

WINSOR McCAY

His Life and Art

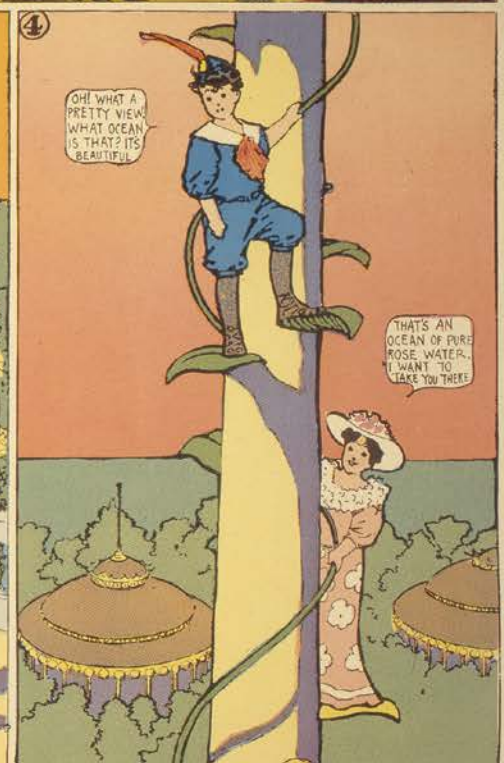
John Canemaker



Foreword by Maurice Sendak

 CRC Press
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A FOCAL PRESS BOOK

winsor mccay



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ABOVE:
October 15, 1905: The premiere episode of Little Nemo in Slumberland in the New York Herald (detail) (Collection Robert Lesser)

FRONTISPIECE:
The August 12, 1906, Little Nemo in Slumberland episode is Winsor McCay's masterpiece, the single most beautiful comic strip page ever. It is a pantheistic dream, designed with the elegance and luminosity of a stained glass window. The panel shapes work in sympathy with the

characters' actions—a wide rectangle accommodates six giant butterflies in the top panel, changing to a series of vertical shapes when Nemo and the Princess ascend the tree. The drawing is alive with illusions of motion: the differing poses of the butterflies imply fluttery animation, and their flight to a distant tree uses dynamic perspective to lead the eye. The point of view throughout is as mobile as if shot by a swooping camera crane in one continuous take. The downward direction of the insects (panel 5) signals the

start of the rain, enhancing the effect. During the downpour (panel 6), McCay eliminates the usual thick art nouveau outlines around characters and objects, and by adding thin vertical lines he creates a diffuse, steamy summer shower of cool drops hitting hot surfaces.

The use of color is extraordinary, from the blazing red title on the complementary green, to the multihued butterfly wings. The volatile sky excites us, then cools us off with its constantly changing colors.

This is a peaceful world, where nature is tame and friendly—bugs do not bite and weather is truly predictable. A functional metamorphosis solves problems: a stem and leaves become a railing and stairs; a tree becomes a giant umbrella.

Only the relationship between the relentlessly boyish Nemo and his "romantic" partner, the matronly Princess, is out of synch in this leisurely, timeless utopia. They contrast in attire, energy, and attitudes: she is confident

and full of polite chatter; he is concerned for his safety, preoccupied with the mechanics of the place, and bored by his hostess and her tour of marvels.

"How long will this rain last, eh?" he asks impatiently. Mundane reality intrudes when the gentle rain becomes an annoying sprinkle tossed by Nemo's angry father. The dream has ended rudely and too soon, but the memory of Winsor McCay's most perfect vision will remain. (Collection John Canemaker)

