached comic strip artists, mostly from Joseph Pulitzer.) In particular, Hearst stole away all of Barré's talent, including his partner Bill Nolan. But Barré got his revenge when comic strip artist Bud Fisher walked away from Hearst's syndication company, King Features Syndicate, and brought his popular strip *Mutt and Jeff* to Barré and his new partner, Charles Bowers, who began producing *Mutt and Jeff* animated cartoons.

[music: Strauss Waltz Medley]

None of these prominent Great War-era animation studios lasted very long. Hearst shut his company down in 1918, after deciding it would be easier to contract his comic strip characters out to independent studios rather than operate his own. Barré gave up animation in 1918 and began doing oil paintings. After the war, Bray himself began moving into instructional films. It turned out animation was also useful for instructional purposes, in a manner reminiscent of those chalk talks I mentioned a few minutes ago.

Bray's studio continued making cartoons for a while, but after the war, his best animators left to strike out on their own, including Earl Hurd, Paul Terry and Max Fleischer. Bray hired an energetic young animator named Walter Lantz to head his cartoon division until he ultimately decided to close it down altogether in 1928.

And this brings me to Patrick Sullivan, an Australian born in Paddington, New South Wales. His father was an immigrant from Ireland. In 1909, when he was 24, he left Australia for London, lived there for a few months, then moved on to New York City, where he got work as a newspaper comic strip artist. Two facts about Sullivan's life stand out. One is that he was a heavy drinker. One of his employees later described him as "[t]he most consistent man in the business—consistent in that he was never sober." The other is that he was notably racist toward African Americans, even by the standard of the time, which is saying something. And he did time in prison in 1917 for statutory rape. Wait, I guess that's three things.

Nobody expects the Spanish Inquisition!

Anyway, in 1914, he landed a job with Raoul Barré's animation studio, but was fired a year later. For incompetence, it was said, although his drinking problem likely played a role. When William Randolph Hearst started his own animation studio and hired away most of Barré's talent, Sullivan became inspired to do the same. Sullivan had been working on a comic strip called *Sambo and His Funny Noises*, about a little African-American boy. It was racist as you would expect, given the times and the title, a sort of minstrel show on paper. In 1916, his new animation studio began making cartoon shorts, and since he didn't own the rights to *Sambo and His Funny Noises*, he produced a series of cartoons based on a little African-American boy called Sammie Johnsins, who was identical to Sambo except for his name.

One of the first artists Sullivan hired was a 24-year-old from West Hoboken, New Jersey named Otto Messmer. Except for one hiatus when he served in the Army during the Great War, Messmer would work for Sullivan for the rest of Sullivan's life. Over time, as Messmer matured as an artist, he took over more and more of the artistic work, while Sullivan focused on the business end of the studio. Even so, as was usually the case in the field at this time, Sullivan's name was the only name in the credits, leaving casual viewers with the sense that he did all the drawing and animation himself.

The biggest name in live-action film at this time was of course Charles Chaplin. Sullivan landed a deal to produce a cartoon series based on Chaplin. The series was a big success. Chaplin himself was said to have enjoyed it. Otto Messmer carefully studied Chaplin's body movements from his films and incorporated them into his animation, which would profoundly influence Messmer's future work, not to mention future generations of animators, all based on Charles Chaplin.

In 1919, John Bray's studio switched distributors, from Paramount to Goldwyn Pictures, leaving Paramount with a sudden, urgent need for animated films. The studio reached out to a couple of animation studios, including Sullivan's, for material. Sullivan answered the call with a proposal for a new series of animated shorts based on a black cat. A producer at the studio dubbed the new character Felix the Cat, apparently a bit of Latin wordplay on *felix*, as in happy or felicitous, and *felis*, as in cat, or feline.

There is dispute over who created the character. During his lifetime, Sullivan claimed full credit, but after his death, Messmer claimed he had created the character, a claim other animators at the studio corroborate. Felix was a black cat. Remember at this time animations were typically just line drawings and lacked even shades of gray. By filling Felix in and making him black, Messmer—or Sullivan, or whoever—created a character that stood out more and felt as if he had more substance, without being that much more difficult to draw.

And although he was supposed to be a black cat, he was given big eyes and made white around the mouth. These features created space for the artists to give Felix a wide range of expressions. This design was based on the look of Sammie Johns in and other Black animated human characters. You can't exactly call a black cartoon cat racist—I guess you can't—but you can say that Felix's look was inspired by the minstrel shows of the era. This is not entirely a bad thing. Messmer said later that some Southern movie houses didn't want to run the Sammie Johns in cartoons, but they were okay with Felix the Cat. To the extent Felix reminded audiences of minstrelsy, that might suggest some positive qualities such as fun-loving, energetic, rebellious, down and out but resourceful, and determined in the face of daunting obstacles—qualities Felix the Cat had in abundance.