winsor mccay

his life and art • revised and expanded edition

john canemaker

FOREWORD BY MAURICE SENDAK



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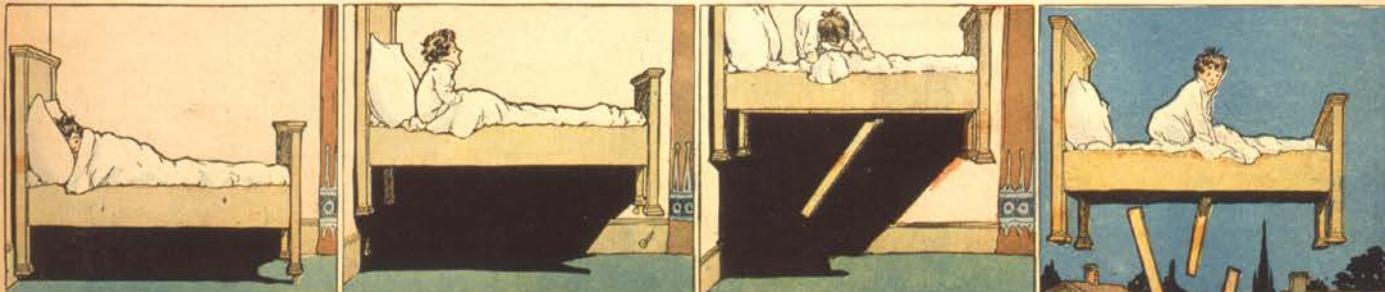
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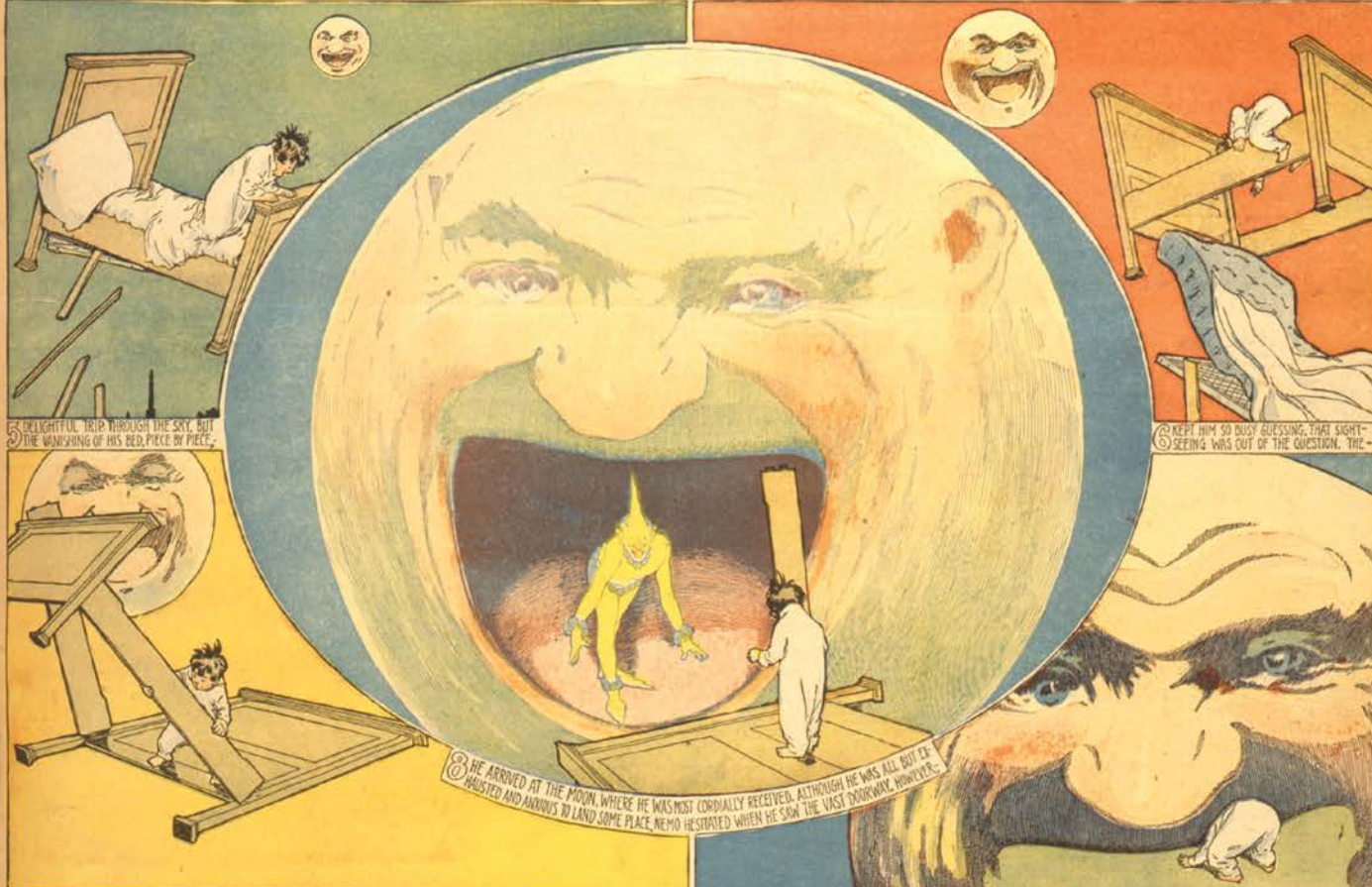
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1. LITTLE NEMO WAS NICELY SNOOZING WHEN A FEELING OF 2. CEILING WARD, AND WHILE IT ASTONISHED HIM IT ALSO INTERESTED HIM CONSIDERABLY. NEMO WAS RATHER INCLINED TO ENJOY THE 3. SENSATION WHEN HE WAS STARTLED BY A SLAT DROPPING FROM 4. UNDERNEATH AND FROM THEN ON HE WAS ALL EXCITEMENT. 5. HIS CURIOSITY, HOWEVER, STAYED HIS FEARS. THE FALLING OF 6. HIS BED SLATS SPOILED FOR HIM WHAT OTHERWISE MIGHT HAVE BEEN A



7. NIGHT WAS CLEAR, BUT WINDY. NEMO WAS REALLY SHIPWRECKED IN THE AIR, AND WHILE THE GALE WHISTLED THROUGH THE RIGGING, NEMO WAS SEEN DESPERATELY STRUGGLING WITH THE PAMPARTS OF HIS BED, BUT IT SEEMED OUR BRAVE BOY MUST SOON PERISH UNLIT. 8. HE CAUTIOUSLY ENTERED, AFTER LISTENING TO THE GLIB TONGUE OF LUNATIX, THE GUIDE. NEMO COULD NOT RESIST THE TEMPTATION TO 9. STEP INSIDE, FOR A SECOND AT LEAST, BUT IT WAS ONLY FOR A SECOND AS THE GREAT DOOR CLOSED UP LIKE A BEAR TRAP AND, AS WE OBSERVE, ALMO-



10. CAUGHT ONLY TINKS AND DISCOURAGED HERO. IT WAS ALMOST DARK FOR LUNATIX TO PURSUE LITTLE NEMO, BUT HE MEANT NO 11. HARM. HE WISHED ONLY TO BRING NEMO TO SLUMBERLAND WHERE A WEEPING PRINCESS AWAITED, BUT NEMO COULD NOT, WOULD 12. NOT LISTEN. HIS ONLY THOUGHT WAS HOME AND HOW TO GET THERE. WHEN HE RAN COMPLETELY AROUND THE MOON SOME 13. DOZENS OF TIMES HE BECAME SO UTTERLY EXHAUSTED THAT HE GAVE UP THE CHASE AND SCREAMED UNTIL HE AWOKE.

WINSOR McCAY

OPPOSITE:

The eighth Little Nemo in Slumberland strip (December 3, 1905) is a beautiful showcase of McCay's interest in animation—the boy's bed, for example, rises and slowly falls apart sequentially—and his inspired use of color for subtle effects, such as the delicate glow emanating from the giant moon's face. The total design of the page accommodates and showcases the shape and prominence of the moon. (Collection Robert Lesser)

*Maurice Sendak (1928–2012) was one of America's most beloved and renowned children's book artists. His 1964 classic *Where the Wild Things Are* won the Caldecott medal. *In the Night Kitchen* (1970) received a Caldecott Honor citation and Sendak was the first American to win the Hans Christian Andersen International Medal for his contributions to children's literature.

From 1980, Sendak designed sets and costumes for numerous operas, including Wolfgang Mozart's *The Magic Flute* and Leo Janáček's *The Cunning Little Vixen*. President Clinton awarded Maurice Sendak the National Medal of the Arts in 1996.

My book *In the Night Kitchen* is, in part, an homage to Winsor McCay. He and I serve the same master, our child selves. We both draw, not on the literal memory of childhood, but on the emotional memory of its stress and urgency. And neither of us forgot our childhood dreams.

Miraculously, McCay recreated dreams that we all had as children but few of us remember—or care to remember. This puts him squarely in league with Lewis Carroll and George MacDonald. His most famous creation, *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, began as a fill-page Sunday comic in the *New York Herald* on October 15, 1905. But it is much more than a comic strip, especially in comparison to the debased examples of the form popular in America since the late 1930s.

An elaborate and audacious fantasy, *Little Nemo* is, in effect, a giant children's book, though no more limited to children than *Alice in Wonderland*, the Grimm tales, or any of the best books for children. Nemo's dreams, like Alice's, have the unquestionable ring of veracity. In McCay's *Slumberland*, as in *Wonderland*, irrational taboos, forbidden places, and terrifying creatures confront Little Nemo at every turn. But Nemo, unlike Alice, is afraid. He has none of her nimble wit and maddening pugnaciousness. He is dubious, suspicious, very much a miniature Buster Keaton ogling a hostile universe.

Like *Little Nemo*, McCay's *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend* is a catalogue of nightmares, a profusion of extreme fantasy images rendered with such explicit definition that the dream is captured in all its surrealistic exactitude. There are many details I suspect only children see, and those few adults who still look with a child's intelligent curiosity.

McCay's originality is confirmed by his radically personal iconography and his innovative method of visual narrative (he ignored the comic strip's traditional arrangement of panels, stretching them vertically and horizontally to get his dreamlike effects—shattering them completely in one sequence of Little Sammy Sneeze). He was a born architect with breathtaking

command of perspective; the elaborate structural decors that appear over and over in all his comic strips—as well as in his later editorial cartoons—are reminiscent of the architectural fantasies of the stage designers of the Baroque—and those of the creators of Dreamland and Luna Park near his home in Brooklyn. The power of his visionary landscapes and the strength of his draftsmanship override and mitigate the softening, sentimental, Art Nouveau conceits he enthusiastically took up. In fact, he injected new spirit into the agitated, voluptuous line and arbitrary, flat-colored patterning of Art Nouveau design. McCay's mature style also reflects his early training, in Cincinnati and Chicago, in meeting the carnival and circus poster's demand for simple, clear shapes and showy motifs. The grandiose facades, the freaks, clowns, fancily tricked-out dancers, and comic-mirror distortions that he knew firsthand (from his days as a “lightning sketch” artist in dime museums and later in vaudeville) became the raw material from which he fashioned Nemo's world.

Little Nemo is nearly pure gold. If it falters now and again—and, at the end, repeatedly—it is a wonder that McCay could sustain his creation at its usual exalted level while producing a color comic page every week. But then, he loved to draw, and the promise of frequent escape into his child-hero's dreams must have been a helpful impetus.

John Canemaker's showcase of Winsor McCay's contributions to the popular arts—from his profound influence on comic strips and animated films to his unique work in theater, poster, and advertising design, as well as his editorial cartoons—is sufficient proof that McCay was one of America's rare, great fantasists. In a country that is ambivalent, at best, toward its volatile imaginations, further proof of his power is the fact that he could hold a mass audience for so long. However America, it seems, still doesn't take its great fantasists all that seriously. I hope this loving and scholarly book will bring Winsor McCay the recognition he deserves.

Maurice Sendak*

preface and acknowledgments

I first heard of Winsor McCay in 1955 when I was twelve years old. *Disneyland*, the weekly television program, presented a show on the history of animation, and McCay was represented as an important pioneer with the showing of his 1914 cartoon film, *Gertie the Dinosaur*.

I remember being impressed with how Disney-like this early animation effort was—how fluid the movements, how naturalistic the design, and how fresh, yet familiar, the personality of the star, a charming diplodocus. Both the film and Winsor McCay's name stayed with me because of the memorable way Disney re-created the original vaudeville presentation in which the film first appeared: an actor playing "Winsor McCay" spoke commands to and cracked a whip at the cartoon character on the large movie screen behind him as the film creature obeyed with varying degrees of civility.

Almost twenty years later, I began my dual career as animator and animation historian. While I was making my own cartoon movies and delving into the history of the art to document it and its artists, Winsor McCay continually loomed as a great and influential figure. But although his work in film and newspapers still exists, facts about the man and his career were maddeningly elusive. I had many questions: how had McCay created such advanced work at so early a stage in animation's development? Who were his influences? How did animation relate to his other major accomplishments in comic strips, which were gloriously innovative? Why did he abandon both strips and films in order to concentrate on drawing editorial cartoons until the end of his life? Why did his reputation slide into near oblivion after his death in 1934? Why is this authentic American genius so little known today? What was his life like—and who *was* Winsor McCay?

As I continued my research, I had the good fortune and pleasure of meeting John A. Fitzsimmons, McCay's assistant on two of his early films, including *Gertie the Dinosaur*. In 1976, he narrated my documentary film *Remembering Winsor McCay* and was a treasure trove of information about the artist,

continuing to help me up to our last meeting in 1984, two months before he died at age ninety-one.

In 1975, when I coordinated the first Winsor McCay film retrospectives in the United States, I met the family of Winsor McCay. Many people contributed to the original publication of this book in 1987, but it could not have been written without the full cooperation and encouragement of Ray Winsor Moniz (1918–2001) and his family.

Ray first suggested I write a biography of his grandfather and led me to Janet McCay Trinker (1922–1997), Winsor McCay's granddaughter, and her family (including Theresa "Tedda" McCay, widow of Robert McCay, who was Winsor's son and the model for Little Nemo). Both branches of the McCay clan generously recalled pertinent details about the life and times of Winsor McCay and allowed me to publish, for the first time, excerpts from the artist's letters, contracts, personal photos, and diaries.

McCay's biography was originally published in 1987 by Abbeville Press, and a revised edition, published by Harry N. Abrams, Inc., appeared in 2005. This 2018 CRC Press revision is a welcome opportunity to add to and correct information about Winsor McCay's life and art that has come forward over the last thirty years.