Felix was a big success. In 1922, Sullivan's studio signed with New York distributor Margaret Winkler to put out a new Felix cartoon every month. In 1925, he signed a new deal with a new distributor for one every two weeks. And if the early Felix looked more like a dog than a cat, his look improved over time. So did his comedy. Messmer discovered that Felix could get a laugh with a look in his eye or a twist of his tail.

Felix was a problem solver. His signature look was his problem-solving mode, when he would pace back and forth, bent over, hands clasped behind his back, frowning as he worked out a solution to whatever problem presented itself. The solution often involved his tail, which could morph into a baseball bat, a cane, a fishing pole, or whatever implement he needed. And because this was the era of Prohibition, Felix the Cat cartoons often took on the topics of liquor and drunkenness.

By 1923, Felix was famous enough to do a cartoon, called *Felix in Hollywood*, where he interacted with animated caricatures of real-life film personalities. When he demonstrates his Charles Chaplin imitation, using his tail for a cane, the real Chaplin appears in animated form to chide him for stealing his material.

Felix had the most rounded personality of any cartoon character yet created, and he became the first cartoon celebrity, in the sense that his name and image were famous and he had his own fan base, similar to real-life film stars, which led to Felix the Cat dolls and other merchandise and a spin-off comic strip. His later cartoons became increasingly sophisticated in technique and explored the surreal, as in Felix jumping into a telephone and riding the phone wires to the other end, or disguising himself as a suitcase for the sake of a free ride. Even serious critics were

impressed with Felix and his cartoons and what they demonstrated about the potential of the medium, including the 1929 review I read at the top of the episode.

Sadly, Felix the Cat, like many a silent film star, did not make the transition to talking pictures. Pat Sullivan was dismissive of the prospect of talking animation, and it was only after other studios released talking cartoons that began to challenge Felix's dominance of the medium that he gave in. But then Sullivan and his studio struggled with the challenges of developing sound films. Sullivan's health was deteriorating too, a consequence of his heavy drinking. He died in 1933, at the age of 47, leaving behind a studio so disorganized that even though there was still demand for the character, it took years to sort out who owned the rights to him.

Felix was briefly revived as a talking cartoon in 1936, voiced by radio actor Walter Tetley, who gave Felix a reedy, childlike voice. Tetley is best remembered today for providing the voice for Sherman, Mr. Peabody's pet boy, in the *Rocky and Bullwinkle* cartoons.

But the Felix revival fizzled. Later in the century, there were a couple of further attempts to revive Felix the Cat on television and in feature films, but none of these efforts bore fruit. Felix is largely forgotten in our time, although it is possible someday someone might find the formula to restore his magic.

In Felix's place came a new cartoon celebrity, who clearly borrowed some aspects of Felix's appearance and personality, but originating at an animation studio that embraced, rather than rejected, the new technology of talking pictures. Ever heard of a little cartoon short called *Steamboat Willie*?

But that is a story for next week's episode. We'll have to stop here for today. I thank you for listening, and I'd especially like to thank Sophie for her kind donation, and thank you to Michael for becoming a patron of the podcast. Donors and patrons like Sophie and Michael help cover the costs of making this show, which in turn keeps the podcast available free for everyone, so my thanks to them and to all of you who have pitched in and helped out. If you'd like to become a patron or make a donation, just visit the website, historyofthetwentiethcentury.com and click on the PayPal or Patreon buttons.

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And I hope you'll join me next week, here on *The History of the Twentieth Century*, as we continue this story and watch animated cartoons begin to talk, sing, and go color. What's Up, Doc? Next week, here, on *The History of the Twentieth Century*.

Oh, and one more thing. When John Randolph Bray moved into producing educational films, he also developed filmstrips as an instructional tool. Filmstrips are short strips of 35mm motion picture film; instead of showing them in rapid succession as in a motion picture, a filmstrip contains a series of independent images that are projected onto a screen one at a time as an adjunct to a lecture or discussion. Think of it as a primitive form of PowerPoint.

Filmstrips had the advantage of being cheaper, easier to store, and more convenient to use in a classroom setting than a motion picture projector. They were in common use in classrooms from the 1930s through the 1980s. Later versions came with a phonograph record or cassette tape to provide narration; later still came machines where the recorded audio could also advance the projector to the next frame automatically.

Bray's instructional company, Brayco, would remain in this business until 1963. Filmstrips began to fall out of favor as an educational tool when video cassette recorders, or VCRs became commonplace. VCRs were even easier to use than filmstrip projectors, and they could present full video instead of just a series of still images.

John Randolph Bray died in 1978, at the age of 99.

[music: Closing Theme]