Contributors to the original 1987 and the 2005 revised edition of this book include:

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Once again, as in 1987 and 2005 (and, in fact, since 1972), I have relied on my loving husband Joseph J. Kennedy (to whom I dedicated this book) for his continuing counsel and support.

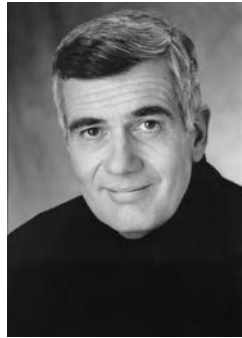




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John Canemaker is an Academy Award and Emmy Award-winning independent animator, animation historian, NYU professor, and author.

He is head of the Animation program at New York University

Tisch School of the Arts Kanbar Institute of Film & Television. In 2009, he received NYU's Distinguished Teaching Award for "exceptional teaching, inside and outside the classroom."

Canemaker won a 2005 Oscar and a 2006 Emmy Award for his 28-min. animated short, *The Moon and the Son: An Imagined Conversation*. He also produced and directed animation sequences for Oscar-winning HBO documentary *You Don't Have to Die*; CBS-TV Peabody Award-winning *Break the Silence: Kids Against Child Abuse*; Yoko Ono's *John Lennon Sketchbook*; and Warner Brothers' *The World According to Garp*, among other commercials and sponsored films. His films are in The Museum of Modern Art's permanent collection and distributed by Milestone Film & Video.

A world-renowned animation historian, he has written twelve books on animation

subjects—ranging from Winsor McCay, Felix the Cat, Tex Avery, and numerous Disney artists including Mary Blair, Vladimir Tytla, and the Nine Old Men, among others. His most recent book is *The Lost Notebook: Herman Schultheis and the Secrets of Walt Disney's Movie Magic*.

His numerous articles and book reviews have appeared through the years in the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Print Magazine*, and *Esopus*. He has curated animation art exhibitions for the Walt Disney Family Museum and the Katonah Museum of Art.

In 2007, ASIFA-Hollywood honored him with the prestigious Winsor McCay Award "for distinguished lifetime contributions to the art of animation."

He has received two residency grants from the Rockefeller Foundation's Bellagio Study Center in Italy, an honorary Doctor of Fine Arts degree from Marymount Manhattan College, the 2007 Jean Mitry Award from Italy's *Le Giornate Del Cinema Muto*, and a special Animation Theory award from the 2006 Zagreb Animation Festival.

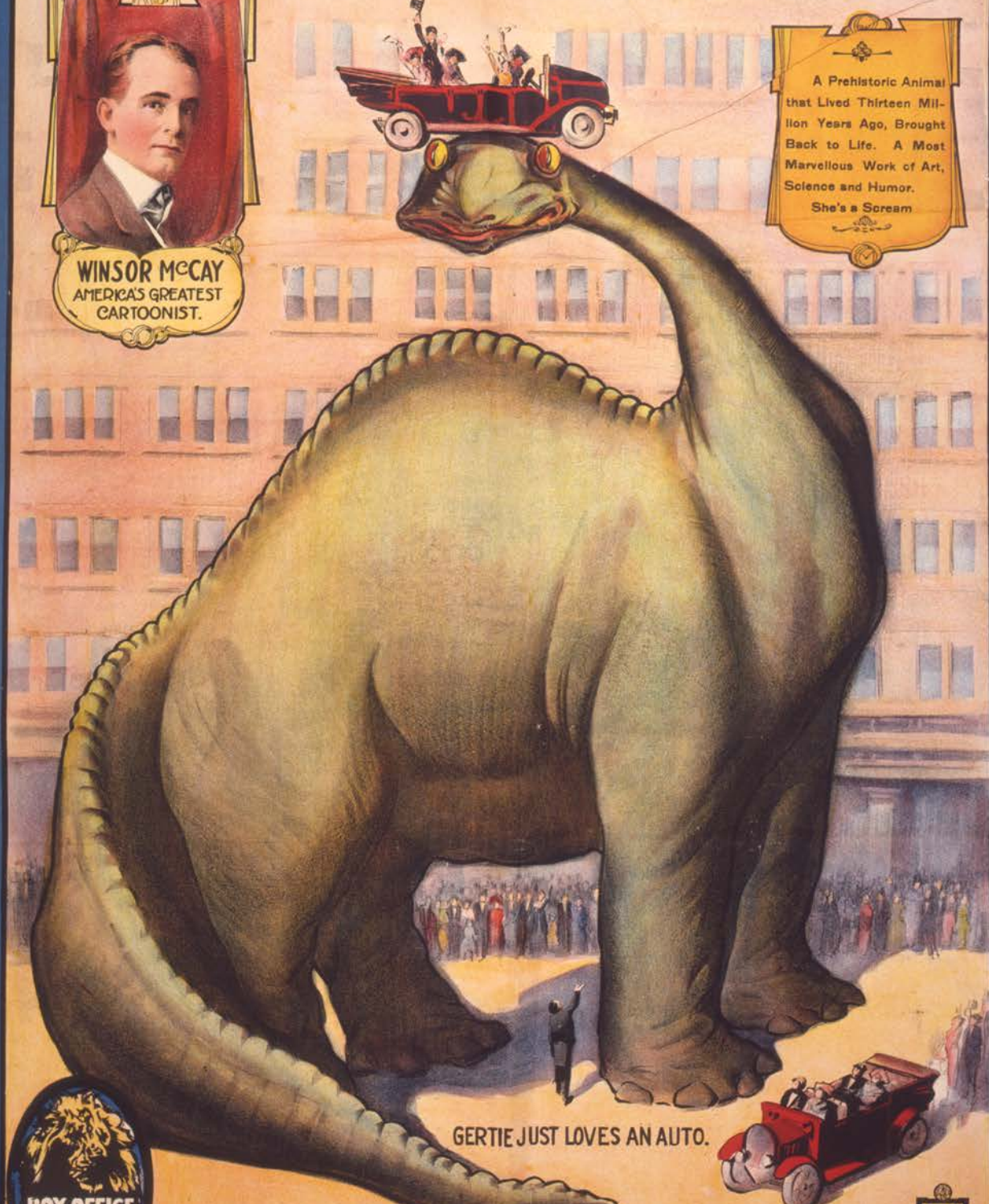
Appearing on Turner Classic Movies in 2014, Canemaker co-hosted, with Robert Osborne, a special hour on the films of Winsor McCay.

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A large poster advertising the general theatrical release of McCay's popular animated film Gertie the Dinosaur in November 1914; the film had its debut earlier in 1914 as part of McCay's vaudeville act. (Collection Ray Winsor Moniz)

“Draw lines, young man, many lines, from memory or from nature; it is in this way that you will become a good artist.”

—INGRES TO THE YOUNG DEGAS

“I just couldn’t stop drawing anything and everything.”

—WINSOR McCAY

February 2, 1914, was a bitterly cold Monday in Chicago, but the vaudeville theaters were presenting such an array of stellar attractions that full houses were assured even for the matinee. At the American Music Hall on Wabash Avenue, for example, there was vivacious Eva Tanguay, the “Cyclonic Comedienne and Her Jubilee Vaudeville Company.” Over at the Garrick, Harry Lauder, billed as “The World’s Greatest Entertainer” and “racy, faithful and poetic balladist of humble life,” performed in Scottish tartan kilts.

At the ornate Palace Theater on Clark Street near Randolph, the Farber Sisters (“Society’s Dainty Entertainers”) sang, Miss Charlotte Parry (“protean actress”) recited a “psychological fantasy,” and the Kitaro Troupe juggled objects with their feet. The headliner at the Palace was the internationally renowned newspaper cartoonist Winsor McCay.

A veteran of eight years of intermittent touring on the vaudeville circuits, McCay was an audience favorite whose marvelous ability to sketch quickly in chalk on a blackboard never failed to please. Within minutes, through a series of lightning-fast erasures and additions, McCay would bring two facing portraits of a boy and a girl through youth, adolescence, maturity, and old age, as the pit orchestra played “Ah, Sweet Mystery of Life.” Within the last three years, a new addition had been made to his mute “lightning sketch” act: he presented animated cartoon movies made by himself, based on two of his famous comic strips.

McCay’s fame (and the *raison d’être* for his vaudeville appearances) stemmed from his prodigious output of newspaper illustrations, editorial cartoons, and, most important, comic

strips. Indeed, when the American comic strip was in its infancy, McCay became the first master of the form with two unsurpassed works of genius: *Dream of the Rarebit Fiend*, first published in the *New York Evening Telegram* in 1904, and the epic *Little Nemo in Slumberland*, begun in the *New York Herald* in 1905. Both strips dealt with the dream state, with *Rarebit Fiend* containing a decidedly adult point of view and an anticipation of surrealist conceits in its juxtaposition of fantastic occurrences in mundane settings, the instability of appearances, and the irrationality of life.

Little Nemo in Slumberland, a child’s version of the mythic theme of the quest, set in a dream world, was and is quite simply the most beautiful and innovative comic strip ever drawn. McCay’s style combined an art nouveau line with subtle yet daring coloring; stunningly rendered architectural perspectives and sequential changes of characters and settings within the borders of the strip’s flexible panels reflected the artist’s strong interest in motion experiments and film animation.

McCay introduced a film version of *Little Nemo* into his act in 1911, followed the next year by a delightfully gruesome animated short based on a *Rarebit Fiend* strip, entitled *How a Mosquito Operates*. Both films represented a quantum leap in the direction of the nascent animated-film art form; McCay distinguished his work from that of his contemporaries in the field by the sophistication of his elaborate graphics, the fluid movement of his characters, the attempts to inject personality traits into those characters, and the use of strong narrative continuity.

At that long-ago vaudeville matinee, Winsor McCay offered a new film that would fascinate

DREAM OF THE RAREBIT FIEND

BY SILAS

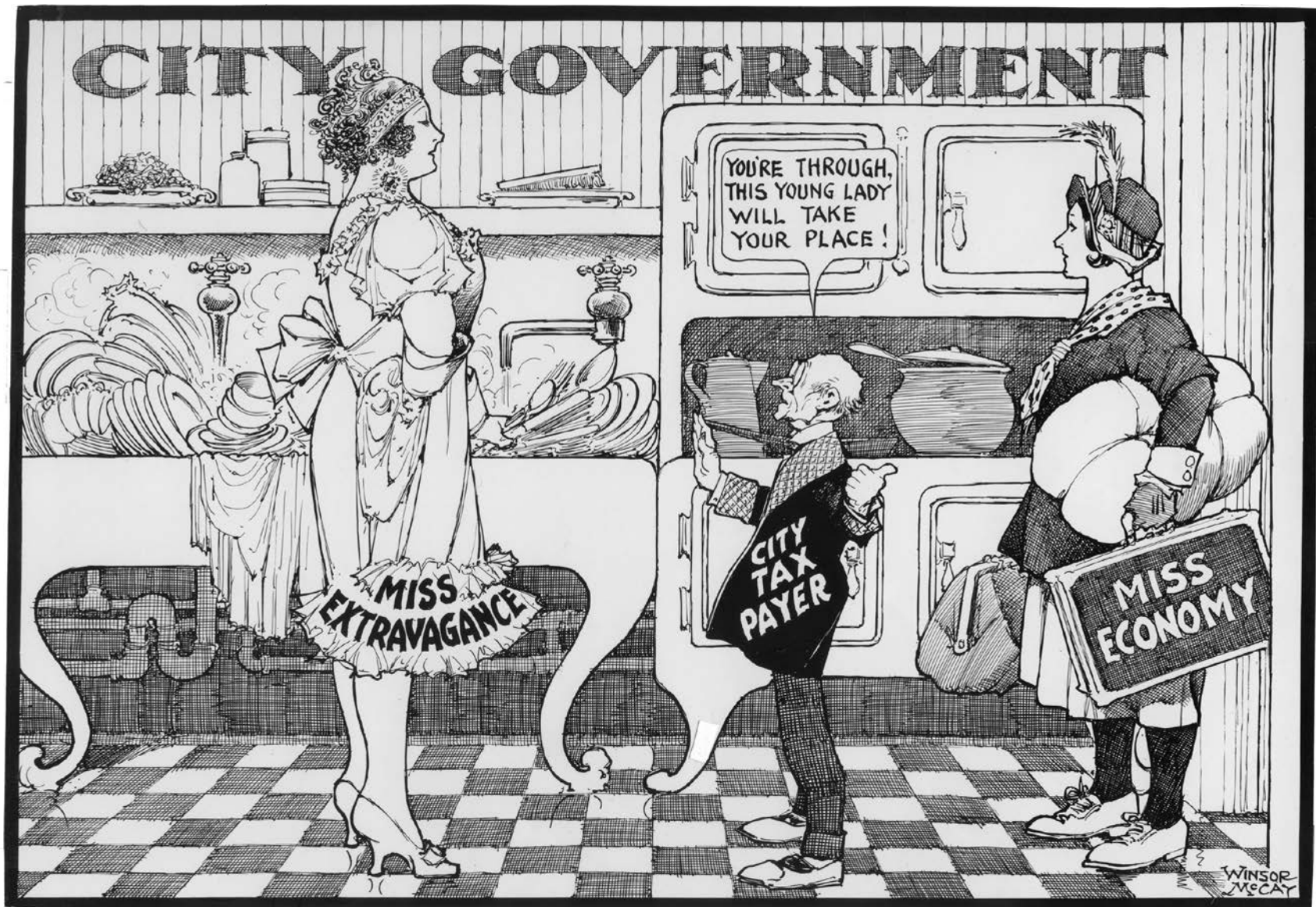


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LEFT:
A man becomes literally fired with anger over the cost of his wife's new hat in a Dream of the Rarebit Fiend strip on August 14, 1908. McCay found appropriate graphic symbols to show the progressively rising temperature of the man that leads to his burning; they range from large sweat drops and boiling steam (panels 3 and 4), to radiating sparks and a glow emanating from the man's form (as if he were a match when first struck) seen in panels 5 and 6, to, finally, a full and beautiful art nouveau flame that engulfs the man and flows from him in a lush and sensual design. "Silas" was Winsor McCay's pseudonym for his work in the New York Telegram. (Collection Ray Winsor Moniz)

OPPOSITE:
Winsor McCay in a 1906 portrait. (Collection Ray Winsor Moniz)





A Winsor McCay editorial cartoon from the New York American of May 10, 1932, contains a caricature of the artist and his wife. Maude McCay's features adorn both "Miss Extravagance" and "Miss Economy." McCay's private joke in this public cartoon satirizes his wife's expensive tastes and himself as a long-suffering husband. The cartoon exaggerates the truth: Maude did spend Winsor's money lavishly, but with his approval and permission. Physically, Maude was slightly shorter than the diminutive Winsor, but she possessed a grander and more dominating personality than her quiet husband. (Collection Ray Winsor Moniz)

audiences for generations and become, as film historian Donald Crafton put it, "the enduring masterpiece of pre-Disney animation." Not until the Walt Disney studio hit its stride in 1934 (ironically, the year of McCay's death) would the animated cartoon match the high-quality draftsmanship and naturalistic motion established two decades before in *Gertie the Dinosaur*.

McCay presented *Gertie* in an impressive early version of multimedia performance art. Stepping into a spotlight next to a giant movie screen, the impeccably dressed, diminutive (five feet five, 130 pounds) McCay cracked a long bullwhip, as a circus ringmaster would. With this cue, the projectionist in the balcony area flashed the first frames of the film onto the screen. From behind some cartoon rocks hopped a large but playful diplodocus, who strode from the distance to the foreground in masterful perspective animation. Along the way, *Gertie* devoured a rock and part of a tree; later, she tossed a mastodon over her shoulder into a lake, which she then drank in its entirety.

Throughout the presentation, the elegant McCay barked commands at the cartoon dinosaur, demanding that she raise her foot, eat an apple, dance, behave ("Stop that crying!"), and take a bow. *Gertie's* reaction to the commands was based on her unique and endearing personality. Like a petulant little girl, *Gertie* obeyed her master in her own good time, threw a temper tantrum, and wept. The charming juxtaposition of a fragile spirit trapped inside a gargantuan body was as memorable as the mode of presentation, which is one reason why the film has had a life of its own without the physical presence of Winsor McCay.

In the final moments of his act, McCay merged reality with his fantasy world: walking out of the spotlight stage-left, he reappeared screen-right as a tiny cartoon version of himself. *Gertie* lowered her head gently to allow "McCay" to step into her mouth and then transferred him to her broad back. Atop his tamed monster, in total control of his imaginary universe, "McCay" took his bow as *Gertie* gracefully maneuvered them both off the screen.

Unfortunately for Winsor McCay, the monsters inhabiting the real world were not as easily controlled or dominated as were the fantasies existing in his pen-and-ink world. Throughout

his career, McCay used his obsessively detailed drawings as a means to distance himself from problems and unpleasantness in his personal and professional life. His formidable talent for drawing was fueled by a compulsive need to draw and an overwhelming desire to give shape and direction to his life. His natural gifts included extraordinary energy, drive, and ambition; when combined with his great artistic abilities, these characteristics would lead him far from an unhappy childhood and penniless beginnings as a Midwestern poster painter for several traveling circuses, melodramas, and freakshow museums.

In 1914, Winsor McCay was forty-six, at the peak of his fame and creative powers. He was employed by newspaper magnate William Randolph Hearst, who considered McCay to be the crown jewel in his fine collection of newspaper illustrators and cartoonists. McCay's salary as a "Hearst man," plus his fee as a vaudeville headliner and royalties from various merchandising and licensing deals, resulted in an annual income of between \$50,000 and \$100,000. He owned homes considered to be the showplaces of their neighborhoods in the fashionable resort towns of Sheepshead Bay in Brooklyn and Sea Gate near Coney Island. In winter the McCay family—Winsor, his wife, Maude, and their children, Robert and Marion—escaped the cold winds blowing off the Atlantic Ocean by moving into a suite of rooms at the Hotel St. George in Brooklyn Heights and by taking occasional trips to Miami.

McCay often joked that he had no business sense, but it was the truth. Although he could fight for and win high fees for his work, neither Winsor nor Maude saved or invested any substantial amount of money from all his years of large earnings. Despite the continuous flow of cash through their hands, money was always a prime source of irritation between the couple. To continue living the luxurious style of life to which they were accustomed, Winsor McCay literally had to work all the time.

It was true he loved to draw and once claimed that "the greatest contributing factor to my success was an absolute craving to draw pictures all the time." But the pressures of his never-ending attempts to please the demanding Maude and Hearst were beginning to tell on McCay, a man who often drew for several eighteen-hour days

in a row with little outward sign of fatigue. For example, in December 1913, McCay abandoned his beloved comic strips. They were a casualty of artistic exhaustion as much as of Hearst's insistence that McCay concentrate on drawing elaborate daily half-page editorial cartoons illustrating the "average man" homilies of his dictatorial editor Arthur Brisbane, who decreed "McCay is serious, not funny."

McCay's drawing board was a constant companion on his vaudeville tours. Backstage between shows and late at night in his hotel room, the endless drawing continued. Once he began to work his pen over the white surface of the paper, McCay would be overcome by a strange peace, and he became totally immersed in the world and characters he was creating and controlling. Lovely and grotesque, grand and gaudy, the images flowed from his mind to his hand with astonishing swiftness and Mozart-like directness.

The new film addition to McCay's act received excellent notices in the Chicago papers: "Every child and its parents will want to see Gerty [sic]," wrote Ashton Stevens in the *Examiner*. "*You are flabbergasted to see the way the reel minds its master.*" And so the triumphant artist took the train back to New York, looking eagerly toward an engagement at Hammerstein's in Times Square, the country's top vaudeville house.¹

A blizzard greeted his arrival, and snow and traffic clogged the streets so badly that the mayor eventually prayed in public for rain. Storms of a different sort were also gathering. Maude McCay would soon be named as correspondent in a divorce suit, the second time news headlines would embarrass McCay publicly in a situation involving his considerably younger wife's attractiveness to other men.

Moreover, the unpredictable William Randolph Hearst would begin a concentrated effort to end McCay's vaudeville career, claiming McCay's "dalliance with the stage interferes with [his] regular newspaper work." Economically

dependent upon Hearst and chained to an ironclad contract, McCay turned out hundreds of drawings that almost always transcended the jingoistic and pompous Arthur Brisbane editorials they illustrated. McCay's gift for composing a striking layout never abandoned him, and his art of this period was usually grand in concept, awesome in detail, and skillful in execution, reminding one of the drawings of Dürer, Daumier, and Doré.

Little by little the work that sustained McCay emotionally would disappear. First, his comic strips were discontinued, then his theatrical tours were limited to the New York area and finally ceased altogether, except for an occasional one-shot appearance. The loss of a live audience undermined his interest in making animated films; in 1921 he completed the last of only ten films, some of which were never screened publicly. McCay continued to confront the pressures of newspaper deadlines until his final escape: death from a stroke at age sixty-seven.

During his hectic but full life, Winsor McCay created perhaps a million drawings, many examples of a quality of draftsmanship unsurpassed in this century. He was a self-taught artist who survived by adapting his talents to the exigencies of the commercial market-place, first in the popular recreational outlets of the nineteenth century—circuses, dime museums, and humor magazines—and then in the mass-production technologies of the new century—newspapers and movies—thus cementing his reputation.

In his last twenty years, when the wide horizons opened by his extraordinary gifts were diminished, McCay must often have recalled with pleasure the placid times when he could become a part of his own cartoon Peaceable Kingdom, when he could expurgate his fears in a horrific *Rarebit Fiend* episode or, better yet, run with Little Nemo and his pals through the royal gardens and palatial halls of the King of Slumberland or, best of all, ride on the back of his very own trained dinosaur.

The McCay family of Sheepshead Bay, Brooklyn, New York, c. 1907. Left to right: Maude, husband Winsor, daughter Marion, and son Robert (who was the model for Little Nemo). On the wall in the background is a photograph of Robert as an infant emerging from a lily, a quaint holdover from a nineteenth-century Victorian conceit regarding the origin of babies. (Collection Ray Winsor Moniz)

*Underwood & Underwood, Publishers.
New York, London, Toronto-Canada, Ottawa-Kansas.*



*Worbes and
Antington, N.Y.*



*AMERICAN
PHOTOGRAPHIC
TRADE UNION*

*Studios
Westwood, N.Y.*

PHASE ONE

WINSOR, SPORTING A MUSTACHE, WITH DAUGHTER, MARION, AND SON, ROBERT, WHO IS RIDING IN A CART ATTACHED TO A TOY HORSE ON WHEELS. [COLLECTION RAY WINSOR MOM12]

1867



TO 1903

chapter 1. michigan years

“Bad and good traits do not always last beyond puberty; that parting ways of dispositions.”

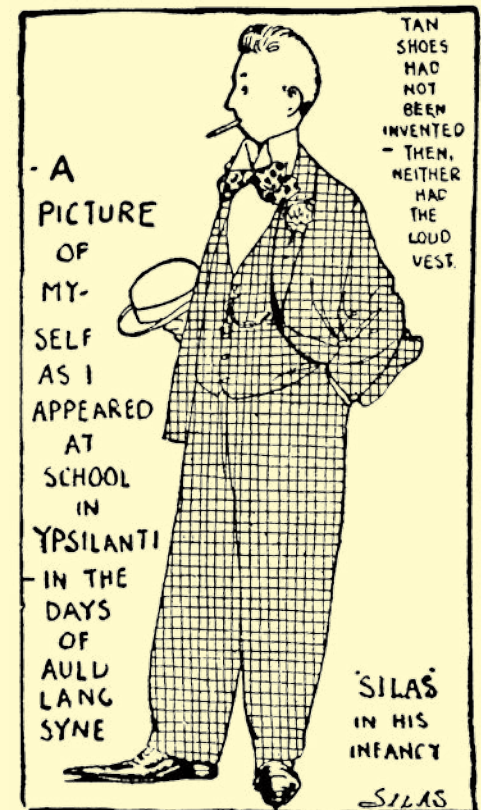
—WINSOR McCAY'S DIARY, c.A. 1906–08

In the township of West Zorra, near Woodstock, Ontario, Canada, Robert McKay was born in about 1840. He was the third of six children born to Donald and Christiana McKay, farmers who immigrated from Scotland to Ontario in the mid-1830s, part of the large influx of Scottish, German, and Irish settlers eager to buy cheap land and start a new life.¹ Many of the European immigrants were disillusioned by what they found in Canada: employment opportunities were limited and the western provinces were underdeveloped. For survival they turned to America, where the burgeoning frontier offered a variety of jobs in agriculture, mining, forestry, and industry.

On January 8, 1866, in the Methodist Episcopal Church, Robert McKay married twenty-five-year-old Jeannette (Janet) Murray, a neighbor from East Zorra. She was the third of nine children born to Peter and Mary Murray, who were, like Robert's parents, farmers and Scottish immigrants.² In that year the couple crossed the border of Ontario into the United States and, in almost a straight line, traveled across the state of Michigan, heading for the township of Spring Lake on the eastern, heavily wooded shore of Lake Michigan.

The fruit industry gave Spring Lake its initial boost in population, but lumbering was equally important to the town's development. From 1860 to 1910, logging was the major nonagricultural state industry. The beautiful white pine, plentiful in Michigan, played a crucial role in the development of the prairies of middle America, making possible the building of homes and barns. As early as 1874, nine sawmills thrived within the town limits of Spring Lake.

The rapid growth of the town was noted in the *Grand Rapids Eagle* of October 4, 1871: "Four years ago this place was just struggling into notice. ... Now the place contains about twenty-five stores, several hotels, and five or six churches, the appearances of which will at once convince the sojourner that the citizens are interested in good morals as well as fruit."



The arrival of the McKays in Spring Lake was not happenstance, for Robert had first come to America in 1862, four years before his marriage.³ While in Canada he met and was later employed by one Zenas Gilbert Winsor (1814–1890), an American entrepreneur involved in a number of enterprises, including manufacturing, exporting, lumber, fur trading, currency exchange for land buyers, the dry goods trade, and Nevada silver mines. In 1866 Winsor was developing oil wells and the petroleum trade in Canada; two years later in Grand Haven, the town next to Spring Lake, he engaged in the storing, forwarding, and commission business and acted as an agent for the Chicago and Grand Rapids steamboat lines.

A contemporary sketch describes Winsor without irony as “a busy man. He could never be idle. He would always be doing something, either on his own account or for somebody else. ...” Further, he was “genial and uniformly pleasant; a gentleman ... enjoying the good will and wishes of everybody in this community. ...”⁴ Certainly Robert and Janet McKay had particularly good and even deep feelings toward the older gentleman, for they named their firstborn after him: Zenas Winsor McKay.

In 1987, I wrote that the exact date and place of birth of the child who became Winsor McCay is uncertain because of a lack of primary documentation. McCay’s birth records may have been destroyed in a disastrous fire in Spring Lake in May 1893, which burned a school, several homes and businesses, and the Baptist and Methodist churches.

His grave marker in Brooklyn reads 1869 as his birth year, the same date he indicated to a 1910 Brooklyn census taker. Late in his life, however, he insisted to friends and wrote in a magazine article that he was born in Spring Lake on September 26, 1871. A different (and perhaps correct) date and place of birth are found in both the 1870 Michigan census reports, which indicate that Zenas W. McKay was born in 1867 in Canada. Apparently, Janet, while pregnant, chose to make the long and arduous journey back to her family in Ontario for the birth, but a search for Canadian birth records has proved futile.

On July 7, 2016, the blog *Nitrateville.com* speculated that McCay, who at various times said that he was born in 1867, 1868, 1869 and 1871, “...

probably fiddled with the year out of vanity, or to reduce the age difference between himself and his much younger wife.” The blog also suggested that

anyone with some genealogy experience knows McCay could have been born in the latter part of the previous year, 1866. And that is the case here. The Spring Lake census was recorded on August 16, 1870, about six weeks before McCay’s 4th birthday on September 26, so McCay was born in 1866 (1870 – 4 = 1866). Winsor McCay’s parents were married on January 8, 1866. Winsor was born nearly 9 months later on September 26, 1866—150 years ago.

Another point of view regarding McCay’s birth year comes from Kevin Scott Collier, historian and author of *Winsor McCay: Boyhood Dreams—Growing Up in Spring Lake, Michigan 1867–1885*. In his book, he notes that Gaines M. Barney, the 1870 Spring Lake census taker, “had a numerical curve habit” of “rounding numbers off concerning the age of children.” In Collier’s research, he found

little exception to Barney’s pattern in the 46 pages he filled out from August 10–18th, 1870. If a child had already celebrated his or her birthday prior to recording the census, Barney entered their age correctly. But if a child’s next birthday was approaching within a couple of months, Barney rounded their age up to the next number.

After listing specific examples of Barney’s numerical curve pattern in the census recordings for McCay’s neighboring families, Collier concludes:

Winsor Zenis McCay was actually age 2 when Barney stopped at the McCay residence on August 16, 1870. Seeing that Winsor was less than six weeks away from his next birthday on September 26, Barney rounded it up to age 3. Thus, Winsor Zenis McCay was born September 26, 1867.

The 1880 census for Spring Lake Village appears to corroborate Collier’s theory. It was enumerated on June 2, 1880, by one J. O. Bates, who listed Zenas W. McKay as being twelve years old, which would be his correct age on the census date, nearly four months before his thirteenth birthday. Thus the evidence argues for a 1867 birthdate.

Until Winsor McCay’s actual birth certificate is discovered, his birth year will continue to be disputed.⁵

PREVIOUS PAGE:

McCay drew this self-caricature in the February 10, 1907, New York Herald, describing it as a portrait of himself “in his infancy,” living in Ypsilanti. He was actually in his late teens/early twenties, but even then he was nattily dressed, complete with ever-present hat and cigarette.